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The Righteous Judge

There is only one way to judge righteous judgment, as Jesus Christ does, and that is to be as He is.

In His mortal life, Jesus Christ was a loving judge, uncommonly wise and patient. He is known in the scriptures as “the righteous judge” (2 Timothy 4:8; Moses 6:57), and His counsel to us is to also “judge righteous judgment” (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:1–2 [in Matthew 7:1, footnote *a*]) and to “put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good . . . [and] to judge righteously” (D&C 11:12).

This counsel to the Nephite Twelve will help us judge as the Lord does: “Ye shall be judges of this people, according to the judgment which I shall give unto you, which shall be just. Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27; emphasis added). We sometimes forget that when He gave the counsel to be as He is, it was in the context of how to judge righteously.

Unrighteous Judgment

A shameful example of unrighteous judgment comes from the parable of the lost sheep, when the Pharisees and scribes ill-judged both the Savior and His dinner company, saying, “This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (Luke 15:2)—they were oblivious to the fact that they were sinners

themselves. Possessed of condemning hearts, the scribes and Pharisees never knew the joy of rescuing lost sheep.

It was also “the scribes and Pharisees” who brought “a woman taken in adultery” (John 8:3) to the Savior to see if He would judge her according to the law of Moses (see verse 5). You know the rest of the story, how He humbled them for their unrighteous judgment and how they were “convicted by *their own* conscience” and departed “one by



one” (verse 9; emphasis added). He then said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. And the woman glorified God from that hour, and believed on his name” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 8:11 [in John 8:11, footnote *c*]).

The natural man and woman in each of us has a tendency to condemn others and to judge unrighteously, or self-righteously. This even happened to James and John, two of the Savior’s Apostles. They were infuriated when the people of a Samaritan village treated the Savior disrespectfully (see Luke 9:51–54):

“And when [they] saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?”

“But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.

“For the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (verses 54–56).

Today’s “common judge[s]” (D&C 107:74), our bishops and branch presidents, should avoid any similar impulse to condemn, as James and John did on that occasion. A righteous judge would respond to confessions with compassion and understanding. An erring youth, for example, should leave the bishop’s office feeling the love of the Savior through the bishop and enveloped in the joy and healing power of the Atonement—never shamed or held in contempt. Otherwise, the bishop may unwittingly drive the lost sheep further into the wilderness (see Luke 15:4).

Discipline

However, compassion doesn’t nullify the need for discipline. The word *discipline* comes from the Latin word *discere*, “to learn,” or *discipulus*,

“learner,” making a disciple a student and follower.¹ To discipline in the Lord’s way is to lovingly and patiently teach. In the scriptures the Lord often uses the word *chasten* when speaking of discipline (see, for example, Mosiah 23:21; D&C 95:1). The word *chasten* comes from the Latin *castus*, meaning “chaste or pure,” and *chasten* means “to purify.”²

In the world, it is an earthly judge who condemns a man and *locks* him in prison. In contrast, the Book of Mormon teaches us that when we willfully sin, we become our “own judges” (Alma 41:7) and consign ourselves to spiritual prison. Ironically, the common judge in this case holds the keys that *unlock* the prison gates; “for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their *deliverance* in all things out of temptation” (D&C 95:1; emphasis added). The proceedings of a righteous judge are merciful, loving, and redemptive, not condemning.

Young Joseph Smith was disciplined with a four-year probation before obtaining the golden plates, “because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord.”³ Later, when Joseph lost the 116 manuscript pages, he was disciplined again. Though Joseph was truly remorseful, the Lord still withdrew his privileges for a short season because “whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven” (D&C 95:1).

Joseph said, “The angel was rejoiced when he gave me back the Urim and Thummim and said that God was pleased with my faithfulness and humility, and loved me for *my penitence* and diligence in prayer.”⁴ Because the Lord wanted to teach Joseph a heart-changing lesson, He required a heartrending sacrifice of him—sacrifice being an essential part of discipline.



