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"Alma 39: A Model for Teaching Morality"

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As a seminary teacher, I had the opportunity one year to teach a class that consisted mostly of non-Latter-day Saint teenagers. Early in the course of study, the occasion to teach the law of chastity arose. While preparing for the class, I realized I was not sure how these students currently felt about the law of chastity. I decided I could teach them best if I first assessed their feelings and values concerning the subject.

To do so, I began the class by drawing a value continuum on the chalkboard. I drew a long horizontal line across the board and on one end wrote the number "1." On the other end, I wrote the number "100." In the middle of the line, I wrote "50." Over the number "1," I wrote what I thought was a small sin, "Stealing Gum" from the store. On the other end of the continuum over the "100," I wrote what I hoped they would recognize as a serious sin, "Murder," as shown in the figure below.

Stealing Gum		Murder
1	50	100

Value Continuum

Then, I asked the class, "Where on this scale of one to one hundred would you put the sin of having premarital sexual relations, assuming that stealing gum was a one and murder was a one hundred?" Although they were not Latter-day Saints, these were generally good young men and women, and I guessed that most would rate the sin of immorality in the upper half of the continuum, somewhere between fifty and seventy-five.

I never anticipated their actual response. Only a few ranked the sin in the upper half of the continuum; many placed it in the lower half; and a significant number felt that having premarital sexual relations was not a sin at all and therefore it did not belong on the continuum. In fact, in their minds, such relations were viewed as healthy and desirable. To this day, I wonder how well they understood and accepted what I taught them about the importance of chastity in God's eyes. Certainly teaching morality in a very immoral world is one of the greatest challenges facing Latter-day Saint educators today. As President Ezra Taft Benson declared, "The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality. This, the Prophet Joseph Smith said, would be the source of more temptations, more buffetings, and more difficulties for the elders of Israel than any other."¹ President Gordon B. Hinckley explained why the challenge is so great: "It seems as if the whole world has become obsessed with sex. In a very beguiling and alluring way, it is thrown at you constantly. You are exposed to it on television, in magazines and books and videos, even in music."²

Unfortunately, simply being a member of the Church does not protect us from the dilemma. As President Benson further explained, "Sexual immorality is a viper that is striking not only in the world, but in the Church today. Not to admit it is to be dangerously complacent or is like putting one's head in the sand."³

Teachers and parents face a constant and sometimes frustrating struggle to teach morality convincingly to children. Though we may teach our children the correct principles about how and when to use the power to create life, when they turn on the television, the values we have taught are often challenged and demeaned. When they turn on the radio, they are blasted with dialogue and lyrics that profane the sacred power to create life. And they are even exposed to checkout-stand magazines featuring the titles of articles that glamorize immorality.

Consequently, we must continually reteach morality to our children.

This battle for the moral values of our students and children is constant and fierce. If the voice of righteousness is ever going to be victorious in the battle, we have to teach morality better than the adversary teaches immorality. As someone once put it, “Satan works night and day to destroy us, and we have to ‘work like the devil’ to stay ahead of him!”

For Latter-day Saint educators engaged in this moral battle, Alma 39 can be an excellent resource to help in effectively combating false principles and corrupt values. In this chapter, Alma counsels his wayward son Corianton, providing a wonderful model of not only what to teach but also how to teach moral cleanliness. Analyzing not only the “what” but also the “how” of Alma’s counsel can help us identify important principles and methodology for effective teaching of this difficult subject. I have found this analytical approach to be an engaging way to teach Alma 39 to my students in helping them internalize and find application for the chapter’s message.

Tailoring the Teaching of Morality to the Student

Teachers may want to begin a study of the text by suggesting that the class discuss how to teach others about morality while using Alma 39 as a model. Teachers can then invite students to follow as the first two verses are read while considering the question, “What principle of teaching morality is Alma modeling in this passage?”

“And now, my son, I have somewhat more to say unto thee than what I said unto thy brother; for behold, have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?

“For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother, among the people of the Zoramites” (Alma 39:1–2).

