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How Do Justice and Mercy Relate to the Atonement?

Tad R. Callister

The Immutable Laws of the Universe

Justice and mercy are difficult concepts to explore, not because there is an absence of scriptural references, but because these concepts exhaust our intellectual resources long before divulging all the answers. Elder McConkie wrote, “We know that in some way, incomprehensible to us, his suffering satisfied the demands of justice.”¹

The scriptures frequently refer to “justice” and the demand for its satisfaction. What, then, is justice, and who requires it? Dictionary definitions are many—“fairness,” “righteousness,” and “the administration of that which is right.” These are only a few. But who determines what justice is? Who demands it? What are the consequences of violating or complying with that which is just?

There are certain laws of the universe that are immutable, that are without beginning of days or end of years. They are not created by an intelligent being, nor are they the product of moral thought, rather they are eternal, co-existent realities with the intelligences of the universe. These laws are immutable in that they cannot be altered or modified in any form. They are unchangeable from eternity to eternity. They are self-existing, self-perpetuating laws to which even God himself is subject. B. H. Roberts spoke of the “eternal existences” that govern even Gods:

[There] are things that limit even God’s omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice, reign of law, God can do. But even he may not act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit even him.²

Brigham Young taught the same truth: “Our religion is nothing more nor less than the true order of heaven—the system of laws by which the

Gods and the angels are governed. Are they governed by law? Certainly. There is no being in all the eternities but what is governed by law.”³

Certain of these immutable laws affect the physical or natural world. For example, the Prophet Joseph taught that the “pure principles of element . . . can never be destroyed: they may be organized and re-organized but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.”⁴ Likewise, the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, “The elements are eternal” (D&C 93:33). In other words, the universe contains basic, elemental matter that cannot be created or destroyed, or as Brigham Young said, “[It] cannot be annihilated.”⁵ There is no exception to this natural law. Even God is not exempt. The Prophet Joseph confirmed this when he taught, “Intelligence . . . was not created or made, *neither indeed can be*” (D&C 93:29; emphasis added).

In and of themselves, the laws of the physical or natural world seem to have no moral implications. They do not affect our spiritual growth. We cannot sin by breaking these laws, because it is not possible to break them. We would not drop a ball from a tower and deduce, “This ball will always fall in this way, because the laws of gravity are just.” Justice and mercy have no meaning in these circumstances; fairness or rightness are not issues when it comes to the physical, natural laws; they do not allow for obedience by choice, but rather require uncompromising, involuntary compliance.

There appear to be other immutable laws in the universe, however, that offer both a choice and a consequence, and hence, in this sense, they are spiritual laws. These spiritual laws govern all intelligent beings in the universe—and also govern their progress. For these purposes, progress means an increase in eternal power. In other words, there seem to exist certain immutable laws that will bring power if they are followed or “obeyed,” but if they are neglected or “disobeyed” they may trigger the opposite result. For example, it may be that an individual cannot progress without acquiring knowledge. President John Taylor noted that even the gods submit to these immutable laws: “There are certain eternal laws by which the Gods in the eternal worlds are governed and which they cannot violate, and do not want to violate. These eternal principles must be kept, and one principle is, that no unclean thing can enter into the Kingdom of God.”⁶

Thus certain laws govern even the gods. President Taylor does not seem to be suggesting that these laws cannot be violated or broken under any set of circumstances, but rather that they cannot be violated by gods who desire to remain as such.

The Savior observed every spiritual law with undeviating exactness. Apparently because of his compliance with each one, he received power upon power until he acquired the attributes of God, even in premortal times. Such progress was a natural consequence of his exacting compliance. His godhood thus seemed to result not from a creation of these laws, but rather from compliance with them. But what of the rest of us, who do not

comply with each and every immutable law? Could we not just try and try and try again until we finally got it right, and then become gods, even though it might be on a delayed timetable? The answer is no. Evidently these immutable spiritual laws offer no leniency or mercy or second chances. If we do not comply, we have lost forever that opportunity for increased power that naturally flows from compliance. Aaron taught that once “man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself” (Alma 22:14). In other words, he could not pull himself up by his own bootstraps, regardless of how much time he had to try to do so. The Savior taught the Nephites the same principle: “While ye are in prison can ye pay even one senine? Verily, verily, I say unto you, Nay” (3 Nephi 12:26). The message is clear—once we sinned, violating the laws of eternity, there was no means of escape without outside help.