Sacrifice

“In ancient days, *sacrifice* meant to make something or someone holy,”⁵ which links it, in an interdependent way, to the definition of the word *chasten*—“to purify.” Likewise, in ancient Israel, forgiveness came through a sin or trespass offering, or sacrifice.⁶ The sacrifice not only “point[ed] to that great and last sacrifice” (Alma 34:14) but also helped engender a deeper sense of gratitude for the Savior’s Atonement. An unwillingness to sacrifice as part of our penitence mocks or belittles Christ’s greater sacrifice for the same sin and trivializes His suffering—a callous sign of ingratitude.

On the other hand, through the sweet irony of sacrifice, we actually *gain* something of eternal worth—His mercy and forgiveness and eventually “all that [the] Father hath” (D&C 84:38). As part of the repentance process, sacrifice also acts as a healing balm to help replace “remorse of

conscience” (Alma 42:18) with “peace of conscience” (Mosiah 4:3). Without sacrifice, a person may find it hard to forgive himself or herself, because of a lingering consciousness of something withheld.⁷

The Parent as a Righteous Judge

While few of us will be called to be common judges, the principles of righteous judgment apply to all of us, especially to parents who have a daily opportunity to use these principles with their children. To effectively teach a child is the very essence of good parenting, and to lovingly discipline is the very essence of being a righteous judge.

President Joseph F. Smith taught, “If children are defiant and difficult to control, be patient with them until you can conquer by love, . . . and you can then [mold] their characters as you please.”⁸

It is insightful that in teaching how to discipline, the prophets seem to



always refer to Christlike attributes. The Doctrine and Covenants gives us this well-known advice on discipline:

“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

“By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—

“Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love” (D&C 121:41–43).

This scripture teaches us to reprove “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,” *not* when moved upon by anger. The Holy Ghost and anger are incompatible because “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger” (3 Nephi 11:29). President George Albert Smith taught that “unkind things are not usually said under the inspiration of the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord is a spirit of kindness; it is a spirit of patience; it is a spirit of charity and love and forbearance and long suffering. . . .

“ . . . But if we have the spirit of fault finding . . . in a destructive manner, that *never* comes as a result of the companionship of the Spirit of our Heavenly Father and is *always* harmful.

“ . . . Kindness is the power that God has given us to unlock hard hearts and subdue stubborn souls.”⁹

Our Children’s True Identity

When the Savior visited the Nephites, He did something extraordinary with the children:

“And it came to pass that he did teach and minister unto the children of the multitude . . . , and he did loose their tongues, and they did speak unto their fathers great and marvelous things. . . .

“ . . . And they both saw and heard these children; yea, even babes did open their mouths and utter marvelous things” (3 Nephi 26:14, 16).

Perhaps more than *opening the mouths* of babes, the Lord was *opening the eyes and ears* of their astonished parents. Those parents had been granted the extraordinary gift of a glimpse into eternity and of beholding the true identity and premortal stature of their children. Would that not forever change the way the parents *saw* and

treated their children? I like this variation of a quote attributed to Goethe: “The way you see [a child] is the way you treat them, and the way you treat them is [who] they [will] become.”¹⁰ To remember a child’s true identity is a gift of foresight that divinely inspires the vision of a righteous judge.

Conclusion

President Thomas S. Monson has taught us, “Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”¹¹ How vital that principle is in becoming righteous judges, especially with our own children.

There is only one way to judge righteous judgment, as Jesus Christ does, and that is to be as He is. Therefore, “what manner of men [and women] ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. See “disciple,” etymonline.com.
2. See *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2003), “chasten.”
3. Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2012), 83.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 71; emphasis added.
5. Guide to the Scriptures, “Sacrifice,” scriptures.lds.org.
6. See Bible Dictionary, “Sacrifices.”
7. The sacrifice we offer on the altar of the sacrament table each week is a broken heart and a contrite spirit (see 2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20; Doctrine and Covenants 59:8). A broken heart is a repentant heart; a contrite spirit is an obedient spirit (see D. Todd Christofferson, “When Thou Art Converted,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2004, 12).
8. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 299.
9. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith* (2011), 225, 226, 228; emphasis added.
10. Attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, brainyquote.com.
11. Thomas S. Monson, “Finding Joy in the Journey,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2008, 86.