Corianton most likely was very unhappy to be compared to his brothers and to be singled out for special treatment in this way. Children seldom seem to appreciate being asked, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” Children’s typical response is to complain, “This is not fair! You’re treating me differently than him!” or “Why do you give me this lecture and not him? It’s not fair!” All of us have probably recognized that children being disciplined often have a very misguided sense of justice. They mistakenly think that to be fair, we must treat each person exactly the same. What an unjust world it would be if God acted on that principle.

When one of my children complains by saying “It’s not fair! Why do you treat my brother one way and me another!” I have on occasion responded, “Well, the reason I treat you differently than your brother is because I love your brother more than you.” That always gets them more agitated. They immediately protest, “That’s not true. You don’t love him more than me!” I quickly agree, “Of course I don’t love him more than you. I couldn’t love him more than I love you.” Then, I like to ask, “If I’m not treating you differently than your brother because I love you less, then why do you suppose I am treating you differently?”

Hopefully, what follows is a thoughtful discussion of how and why parents teach and discipline their children. Such a discussion usually leads to the conclusion that parents treat their children

differently because children *are* different. Moreover, because everyone is not the same, the ultimate injustice would be to treat them as if they were. In the course of such discussions, I try to find opportunity to reassure my children that because I love them, I try to teach and treat them in the way that is best for them. I confess sometimes I make mistakes, not because I don't love my children but because I'm not always as smart as I should be.

I share this example of parenting because it illustrates another principle of teaching morality that Alma models as he counsels his son in Alma 39:1–2. Because his son chose to misuse agency and because Alma loved the young man, the content of Alma's counsel to Corianton was very different than that given to Helaman and Shiblon, Corianton's brothers (Alma 36–38). Alma understood and modeled the principle that we too should adopt.

As we teach morality today, we should recognize that how we teach should differ according to the student's age, maturity, personality, and prior use of agency. For example, we would likely not be very effective teaching morality to a rebellious seventeen-year-old if we used the same content and context as we would typically use to teach an innocent seven-year-old. Teachers carry a heavy responsibility to seek the guidance of the Spirit and to know and love their students so they can correctly identify what, where, and when it is best to teach them about the proper use of the sacred power to create life. The content and context of Alma's counsel to Corianton seem to be perfectly tailored to meet the young man's needs.

Teaching the Seriousness of Violating the Law of Chastity

In verses two through four of Alma 39, the prophet clearly identifies Corianton's sins. Then, in the fifth and sixth verses, he models another important principle of teaching mortality. While reading these passages, we should ponder the question, "What principle of teaching morality is Alma modeling?"

Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom.

And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron, among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel.

Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted.

Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?

For behold, if ye deny the Holy Ghost when it once has had place in you, and ye know that ye deny it, behold, this is a sin which is unpardonable; yea, and whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness; yea, I say unto you, my son, that it is not easy for him to obtain a forgiveness. (Alma 39:2–6)

Perhaps Corianton was surprised to learn how “abominable” his sin was in the eyes of God. Certainly many would be astonished at such doctrine in some of today’s spiritually sick societies. Alma rendered his wayward son a great service by not discounting the gravity of the transgression. This wise prophet clearly models for us the principle that as we teach morality, we must teach the seriousness of violating the law of chastity. Some of the adversary’s greatest victories in this dispensation have come as a result of his deceiving so many into believing that violating the law of chastity is an inconsequential offense—if an offense at all. What a victory for Lucifer to have convinced so many that one of the most serious sins they are capable of committing is not really a sin at all!⁴ Satan may well relegate more souls to kingdoms that are less than celestial by trivializing the misuse of the power to create life than by any other temptation in his arsenal.

Latter-day Saint educators bear a heavy responsibility to thwart deception. If we are to be effective in teaching morality, we must teach our students the sanctity of the power to create life and of the seriousness of its misuse.

In teaching the seriousness of Corianton’s sins, Alma also made certain his son understood that a person’s actions have a grievous impact on others as well: “Suffer not yourself to be led away by any vain or foolish thing; suffer not the devil to lead away your heart again after those wicked harlots. Behold, O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words” (Alma 39:11).