If someone falls from an airplane, he will plummet to the ground. The law of gravity will not change to accommodate his dire circumstances. There will be no slowing of the descent or softening of the earth to cushion the fall, however good a fellow he may be. He cannot say just before impact, “Let me take that last step one more time.” No, there is only the automatic application of the law, hard and fast and uncompromising. Why does it work this way? There is no answer to that question. It is like asking, “Why does matter exist?” or “Why is the sky endless?” “Why” is not a question that can be asked of something that was never created. It exists because it exists.

The Justice of God

One might refer to these immutable spiritual laws that govern our progression as justice. Yet such “justice” as this is simply the natural consequence that flows from uncreated law. It exists co-eternally with and independent of the uncreated intelligences of the universe. In this regard, one might ask, “Do these laws constitute or determine justice? Does justice, as a concept of fairness and righteousness, exist only as determined and created by a moral being?” If the answer is yes, then justice would not be a self-existing law, but rather a principle of morality that is the product of intelligent thought. If this is the case, then what being or beings determine and demand justice? Is it God alone? Mankind? The intelligences of the universe? All or part of the above?

The scriptures make it clear that God has a system of justice. It is often referred to as “the justice of God” (Alma 41:3; 42:14, 30; D&C 10:28) or “his justice” (2 Nephi 9:26) or “divine justice” (Mosiah 2:38); but clearly the prophets confirm that God provides a moral system by which man is governed. But how does this moral system relate to the immutable, uncreated laws of which we have just spoken? God understood that our failure to comply with these immutable laws would forever bar us from

godhood unless there was another source of power that could be available to man—not because he earned it, not because he had a right to it through worthiness, but because another being with more power was so loving and kind that he was willing, even anxious, to propose and implement a plan that would provide the necessary power to exalt man. God instituted such a plan, known as the “plan of the great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:6), he rejoiced with exclamation, “O how great the plan of our God!” (2 Nephi 9:13). Joseph Smith spoke of the purpose of this plan:

God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. . . He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another.⁷

These laws “to instruct the weaker intelligences” are referred to as “his law” (2 Nephi 9:17) or “the laws of God” (D&C 107:84).

Elder Erastus Snow wrote of the immutable laws of the universe: “I understand that what has exalted to life and salvation our Father in heaven and all the Gods of eternity will also exalt us, their children[.] And what causes Lucifer and his followers to descend to the regions of death and perdition will also lead us in the same direction; *and no atonement of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ can alter that eternal law*, any more than he can make two and two to mean sixteen.”⁸

That “eternal law” of which he spoke is the immutable law that governs the path to godhood. God’s law can never violate it, circumvent it, or “short-change” it, but it can complement and supplement it. Perhaps it is not unlike the conditions under which Nephiah operated as chief judge. He was given “power to enact laws according to the laws which had been given” (Alma 4:16). In other words, he could create “smaller” laws, provided they did not violate the principles of any existing “larger” laws. It is a well-known legal principle that individual states may create any law that is not expressly prohibited by the federal constitution. This gives each state wide latitude in determining a system of justice that will govern its citizens, provided such laws never violate our charter. Perhaps, in a similar way, God may establish any law he desires, provided it does not violate one of the immutable laws of the universe. These laws established by God, if obeyed, will endow his children with added power, even that power necessary to become gods.

By the way of illustration, God might not be able to rob a man of his agency to jump from a plane (i.e., to prevent him from sinning), but he might be able to put a parachute on the man’s back before he leaps (i.e., provide a means to repent). As the dire consequences of this man’s foolish decision quickly unfold, he still has a chance to land safely: He can pull the rip cord. In such a circumstance no law is violated or circumvented.

The law of gravity is still in full force and effect. No justice is robbed; yet the sinner is given power to land safely if he will just pull the rip cord (i.e., repent and rely on the protective life-preserving power of the Atonement). Nephi spoke of those who relied on the “tender mercies of the Lord” as those who were “mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20).

