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## First Aids to Goodness

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# Lesson Department

(First Week in March)

## Theology and Testimony

Select Readings: Alma, chapters 5-9 inclusive. Make notes of doctrines taught.

### FIRST AIDS TO GOODNESS

Having seen what the Nephite Record has to say about the immortality of the soul—a new aspect—we have now to ask what are its teachings concerning the duties and obligations of man here and now.

This longer view of the life of man, of which we spoke in the last lesson, should exert a wholesome effect on human conduct in those who accept it. A clear view of the end from the beginning, in any sphere of life, helps in the proper adjustment of the details. The more clearly, for instance, a young man or a young woman sees ahead, the better he or she is able to plan for the future. There is no doubt about that. It is the same with life as a whole. The longer view is always helpful.

One of the fundamental principles operative in the life of the Nephites, individual and social, is that man is free to choose his course in life; and their leaders saw to it that there was no interference with this freedom. All through the *Book of Mormon* runs this thought like a golden thread. Here are some of the most striking passages on this freedom of choice:

“Men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. They are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for

he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

“And now I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; and not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom.” (Lehi in II Nephi, 2:27-29.)

“God granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; he allotteth unto men according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction. Good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.” (Alma 29:4-5.)

“Whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.” (Alma 42:27.)

“And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free. He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death. Ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you.” (Samuel, in Helaman, 14:30, 31.)

Lehi was the first of the Nephite prophets; Alma's life fell in the first century before Christ; Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, lived a few years before the Crucifixion. These men, and others living in between them, all through the thousand years of Nephite history taught the principle of human free agency, with a clearness and force which we do not find among any other religious people. It was the ruling idea in the life of that nation.

But how did the principle work itself out among the Nephites? For very often, in the history of the world, nations have had a higher ideal of individual freedom than their practice of it would indicate.

Perhaps the best single instance of the principle of free agency in the Nephite nation is to be found in the political action of King Mosiah. The account of this reformation of the government and the granting of greater political liberty to the people is in chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine of Mosiah.

Here are the remarkable facts in the case:

Mosiah's sons, having been converted to the church through a miracle, decline to succeed their father in the rule of the nation, each in turn, beginning with the eldest. This is an unusual situation. The king begins to think—not about what is best for himself, but what is best for his people. If some one else should become king and if afterwards one of the sons should change his mind on the point of the kingship, there would most probably be civil war, in which much blood would be shed. For Mosiah has no illusions about human nature and youthful ambition.

So he decides upon an extraordinary thing. He will change the form of the government. He will

create a sort of republic. Accordingly, he sets a time for an election by the people. A chief judge and minor judges are to be chosen by them. Heretofore, it would seem, the people had had no part in the government.

This was an epochal event in the history of the Nephites. The manner in which this change was received by the nation is told us in this significant passage: "Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that *every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins.* They were exceedingly rejoiced because of the liberty which had been granted unto them."

From this time on it was "the voice of the people" that prevailed among the Nephites. Sometimes this voice was loud for iniquity and political sin, but often it was as loud for righteousness, individual and national. But of this responsibility Mosiah had forewarned the nation at the time of the alteration in the government. His views on this point have already been quoted as one of the literary gems in the Book of Mormon.

In the time of Alma the Younger, as will be remembered, Amlici endeavored to restore the kingdom, with himself as king. The matter was submitted to the people at an election, and their "voice" was against him. This was the first test of the wisdom of Mosiah in giving the people the right of suffrage. (Alma 2:2-7)

During the life-time of Moroni, the military chieftain, it was put to an even severer test, when Amalackiah sought to lead away the people. In this case, as we are told, the Nephite Patrick Henry roused

enough men to rout the ambitious dissenter, who escaped to the Lamanites. (Alma, chapter 46)

The Nephite nation having been granted a full measure of personal liberty, the leaders of that people did not consider that the average man among them was left to himself in the matter of choice, whether in matters of governmental concerns or in religion. For there was the Holy Spirit, to which every man was entitled as a guide to his conscience.

As early as the time of the First Nephi we find the idea announced. "Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son. And also the voice of the Son, saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me. Wherefore, follow me, and do the things ye have seen me do." (II Nephi 31:11, 12)

What is this Spirit supposed to do?

In the first place, it sanctifies. Says Alma the Younger: "Now they, after being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God, could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence."

In the second place, it gives power of utterance. In the case of the brothers Lehi and Nephi (Helaman, 5:44, 45), the time they were in prison, the Holy Ghost enabled them to speak divine words: "They were encircled about; they were as if in the midst of flaming fire, yet it did harm them not, neither did it take hold upon the walls of the prison; and they were filled with joy which is unspeakable and full of glory. And, behold, the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their

hearts, and they were filled as if with fire, and they could speak forth marvelous words."