Perhaps, like some, Corianton had tried to minimize the damage his sin would cause by accepting the frequently used and extraordinarily pitiful excuse, “It’s okay for me to sin if I want. It’s my life, and I’m hurting only myself.” Latter-day Saints understand that there is no such thing as a sin that injures only the individual. From the story of Corianton, we know that unrighteous acts can undermine missionary efforts. We also know that because the basic unit of exaltation is the family, when individuals use their agency in such a way as to place their exaltation in jeopardy, their spouses and children are affected by those choices. Sin of any kind—especially immorality—has serious consequences not only for ourselves but also for others.

Being Involved, Open, and Aggressive

Alma continued to instruct his son in the seventh verse of the chapter: “And now, my son, I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime. I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good” (Alma 39:7).

This passage suggests that Alma did not enjoy having to deal with such a difficult issue. Indeed, he seems to find the task to be a very uncomfortable if not painful duty. Yet, despite the difficulty and perhaps awkwardness of the situation, Alma was determined to do what was best for his son by teaching him the importance of chastity. Alma was willing to set aside his own and his son’s comfort to rescue the young man. The adjectives that we could use to describe how Alma counsels his son in verse seven, and throughout the entire chapter, constitute another principle of teaching morality. As we teach morality, we must be involved, open, and aggressive. As previously noted, Satan is certainly open and aggressive in attacking proper moral principles. There is nothing subtle or obscure in the way he attacks morality, and we have to “work like the devil” to defeat him. If we are reluctant, timid, or passive in teaching chastity, our students will not have an anchor to hold themselves firm in the deluge of immorality with which the adversary floods their mortal environment. Moreover, if we are not matching the aggressive, bold, and constant efforts of those who challenge morality, our reluctance may be interpreted by our

students as evidence that chastity is not really very important. We cannot ignore the issue or sugarcoat it so much that those we are teaching do not hear or understand the message—even in instances such as Alma’s where it may be a very painful or harrowing experience for the student or the teacher.

Teaching Accountability for Sins

Alma models another principle of teaching mortality in verse eight of the text: “But behold, ye cannot hide your crimes from God; and except ye repent they will stand as a testimony against you at the last day” (Alma 39:8).

One of the great lies that Satan whispers to those he tempts is that it is all right to commit a sin if “no one will ever know!” The lie suggests that one can sin in secret and not be held accountable. Alma poignantly declares the fallacy of such reasoning. God always knows. Ponder the question, “What would be better—if only God knew of our sins or if the whole world knew but God did not?” Truthfully, it would be better if the entire world knew of our sins and God did not, for only God can hold us eternally accountable. Our students need to understand this doctrine to find the strength to be morally clean. Accordingly, as we teach morality, we also must teach accountability for sins.

Teaching Repentance—Appropriately

If we are teaching a significant number of youth, we will most likely have students who have already violated the law of chastity. For them, the principle of teaching morality shown by Alma in verse nine is especially important: “Now my son, I would that ye should repent and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Oh, remember, and take it upon you, and cross yourself in these things” (Alma 39:9).

Alma understood that the only thing more foolish than committing a sin is refusing to repent—which imposes infinite consequences. He knew that those who have transgressed need to know the way back—not only to redeem their souls but also to give them a reason to discontinue their sinful acts. As we teach morality, we must also teach repentance appropriately.

The adverb attached to this principle, “appropriately,” is especially important. As a bishop, I noticed that despite all our efforts to teach how to obtain forgiveness for sins, far too many Latter-day Saints have a mistaken understanding of what constitutes true repentance. Too many naively think that all a person has to do to qualify for forgiveness is simply allow a certain period of time to pass without committing the sin again. Such individuals often plan their “repentance” while they are in the very act of committing the sin. Their misguided reasoning tells them, “If I commit this sin I will have to wait this many months before I can take the sacrament, but if I commit this other sin, I can be worthy in only this many weeks!”