What constitutes the basis, the underlying rationale, for God’s laws? God has certain inherent, eternal qualities that never change. He can never act inconsistent with or contrary to those qualities, not because he lacks the power to do so, but he has no desire to do so. Perhaps the brother of Jared was alluding to this fact when he said, “O Lord, . . . thou hast all power, *and can do whatsoever thou wilt*” (Ether 3:4; emphasis added). God’s consistent compliance with these inherent qualities is a form of justice (i.e., the administration of that which he deems to be fair and right) because his own moral sense demands compliance. This leads to the next question: Is it possible that God demands justice not only to satisfy his own inherent moral sense, but also to satisfy all the other moral beings in the universe who have a similar standard of morality? In other words, could it be that God has in common with every man who has chosen to be a citizen of his kingdom a set of moral values by which they are desirous of being governed?

The People Also Desire Justice

Justice in the secular sense is the administration of those laws that are established and consented to by the citizens of a nation or a kingdom. Such justice is demanded by the people. Without this form of justice, chaos rather than order would reign. Likewise, justice in the divine dimension is the administration of those laws that are established and consented to by the people who comprise the kingdom of God. No doubt, in the great primeval council such divine laws were discussed and eventually agreed to. The Prophet Joseph explained, “It has been a doctrine taught by this church that we were in the Grand Council amongst the Gods when the organization of this world was contemplated and that *the laws of government were all made and sanctioned by all present.*”⁹ We the people, who would be subject to such laws, had a voice in their adoption.

No doubt the Grand Council in Heaven consisted of far more than a divine proposal immediately followed by a sustaining vote. More likely such a council (or perhaps councils) would have included ample time for discussion, debate, questions, the exchange of feelings, and the sharing of testimonies. This is not to suggest that the plan of salvation was in any way altered or refined, for the Father’s plan, as presented, would have been perfect in every way. But the participants, other than the Father and Son, were not perfect. No doubt many of us had an anxious desire to explore every facet of the plan, to understand the consequences of moral agency

and the risks inherent with mortal birth. All knew there would be pitfalls, crossroads, high roads, low roads, and sometimes seemingly no road at all. Surely we did not receive the plan in a spirit of casualness. No doubt this was a time of rapt attention and intense inquiry. We were profoundly interested and concerned, for our eternal destinies were at stake. Elder Joseph F. Smith taught:

[We] were in the councils of the heavens before the foundations of the earth were laid. . . . We were, no doubt, there, and took a part in all those scenes; we were vitally concerned in the carrying out of these great plans and purposes; we understood them, and it was for our sakes they were decreed and are to be consummated.¹⁰

At some point Satan and his followers must have raised objections and competing issues. God certainly had the power to silence such opposing arguments and suppress every contrary thought with his compelling logic and commanding spiritual presence, but he seemed to have temporarily withheld—perhaps for the sake of agency he allowed the events to run their course. If the Grand Council was similar to councils today, each man who so desired would have had the opportunity, the “equal privilege” (D&C 88:122), to discharge the honest feelings of his heart. The noble and great ones probably stepped forward to courageously and boldly defend the plan. Just as the Gods “counseled among themselves” (Abraham 5:3), so too the members of this council may have counseled with each other, not to improve the plan, but to more fully understand and embrace it. Then, after all questions had been answered and testimonies borne, the decisive question was most likely put to a vote.

Among the most basic of all gospel principles is the law of common consent. Mosiah taught this law to his people: “It is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore *this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people*” (Mosiah 29:26; emphasis added; see also Alma 1:14; Mosiah 22:1).

This fundamental principle of governance by consent was announced upon the formation of the Church in the latter days, and similar counsel was repeated twice thereafter within the short space of six months. Each time the message was similar; “And all things shall be done by common consent in the church” (D&C 26:2; see also D&C 28:13).

This law is fundamental not only in mortality, but in all spheres of our existence. Brigham Young taught: “The eternal laws by which he [God] and all others exist in the eternities of the Gods, decree that *the consent of the creature must be obtained before the Creator can rule perfectly.*”¹¹ Even when the voice of the people goes contrary to God’s will, he has respected their agency. Israel desired an earthly king in lieu of their heavenly king. God told

Samuel to explain to the people the consequences of a king, so there would be no misunderstanding about their political future. Then he instructed Samuel to “hearken unto their voice” (1 Samuel 8:9), and make them a king.

