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Jesus Christ: Master Teacher

Craig J. Ostler

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The Savior is the Master Teacher, and He uses divine methods and purposes to teach the definitive course. In His instruction, particularly in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord exemplified several approaches that we should consider in our teaching responsibilities: preparing meaningful messages; bearing testimony; applying the message to the listener; expressing love, forgiveness, and appreciation; teaching truth from the heart; enhancing curiosity; teaching the mysteries of the kingdom; disciplining and chastening; holding people accountable; guiding students in their assignments; and leading the way.

Preparing Meaningful Messages

The Lord did not make idle chitchat in teaching. He knew the doctrines that needed to be taught, and He was very specific in the commands or assignments He gave concerning gospel instruction. He required the same standard of His servants. For example, He counseled Hyrum Smith, “Seek not to declare my word, but *first seek to obtain my word*, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men” (D&C 11:21; emphasis added).

Further, He commanded the Saints to “teach one another the *doctrine of the kingdom*” and to “*teach ye diligently . . . that ye may be prepared in all things . . . to magnify the calling* whereunto I have called you” (D&C 88:77–78, 80; emphasis added).

The Lord approached His teaching responsibility with a seriousness that was commensurate with the message of salvation. The revelations emphasized quality time—that is, the Lord had a work to carry out, and He helped the Saints by giving them meaningful assignments and staying on task. The spirit of the revelations indicates that the time is short and that, similarly, gospel teachers should be about the Father's business. The time in the classroom is precious, and if the instructors' and students' efforts are worthy of the companionship of the Spirit, teaching will be directed, attended, and confirmed by the power of the Holy Ghost (see D&C 50:21–22). That Spirit will give life to lessons prepared with meaningful forethought.

Bearing Testimony

Another simple but important aspect of the Savior's teaching was bearing witness of the truthfulness of the revelations. "These commandments are of me," He testified in His preface to the Book of Commandments (D&C 1:24). "Search these commandments," He continued, "for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled" (D&C 1:37).

Jesus Christ began many of the revelations in the spirit of testimony, preparing the hearts of the Saints to receive the truths He was about to reveal. Often, His testimony was brief and straightforward: "A great and marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men. Behold, I am God; give heed unto my word" (D&C 6:1–2; 11:1; 12:1–2; 14:1–2).

Teaching as the Savior did suggests that religious educators follow this example. Gospel teachers can increase their effectiveness as servant-teachers of the Master by beginning their lessons with brief, clear, and direct testimony regarding the principles they will discuss.

Applying the Message to the Listener

The Savior frequently sealed the truthfulness of the revelations with the charge that His servants should go forth applying the teachings they had received. The Lord concluded several revelations with encouragement and a witness that He spoke the truth and that the Saints would be blessed in their obedience. For example, in a revelation calling Stephen Burnett to preach the gospel, He instructed, "Therefore, declare the things which ye have heard, and verily believe, and know to be true. Behold, this is the will of him who hath called you, your Redeemer, even Jesus Christ. Amen" (D&C 80:4–5). Likewise, teachers bless their students by sealing teachings with admonitions to live the truths they have been taught.

Expressing Love, Forgiveness, and Appreciation

In the revelations of the Restoration, the Lord frequently expressed love and compassion to His disciples. The old adage that students do not care how much a teacher knows until they know how much the teacher cares conveys this aspect of teaching.

The Savior extended mercy in forgiving sins and strengthened the Saints in expressing confidence in them. “Behold, thy sins are forgiven thee,” He declared to Emma Smith, “and thou art an elect lady, whom I have called” (D&C 25:3). In a revelation directed to Thomas B. Marsh, the Lord declared, “Thomas, my son, blessed are you because of your faith in my work” (D&C 31:1).

In a further example, when inspired by the Spirit of God, the Prophet Joseph Smith expressed his sentiments and those of the Lord, “Dear and well-beloved brother, Brigham Young, verily thus saith the Lord unto you: My servant Brigham, it is no more required at your hand to leave your family as in times past, for your offering is acceptable to me” (D&C 126:1). Furthermore, the Savior often addressed His servants as His friends (see D&C 84:77; 93:45; 94:1; 98:1; 100:1; 104:1). Students are led to live the commandments when they know that they are known and loved.

Teaching Truth from the Heart

Truths of the gospel are best taught from the heart. That is, the instructor teaches the gospel from the soul, not simply from a lesson outline. Going through the motions of teaching will not communicate the principles of the gospel from the heart of the teacher to the heart of the student. The Savior’s words were heartfelt, even to piercing the very soul. In the revelations, His words are described as being “quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of the joints and marrow, soul and spirit” (D&C 33:1).

