

## TOUGH OR TENDER IN THE CLASSROOM

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Properly balancing justice and mercy in the classroom is a line that must be walked by teachers to awaken a motivating sense of divine discontent in students without instilling devilish discouragement. Even in their toughest subjects or most challenging academic moments, students must be encouraged to maintain a “perfect brightness of hope.” But false hope instilled by too much tenderness is a disservice that sets them up for failure when they move into the world. We sometimes remind today’s youth of their noble latter-day birthright without helping them properly understand the immense responsibility for heightened performance that comes with it.

Thus the question lingers of when to use sugar—and when a stick—to help motivate youngsters. As in all things, we are blessed to have the gift of the Holy Ghost to “tell [and even show] you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3, 5). Receiving that inspiration requires a constant effort toward humility and worthiness on our part, traits which—ironically in the world’s eyes—add power and impact to our classroom messages.

That proposed premortal guide to life and learning, “Free Agency and How to Enforce It,” would make parenting and teaching so much simpler! But it was voted down then and should be vetoed now. True, “the rod and reproof give wisdom” (Proverbs 29:15). But we have a doctrinal mandate that “sharpness” of stick only be used following ample doses of “long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned.” Kindness and “pure knowledge” (which sounds a touch academic) must precede sternness, as must the absence of hypocrisy and guile.

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Those who would issue academic or spiritual spankings must qualify to do so only “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” Simply put, it’s tough to be tough. One has to be spiritually justified to make toughness effective with students. The Savior and His prophets provide examples of using proper reproof for motivating means and righteous results.

Some would argue that the “sharpness” spoken of in *Doctrine and Covenants* 121 is strictly for clarity and not reproof, as in seeing through a “sharply” focused lens. I believe the Savior and His anointed servants illustrate otherwise, with primary evidence being the injunction to show forth afterward an increase of love toward the reproofed, “lest he esteem thee to be his enemy” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 121:41-43).

The Savior was strikingly blunt—and perfectly loving—with friends and antagonists alike. No one would question his scathing rebuke of hypocrites, but His scolding of Peter for a lack of faith, after the chief disciple crossed a significant stretch of water on foot, may have raised

a few eyebrows. Yet the Master Teacher sensed a greater depth in Peter and understood his future role, so He lovingly challenged him to stand on his own in a turbulent sea, knowing the sea of change awaiting the chief apostle not long hence. He also understood Peter's personality and potential and compelled him accordingly. Furthermore, the Savior had already walked on water. He was and is the perfectly qualified schoolmaster. What a blessing to know that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Hebrews 12:6). This from He who endured brutal scourging on our behalf, sandwiched between Gethsemane and cruel crucifixion.

As master teachers, with the Master setting the pattern, prophetic exemplars are often direct and challenging, even rebuking, toward those whom they love and desire to teach. The key, of course, is that love is always their motive, creating a desire for their pupils' spiritual stretching and the development of temporal talents. And again, their admonitions are always delivered by the power of the Holy Ghost.

The Prophet Joseph spoke on several occasions concerning the value of a righteous rebuke. "I frequently rebuke and admonish my brethren, and that because I love them, not because I wish to incur their displeasure, or mar their happiness" (Teachings, pp. 112-13). He explained that this responsibility was part of his calling and was always done for the welfare of those he taught. Who was more qualified, really, to deliver a deserved dressing down than the prophet of this dispensation? He not only endured worldly dressings down accompanied by tar and feathers, but also spiritual rebukes he openly published to the world.

Seldom does one read of the Savior and His anointed servants doing much cheerleading—even among the faithful. President Hinckley is a master at commending the saints for a degree of faithfulness, followed by, "But we can do better; we must do better." He certainly is direct on many occasions, reproofing with spiritual sharpness. But he likewise is quick and consistent in directly expressing his love, as he did so powerfully to students during the dedication of the Gordon B. Hinckley Building. He strikes an inspiring balance of healthy build-up without instilling complacency or false security. What a great model for any teacher to follow, even with the gulf between us and his prophetic perspective, power, and personal acumen as a communicator.

In a *Church News* interview, President Thomas S. Monson described his years as a young priesthood leader under the tutoring influence of President Harold B. Lee. He spoke respectfully about President Lee's firmness in getting the attention of those brethren who needed a nudge or course correction, figuratively comparing his methodology to taking a horse by the reins and giving a good yank. Understanding was usually clear and instantaneous, and performance would measurably improve. I

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wonder how many times the Lord lovingly but firmly did the same for President Lee, and I marvel at the latter's common-sense compassion on Salt Lake's humble west side, where he had served as a stake president. There he practiced and taught principles of self-reliance and selfless service that became in large measure the foundation of Church welfare.

As a green teacher in need of mercy, I wrestle to administer justice and mercy wisely in my classroom. This is not always easy, but it must be simple and consistent, driven by love and the Spirit. Discernment makes all the difference. Is there a methodological balance to be struck concerning tough versus tender? Sure. But like all principles the Savior taught, the application is spiritual and starts from the inside out. Then the broader implementation will take care of itself.