

15 Repentance and Character

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The religious leaders in the Book of Mormon – priests, teachers, even the 12 disciples – were called and authorized to assist the individual in developing a spiritual relationship the Savior. The intent of priesthood leadership, from the days of Adam, has always been to help promote the change of character that activates the power of the gospel in the lives of believers. This power of the Gospel has the ability to prepare them to eventually dwell in the presence of God. Likewise, membership in an organized Christian *religion* should be motivated by that desire for a *relationship* with the Atonement as one seeks to come unto Christ. To review again:

26 And we *talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ,* and we write according to our prophecies, *that our children may know* to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. (2 Nephi 25:25-26)

This verse makes it clear that the spiritual purpose of the scriptures, parents, priesthood leaders, and the church, should be “that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.” The importance of a sure and faithful foundation in Christ stretches above and beyond that of the organization that administers the gospel. This faith expands beyond the simple “activity” and participation in church programs and lies in the quality of heart and character. What sets a faithful Christian apart from an unfaithful one? The faithful Christian is “exercising faith unto repentance.” Repentance is nothing more than the process of changing one’s character, and the character that must be developed by the true disciple of Christ is the character and nature that has learned to love God and humanity. The last commandment that Christ gave the apostles before His crucifixion was:

34 A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.
35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.
(John 13:34-35)

Christ informs the reader that to be a disciple of Christ (a Christian) one must love one another as He has loved. A Christ centered faith and testimony is founded in the “pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:45-47), rather than how many church meetings one has endured throughout their life. Not all Christians are Mormons, but all Mormons ***should become*** Christians and disciples of Christ.

Consider these statements from the Prophet Joseph Smith about the individual’s responsibility to initiate that change of character:

If you wish to go where God is, *you must be like God*, or possess the principles which God possesses, for *if we are not drawing towards God* in principle, we are going from Him and drawing towards the devil. (TPJS, p 216)

Here, then, is eternal life – to know the only wise and true God; and *you have got to learn how to be a God yourself* – and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have

done before you, namely, *by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation*, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. (TPJS, p 346-347)

. . . so it is with the principles of the Gospel – you must begin with the first, and go on *until you learn all the principles of exaltation*. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave. (TPJS, p 348)

The best preparation for exaltation is to develop a character that loves all mankind as Christ loved them. “Upon two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,” taught Christ, which are: to “love God and love your fellowman” (Matthew 22:36-40). It would follow that the surest way to develop that kind of character (and love) lies in obedience to all commandments. All commandments, laws, and even ordinances (Alma 13:16) are not restrictive in nature but are calculated to help mankind develop the kind of character that will enable an individual to one day stand in the presence of God with a confidence that will wax strong.

If all the law and prophets hang upon these two commandments, it stands to reason that all judgment will hang upon the same. “By their works” shall all men be judged. The “works” of life can’t help but reflect the character developed. If sin is defined as “the breaking of commandments,” one could define sin as: *any word, work or thought that distracts or inhibits one from developing the character that loves God and all others*. Scripture declares that this life is a “probationary state.” Sin then, is the misuse of the time that is allotted to mankind to develop that character.

Every Christian religious organization should have this as their primary focus: providing the assistance the individual might need to create a loving relationship with themselves, their fellowman, and Christ. Like the Sabbath, (Mark 2:27) organized religion exists for the spiritual benefit of man, not the other way around. If this focus is missing in any denomination, that church has no authority, no purpose, and no power to save man.

Sometimes it might be easier to teach youth the joy of giving and serving others than it is to convince them why they should go to church and actively attend all their meetings. Because love is borne of service (they go hand-in-hand), teaching them to love and serve one another does more to help them develop a character worthy of exaltation than sitting through every single sacrament meeting during their lifetime. All should keep an eye on the big picture. And that eye must become single to the glory of God. Every true and enduring relationship with Christ is predicated on our learning to love one another.

The importance of this relationship with Christ and His Atonement is a central theme in the Book of Mormon. A quick review from Nephi to Moroni:

Nephi states that our faith and testimonies should be in Christ:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ... for we are made alive in Christ because of our faith...and we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to

our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we look forward unto that life which is in Christ...for the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not; for by denying him ye also deny the prophets and the law....and Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him, and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul; and if ye do this ye shall in nowise be cast out. (2 Nephi 25:23-29)

King Benjamin taught that this relationship is most important:

...if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, ... and also, the Atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of his life, I mean the life of the mortal body—this is the man who receiveth salvation, through the Atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind, which ever were since the fall of Adam, or who are, or who ever shall be, even unto the end of the world. And this is the means whereby salvation cometh. And there is none other salvation save this which hath been spoken of; neither are there any conditions whereby man can be saved except the conditions which I have told you. (Mosiah 4:6-8)

Alma the Younger describes the character change we are to seek:

...I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit. And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 27:24-26)

Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. He saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely...come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness, and ye shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire. (Alma 5:33-35)

Christ explains the need for the relationship:

If ye will *come unto me* ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and *blessed are those who come unto me*.

Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name...as many as have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh...Behold, I have come unto the world to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin. Therefore, whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive, for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore, repent and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved. (3 Nephi 9:14-22)

Moroni ends the Book of Mormon with his last lecture and most important message:

32 Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

33 And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.

(Moroni 10:32-33)

These messages from the Book of Mormon are just a few of the hundreds that are found in this sacred record that focus on the relationship one should have with Christ and the character change of the believer. The Title Page itself proclaims that the record is for the “convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.” Those who assume that Joseph Smith was a fraud and a charlatan who concocted or copied this work—putting himself, his friends, and his family in harm’s way without ever denying its divine origin—are ignorant of its message. This book contains the “fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ”, and the central message is “come unto Christ”. The only sure test of the truth and value of a book will be the changes that unfold in the life of the reader because of the message found between its covers, not in the weaknesses of the man behind the translation. The fruits of the Book of Mormon are openly visible in the character of its believers.

Faith and repentance (the principles of Salvation) are self-directed in nature. That means they are actions that cannot be done for one individual by another. One cannot “repent” another person! Salvation, then, is an individual process, aided by the community of saints.

In scripture, the power and authority of the priesthood is an administrative authority. What is the power that makes gospel ordinances effective in one’s life? Even though a person might be baptized a thousand times or participates in any saving ordinance over and over: The "power" of the ordinance's promise is in the individual’s agency and character. If a person has not changed their character by exercising faith in Christ “unto repentance” then that priesthood ordinance has no saving power in their life! This is what Nephi, Benjamin, and Alma, among others, are all trying to explain. There is no miracle or ordinance that will change our character into the character of God, or perfect our thinking and actions. The power within any ordinance lies within the individual through the exercise of agency, choice, action, and character.

The ordinances associated with the gospel are administered to assist in that change of character as they (the ordinances themselves) point the mind to Christ and the Atonement. The power and purpose of a priesthood ordinance is explained by Alma:

16 Now these ordinances were given after this manner, that *thereby the people might look forward on the Son of God*, it being a type of his order, or it being his order, and this *that they might look forward to him for a remission of their sins, that they might enter into the rest of the Lord*. (Alma 13:16)

Alma explains that the ordinances of the gospel exist as a *hope of a future reality*, based on one's commitment to the requisite *change of character*. That means the individual receiving the ordinance holds the power to make the promised blessing of the ordinance a reality. The power behind the reality does not lie in the officiator nor his authority or position. It is true that a designated administrator with the proper authority must administer the ordinance, but the priesthood itself does not hold any "power" to force the reality of the blessing connected to the ordinance. The *power* to make any ordinance a reality lies within the recipient, based on their righteous desires, agency, choices and character change. As Joseph Smith explained, "God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not" (TPJS, 187).

Conversion

The account of King Lamoni, found in the Book of Mormon, is a prime example of *what should be taught and how it should be taught* (see Alma 18: 36, 39). Ammon did not convert King Lamoni to the programs and activities of the church. He first taught the King the need for the Atonement and then the gospel of Jesus Christ. The three pillars of the gospel must be understood to begin this change of heart. They are: 1) The Creation; 2) The Fall; and 3) The Atonement.

36 Now when Ammon had said these words, he began at the *creation of the world*, and also the creation of Adam, and told him all the things *concerning the fall of man*, and rehearsed and laid before him the records and the holy scriptures of the people, which had been spoken by the prophets, even down to the time that their father, Lehi, left Jerusalem.
39 But this is not all; for *he expounded unto them the plan of redemption*, which was prepared from the foundation of the world; and *he also made known unto them concerning the coming of Christ*, and all the works of the Lord did he make known unto them. (Alma 18:36-39)

Aaron, like Ammon, first explains the need for a relationship with Christ, and then explains that the Gospel of faith and repentance are the first steps toward that sacred relationship.

12 And it came to pass that when Aaron saw that the king would believe his words, *he began from the creation of Adam*, reading the scriptures unto the king—*how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen*.

13 And Aaron did *expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name*.

14 And *since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth; and that he breaketh the bands of death, that the grave shall have no victory, and that the sting of death should be swallowed up in the hopes of glory*; and Aaron did expound all these things unto the king.

15 And it came to pass that after Aaron had expounded these things unto him, the king said: *What shall I do that I may have this eternal life of which thou hast spoken? Yea, what shall I do that I may be born of God*, having this wicked spirit rooted out of my breast, and receive his Spirit, that I may be filled with joy, that I may not be cast off at the last day? Behold, said he, I will give up all that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy.

16 But Aaron said unto him: *If thou desirest this thing, if thou wilt bow down before God, yea, if thou wilt repent of all thy sins, and will bow down before God, and call on his name in faith, believing that ye shall receive, then shalt thou receive the hope which thou desirest.* (Alma 22:12-16)

The conversions of King Lamoni and his father were complete. They discovered their faith and testimony in the understanding of their need for a redeemer and the Atonement provided by Christ. This understanding opened the door to the relationship with Christ through a spiritual rebirth. They were not converted to the programs and activities of a religious organization but were taught an understanding of the fundamental concepts or pillars of the gospel: The Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. Their conversion and participation in the gospel (upon the principles of faith and repentance) will have the power to initiate a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Atonement that will precipitate a lasting change of character.