Others, equally as deluded, want to reduce the entire process of repentance to mere confession. Such individuals frequently are deceived by what can be called the “sin-now-pay later program.” In their distorted line of reasoning, they think, “I’ll give into these temptations, but it’s all right because just before my mission, I’ll go confess it all to the bishop, and then I’ll go on my mission!” or “I’ll live a riotous, sinful life for now, but when I meet ‘Mr. Right,’ I’ll go confess my sins so I can marry him in the temple!”

Such attitudes demonstrate an alarming disrespect for the Savior’s atoning sacrifice—not to mention a complete misunderstanding of the vital role godly sorrow plays in the repentance process. Somehow, we need to help students understand that obtaining forgiveness is not a

simple and painless experience and that the godly sorrow required for true repentance is not something that can be turned on and off at a whim. Students need to realize that those who sin with impunity, thinking that repentance is an easy balm to be smeared over their spiritual wounds any time they wish, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to muster the godly sorrow sufficient to obtain forgiveness when the day for their planned repentance arrives. As we teach morality, we can help students come to a proper understanding by making certain that we appropriately teach all the steps of repentance. Teachers may want to invite their students to identify the steps of repentance Alma teaches his sons in the following verses:

Suffer not yourself to be led away by any vain or foolish thing; suffer not the devil to lead away your heart again after those wicked harlots. Behold, O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words.

And now the Spirit of the Lord doth say unto me: Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction; therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities;

That ye turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done. (Alma 39:9, 11–13)

And now, my son, I desire that ye should let these things trouble you no more, and only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance.

O my son, I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do you let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility.

And now, O my son, ye are called of God to preach the word unto this people. And now, my son, go thy way, declare the word with truth and soberness, that thou mayest bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them. And may God grant unto you even according to my words. Amen. (Alma 42:29–31)

In these verses, Alma clearly teaches his son the steps of repentance, including recognizing sins, feeling godly sorrow and being humbled by sins, forsaking sins, confessing wrongs to those offended, and seeking to make restitution by proclaiming the gospel.

Teaching Students to Be Source Critical

Another important principle of teaching morality can be seen in Alma's counsel recorded verse ten: "And I command you to take it upon you to counsel with your elder brothers in your

undertakings; for behold, thou art in thy youth, and ye stand in need to be nourished by your brothers. And give heed to their counsel” (Alma 39:10).

As teachers, we may want to ask our students to consider why Alma told Corianton to look to Corianton’s brothers for advice. Why didn’t Alma say, “I command you to counsel with all your drug-addicted, immoral friends for advice on moral cleanliness” or “Look to your favorite R-rated movie star for advice on moral cleanliness?” Our students will certainly recognize that such individuals generally cannot be considered reliable sources for information about how God would have us live chaste lives. Yet far too many are quick to learn and accept moral values from such spiritually challenged sources. If we are to help our students learn and accept correct moral values, we must teach students to be source critical.

One way to accomplish the task of being source critical is to ask students to make a list of criteria that a good, reliable advisor on morality should meet. Hopefully, their list will include some of the following:

1. A good and reliable advisor on morality should be smart enough to give counsel. For example, one certainly would not go to a kindergarten-aged brother or sister to get help with a calculus assignment! While such little ones may want to help, they simply do not know enough about the subject to be of assistance. They may sincerely give the best answers they can contrive and may even believe their answers are correct, but they will be wrong. In the same spirit, it would certainly be folly to look to morally uneducated individuals for advice about chastity. We simply cannot trust moral advice given by a spiritually untrained peer, an amoral media star, or a passion-driven friend. Such individuals may sincerely want to advise us, but they simply are not morally smart enough to give reliable counsel.

2. A good and reliable advisor on morality must share our goals and values. If the individuals to whom we look for counsel do not have our values and goals, such as keeping baptismal covenants, being a faithful priesthood holder, serving an honorable mission, and having an eternal family, then they may not be able to give counsel that will help us reach our goals and maintain our values. Individuals who do not share our goals and values may be—and likely are—wonderful people, but their values and understanding of the purpose of life may well lead them to make life choices that disregard the importance of chastity. Consequently, they cannot be considered reliable sources for moral counsel for an individual whose goal is to gain exaltation.