In this dispensation, the Lord blessed faithful teachers that “thy *heart* shall be opened to teach the truth” (D&C 23:2; emphasis added; see also D&C 23:3). In addition, the Lord instructed the Prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, “Speak the thoughts that I shall put in your hearts; . . . declare whatsoever thing ye declare in my name, in solemnity of heart, in the spirit of meekness, in all things. And I give unto you this promise, that inasmuch as ye do this the Holy Ghost shall be shed forth in bearing record unto all things whatsoever ye shall say” (D&C 100:5, 7–8).

Enhancing Curiosity

Some of the most effective teaching occurs when instruction is prompted by student questions. The Lord frequently taught by responding to questions posed by the Prophet Joseph Smith or to requests made by others. Even a brief review of the historical headings to the Doctrine and Covenants demonstrates this principle. In many instances, specific doctrinal questions were answered in the revelations. Inquiries dealt with topics such as how to obtain a forgiveness of sins, how to recognize if revelation is from God, what events will attend the Savior's Second Coming, and what conditions will prevail during the Millennium. Modern students often ask questions on similar topics. Many of the best days in teaching are when students become actively involved by asking questions.

However, this is not to say that the Prophet Joseph Smith and other early Saints determined the topics of discussion in the revelations of the Restoration. The Lord directed the Restoration and placed the Prophet in circumstances that, predictably, elicited questions on certain topics. Likewise, an attentive teacher may set up the classroom and learning experiences to enhance the curiosity of students in predetermined directions. In the case of the Restoration of the gospel, the Lord designed the curriculum by means of assignments that He gave to the Prophet Joseph Smith. For example, the Lord asked Joseph to translate the Book of Mormon, organize the Church of Christ, and work on the inspired translation of the Bible. These assignments actually gave opportunity for questions to be posed in areas that the Lord, in His wisdom, knew would be asked (see Joseph Smith—History 1:68; D&C 18; 77; 113).

Similarly, if teachers direct students to the scriptures for answers to questions, students will often desire further clarification and ask questions of their own after reading the scripture passages. Thus, as instructors study the scriptures with students, the students will be prompted to ask questions, thereby allowing the instructor or the Spirit to teach the most valuable and applicable doctrines and principles that are most appropriate in their lives.

Teaching the Mysteries of the Kingdom

On each occasion after revealing a new insight to eternity, the Lord waited until Joseph and the Saints were ready for additional light and truth before He revealed more. The Savior repeatedly returned to discuss previous topics, when He knew that the Saints were prepared to

learn more on that subject. For example, information came line upon line regarding the Second Coming and the Millennium (see D&C 29; 43; 45; 88; 101; 130; 133), the law of consecration (see D&C 38; 42; 51; 70; 78, 82; 83), and the law of celestial glory (D&C 76; 131; 132; 137). This instructional approach emphasizes teaching from the scriptures sequentially rather than by topic, especially for young students, and thus allowing the doctrines to be unfolded line upon line.

The Lord revealed several items to the Prophet Joseph Smith that he was not to teach the world or the Saints at that particular time (see Moses 1:42, 4:32). The Savior instructed, “Remember that that which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken with care, and by constraint of the Spirit” (D&C 63:64). Further, with reference to the visions of eternity and the degrees of glory, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.”¹

Comfortingly, the Lord assured the Saints that even if they were not prepared for answers to their questions, answers were available and would be given when they were better prepared to receive them (see D&C 101:32–34; 121:26–28). Similarly, students should know that there are appropriate answers to their questions, even to their hard questions. However, they must trust their teachers’ good judgment that the answers sought will come at a later but proper time and place.

Disciplining and Chastening

The Lord was forthright in His discipline and chastening. At various times, the chastening was privately administered; and, at other times, the Lord publicly corrected those in error. For instance, Oliver Cowdery was told to take Hiram Page aside “between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him” (D&C 28:12). On the other hand, the Savior later instructed the individual members of His Church: “If thy brother or sister offend many, he or she shall be chastened before many. And if any one offend openly, he or she shall be rebuked openly. . . . If any shall offend in secret, he or she shall be rebuked in secret, that he or she may have opportunity to confess in secret to him or her whom he or she has offended, and to God, that the church may not speak reproachfully of him or her” (D&C 42:90–92).

Thus, we read that the Lord chastened the Saints for not building the temple in Kirtland, Ohio (see D&C 95:1–12) and for their disunity

and disobedience to the celestial law required to build up Zion (see D&C 101:1–9; 105:1–6). Further, the Lord’s rebuke and warning to the Prophet Joseph Smith after the loss of the 116-page manuscript of the Book of Mormon is especially poignant: “How oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men. For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words—yet you should have been faithful” (D&C 3:6–8). Likewise, a trusted teacher may discipline his or her students with “a tender but firm voice” (explanatory introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants).