In the third place, the Holy Ghost testifies of God and the Christ. Jesus says (III Nephi 28:11): "And the Holy Ghost beareth record of the Father and me; and the Father giveth the Holy Ghost unto the children of men, because of me." Not only does it bear witness of God and of Christ, however, but it becomes a means of testing truth. Moroni, the last of the Nephites, makes this assertion in these words: "And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things." (Moroni, 10:6)

In the fourth place, the Holy Ghost manifests itself through certain gifts. Says Moroni (10:8-18):

"Deny not the gifts of God, for they are many; and they come from the same God. And there are different ways that these gifts are administered; but it is the same God who worketh all in all; and they are given by the manifestations of the Spirit of God unto men, to profit them.

"To one is given by the Spirit of God, that he may teach the word of wisdom; to another, that he may teach the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another, exceeding great faith; to another, the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another, that he may work mighty miracles; to another, that he may prophecy concerning all things; to another, the beholding of angels and ministering spirits; to another, all kinds of tongues; to another, the interpretation of languages and of divers kinds of tongues.

"All these gifts come by the Spirit of Christ; and they come unto every man severally, according as he will. And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that every good gift cometh from Christ."

Concerning this Spirit of Christ it may be further said that often people are influenced by it without any knowledge of the fact by them.

This is clear from what Jesus himself says: He told the Nephites (III Nephi, 20:27): "In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed—unto the pouring out of the Holy Ghost through me upon the Gentiles, which blessing upon the Gentiles shall make them mighty above all, unto the scattering of my people, O house of Israel." This is the way in which the *Book of Mormon* represents the promise as having been made to Abraham.

With this spiritual power, then, the Nephites could have (1) purification of spirit, (2) a means of utterance not otherwise obtainable, (3) a knowledge of God and of Christ to be got in no other way, and (4) some very definite gifts of the spirit. What more could any one ask than to be free to make his own choice, to begin with, and then to be guided in the exercise of his freedom, if he so desired, by a divine power, so that he would have no mental or moral confusion, but ample light to see his way? Surely the two ways were magnificently open to the Nephites, and they could well be held accountable for their choice.

A word must be added here concerning the idea of obedience to God, of which the *Book of Mormon* is full.

This notion is repugnant to the "modern mind." It is much scorned by the man who is accustomed to going his own way and gait, politically, morally, and religiously—the man, that is, who makes a boast of traveling by his own light. Very likely, though, such a person is thinking of the idea in terms of the priest-ridden period of the Middle Ages, when the clergy told the people what to do in religion and saw to it that they did it. But such

was not the thought of the Nephite leaders at any time.

The high conception the Nephite leaders had of free agency implies that the free agent has a knowledge of the two ways of life. As a matter of fact, these leaders saw to it that the people were taught the principles of true spiritual growth. Lehi, Nephi, Benjamin, Mosiah, the two Almas, Helaman, the later Lehi and Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni—all these prophets and others spent their lives endeavoring to spread a knowledge of the gospel among their people. That was done so that the people might have light to choose the right from the wrong. And then there was the guidance of the Holy Ghost, to which all members of the Church, both before and after Christ, were entitled. How is it possible that any obedience which the Nephites might give to the commandments of God through the priests could be of the sort which is called "blind"? )

According to the Nephite philosophy of life, obedience of some sort there must be of necessity—obedience to the principle of good or obedience to the principle of evil. There was no getting around that. There is the power of God, on the one hand, and there is the power of the devil, on the other hand. And the only question of a free agent is, To which of these powers shall I give my allegiance? The prophets believed that, if one knew the two powers and if one opened his mind and his heart to the guiding influence of the divine Spirit, he would obey God rather than Satan; and it would not be "blind" obedience, either, but just as intelligent as any decision which can be made in matters that are wholly material.

Here, then, is a sort of life-

philosophy: (1) A will that is free to choose its way in life, as free at least as is consistent with things as they are; (2) a knowledge of the two ways in life that one may take, the one leading to God and immortality and the other leading to ultimate destruction; and (3) an unlimited fund of power waiting ready to be tapped by any one that earnestly seeks to see his way clearly and to secure strength to follow it to the end. }

### Questions

1. State the doctrine of the *Book of Mormon* concerning free agency. What ideas may be added to this doctrine from other sources? Discriminate carefully between the two. To what extent is the will really free, when we consider heredity and environment? Do we act in daily

life on the assumption that we are free or that we are not free to choose? Explain.

2. How may we know which of the two ways of life we ought to choose? In what ways does the Holy Ghost manifest itself? Read section 9, of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, with particular reference to verses 8 and 9, with a view to seeing whether there is not here a key to the solution of every problem by which we may be confronted.

3. What is meant by "blind" obedience? In what way may blind obedience be changed into intelligent obedience? Should we obey God whether or not we understand? Why? Is there an analogy between our relationship to God, so far as this point is concerned, and the relationship of our children to us? Explain.

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## Teachers' Topic

*Watchword*: "And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house."—Luke 10:5

*Text*: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

"Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:

"Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal, it shall be measured to you again."—Luke 6:36-38.

Jesus recognized the universality of sin. He understood the human tendency of man to criticize and find fault with others, at the same time disregarding his own shortcomings. In the chapter from which our text is taken, He goes on to say, "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote

that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then thou shalt see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye."

Jesus seldom spoke with severity; but with kindly advice, and above all by a glorious example, He taught His lesson of charity and understanding. In this chapter He particularly urges the necessity of over-