3. A good and reliable advisor on morality must have our best interest and welfare in mind while giving counsel. Reliable counselors must love us—love us enough that they would never place their personal desires above our welfare. They must be willing to give the counsel they sincerely feel is best for us, even if it may be painful or require sacrifice. If the counselors are selfish, uncaring, or eager to please their own carnal desires first, they cannot be counted on to advise us properly, especially on moral issues.

After such a list of criteria for reliable moral advisors, it might be helpful for students to identify the individuals in their lives who meet those criteria. Students will likely identify their parents, Church leaders and advisors, and perhaps some teachers. If they are fortunate, they will also have friends who meet the criteria of having appropriate intelligence, sharing the same values, and reflecting enough love to give unselfish and correct moral advice. If our students are truly fortunate, not only will they have friends who meet the criteria but also they will be that kind of friend themselves.

Teaching Morality in the Context of the Plan of Redemption

Perhaps the most important principle of teaching morality is demonstrated by Alma in verse fifteen and throughout the rest of chapter thirty-nine and through to the end of chapter forty-two. In verse fifteen, Alma instructs: “And now, my son, I would say somewhat unto you concerning the coming of Christ. Behold, I say unto you, that it is he that surely shall come to take away the sins of the world; yea, he cometh to declare glad tidings of salvation unto his people” (Alma 39:15).

As Alma bears witness of salvation through Christ in this verse and then teaches about the Atonement, Resurrection, Judgment, and the ultimate redemption of humankind in subsequent verses and chapters, he helps his son see how and why moral cleanliness fits in God’s eternal plan. Likewise, we too must teach morality in the context of the plan of redemption.

We will struggle to convince our students to live chaste lives if we teach morality as merely part of a good code of ethics. To maintain the faith and motivation necessary to stay morally clean in an environment that constantly challenges morality, our students need to understand that the law of chastity is a vital part of God’s great and eternal plan to bring to pass our immortality and eternal life. With that understanding, they will better find the strength and faith to live chaste and virtuous lives, even in the face of great temptation.

Conclusion

Alma’s approach to teaching morality to his son was effective. Corianton repented and became an effective missionary. Later, we read that the sons of Alma, including Corianton, “did go forth among the people to declare the word unto them” (Alma 43:1). Along with Helaman, Corianton was part of the great missionary effort that reformed the apostate Nephite people for a time. In Alma 48:18, Corianton, as a son of Alma, is described as a man of God. It was eventually said of both Shiblon and Corianton, “He was a just man, and he did walk uprightly before God; and he did observe to do good continually, to keep the commandments of the Lord his God” (Alma 63:2).

In summary, I believe that latter-day educators can more effectively help their students earn the same praise if they, like Alma, will do the following:

- Tailor the teaching of morality to the student
- Teach the seriousness of violating the law of chastity
- Be involved, open, and aggressive in teaching morality
- Teach accountability for sins
- Teach repentance—appropriately
- Teach students to be source critical
- Teach morality in the context of the plan of redemption

Notes

¹ Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 277.

² Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 384.

³ Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 279. For a discussion of the challenges of immorality facing the youth in the Church, see Brent L. Top and Bruce A. Chadwick, “Helping Teens Stay Strong,” *Ensign* 29, no. 3 (March 1999): 27–34; Brent L. Top and Bruce A. Chadwick, “Raising Righteous Children,” *Brigham Young Magazine* (summer 1998): 41–51.

⁴ As discussed in Alma 39:5–6, the gravest sin a person can commit is to deny the Holy Ghost, followed by murder and then sexual immorality. Because denying the Holy Ghost requires a person to have made certain covenants, participated in certain ordinances, and have certain knowledge, most individuals cannot commit this sin. Therefore, committing murder and violating the law of chastity are the first and second most serious sins most individuals are capable of committing.