An additional principle important in disciplining is that the Lord prepared a way of deliverance before He chastened. For example, Christ had the situation firmly in hand to compensate for the Prophet’s weakness when Joseph was persuaded by Martin Harris to give Martin the 116-page manuscript. The Lord not only had the small plates of Nephi prepared to replace the material on the lost manuscript but also was preparing Oliver Cowdery to be a scribe and a witness of the Restoration with Joseph. It is important that teachers faithfully chasten students concerning their inappropriate behavior, but it is equally important that teachers have a plan by which they can correct students’ errors.

Similar to situations in which teachers may find themselves, the Lord corrected immature behavior. The mistakes of youth were not uncommon in the infant Church. When young elders taught the gospel by jumping up from the floor and striking their head on a ceiling joist or behaving like a baboon, He required them to act with dignity (see D&C 50:1–4, 13–18). Specifically, He asked them to evaluate their behavior against the standard of gospel teaching. When they misbehaved, was the Comforter able to teach the truth? Were the teacher and the student both edified? (See D&C 50:13–14, 21–22.) If their behavior was not acceptable to the abiding Spirit of the Holy Ghost, it was not of God and thus not acceptable to the Master Teacher.

Note, however, that the Lord did not issue a more condemning rebuke for mistakes than was justified. In the summer of 1836, during a period of great financial distress for the Church, the Prophet Joseph Smith traveled several hundred miles to look for a secret treasure to pay debts he had incurred (see D&C 111). Although this activity was not sinful, neither was it complimentary to the Church. The Lord wisely addressed Joseph’s choice to seek the treasure as evidencing a lack of judgment, but not as wickedness: “I, the Lord your God, am not displeased

with your coming this journey, notwithstanding your *follies*" (D&C 111:1; emphasis added). We can even imagine that Christ may have had a smile on His face as He revealed these words of mild rebuke. The Lord did not ignore the need to correct the Prophet's foolish choice; however, the Savior was tempered in His reproof. He directed the Prophet's company to more significant and appropriate activities. That is, they were to seek another treasure in the city of Salem, Massachusetts—knowledge regarding the ancient inhabitants and founders of the area, which included some of the earliest Smiths to come to America (see D&C 111:9–10).

Holding People Accountable

The Savior held His servants, especially the Prophet Joseph Smith, accountable for the directions and assignments He gave them. He was sincerely concerned about their gospel understanding, progress, and obedience. For example, it is clear in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants that the Lord placed the responsibility to translate the Book of Mormon and the inspired translation of the Bible squarely on the shoulders of the Prophet Joseph Smith (Joseph Smith—History 1:59–60; D&C 3:5). When revealing additional information regarding the signs of the Second Coming, the Lord informed the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Saints: "And now, behold, I say unto you, it shall not be given unto you to know any further concerning this chapter, until the New Testament be translated, and in it all these things shall be made known; wherefore I give unto you that ye may now translate it, that you may be prepared for the things to come" (D&C 45:60–61). Jesus Christ expected His servants to become familiar with previous revelation and prophetic writings. Moreover, and unmistakably, the Lord taught that unless His servants personally understood previous scripture and were prepared to learn, He would not teach them the greater mysteries of the kingdom (see D&C 30:1–3; 50:28–30; 76:114–18; 84:23–25, 57–58).

Guiding Students in Their Assignments

Whenever the Savior gave callings or assignment to the Saints, He also promised to guide and strengthen them in fulfilling those assignments. That is, first, the Lord counseled and commanded the Saints, and then He assured them that He would be with them to help them fulfill the command or that He would provide means to accomplish the things He had commanded them.

For example, the Lord guided and inspired the Prophet Joseph Smith in the translation of the Book of Mormon. This same attentiveness in providing needed help is evident in commands to build the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 88:119; 95:11–17), to redeem Zion (see D&C 103:15–20; 105:14–15), and to bless Joseph and other Church leaders in paying debts they incurred in financing the needs of the kingdom (see D&C 104). Indeed, in the revelation calling for the organization of the United Firm that oversaw Church business endeavors, the Lord lovingly reassured, “Ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along” (D&C 78:18).

Leading the Way

Jesus Christ, the Master Teacher, showed us the way to instruct by precept and example, particularly in the revelations of the Restoration. As we prepare ourselves to present true doctrine by the power of His Spirit and in the manner He showed us, we have His promise that “he that [teacheth] and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).¹ ■

Note

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 305; see also D&C 76:114–15.