Would it seem reasonable that God would violate this basic principle of common consent, so emphasized by him, and impose upon his subjects laws not approved by the voice of the people? To the contrary, it seems no one was more anxious and more willing to promote and foster an environment of agency and common consent than God himself. Unfortunately, “the lesser part of the people” (i.e., Satan and a third part of the host of heaven) desired “that which is not right” (Mosiah 29:26) and therefore were cast out of God’s presence. This seemed an appropriate consequence, since they chose not to be bound by the laws that would govern God’s kingdom. Unbelievably, they chose chaos over order, contention over harmony, war over peace. By rejecting the Father’s plan, they could not become the beneficiaries of those very laws that had the power to exalt them. Why they chose Satan over the Savior is the great enigma of the ages. Was it a lack of faith in the Savior’s ability to undergo the atoning sacrifice? Was it lack of faith in their own ability to keep the terms and conditions of God’s law? Was it pride, ambition, selfishness—all of these weaknesses combined? Whatever the cause, the heavens wept over their wickedness—but honored each person’s right to be disobedient.

The two-thirds who remained accepted the laws given us by the Father. “The voice of the people” (Mosiah 29:26) sanctioned the divine laws he proposed through the Son. That is what the Prophet Joseph taught: “At the first organization in heaven we were all present, and saw the Savior chosen and appointed and the plan of salvation made, and we sanctioned it.”¹²

If we sanctioned the laws by which we would be governed, it seems that we did so with full understanding of their corresponding blessings and punishments. These laws, with their attendant consequences, were considered just. No one forced us to consent. We voluntarily chose to accept these laws that would govern our spiritual lives so that order rather than chaos would reign.

Who Administers the Laws?

The administration, supervision, and execution of these laws, punishments, and blessings by which we chose to be bound is what we know to be “justice.” The person responsible for administering these laws is the judge. Mosiah urged his people to “appoint wise men to be judges, that will judge this people according to the commandments of God” (Mosiah 29:11). Those in the great primeval council consented that the wisest of all the Father’s children—the Savior—should be judge. We did so with the comforting assurance that he would be absolutely fair and just and merciful in

the administration of the law. Enoch called him the “righteous Judge, who shall come in the meridian of time” (Moses 6:57). Not only could the Savior sympathize with our cause, but he could empathize. He would suffer the full spectrum of mortality. No one would know the laws better than he who had been our lawgiver. No one was wiser, for he was “more intelligent than they all” (Abraham 3:19). And no one was more merciful, more kind, more loving or concerned than the Savior himself.

The Savior possessed all the qualifications needed and desired in a perfect judge. The “voice of the people” (Mosiah 29:26) wanted him and approved him and rejoiced in him as their judge. No one at a later date could claim exemption from his decrees. No one could claim he did not understand. No one could claim he was unacceptable, for he had our approval, our consent, our vote in advance of the final judgment. David recognized this; “God is the judge” (Psalm 75:7). Isaiah knew it: “The Lord is our judge” (Isaiah 33:22). And Moroni spoke of the Savior as “the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34). Jesus also testified of this truth: “The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son” (John 5:22).

Mercy and Grace—Gifts from God

As crucial as are the laws of justice, they cannot save us. Lehi spoke of man’s fate if justice alone were the governing scepter: “By the law men are cut off” (2 Nephi 2:5). Jacob, a son of Lehi, knew there was only one spiritual remedy that could prevent a permanent separation from God: “It is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Nephi 10:24; see also 2 Nephi 2:8). Paul taught the same; “According to [God’s] mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5). There are no exceptions—without mercy and grace there is neither salvation nor exaltation. With his usual insight Shakespeare wrote of that spiritual truth:

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy.¹³

Mercy and grace are gifts from God. In essence, they are companion doctrines. The LDS Bible Dictionary defines grace as a “divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ In other words, the merciful nature of God prompts him to lovingly provide us with gifts and powers (i.e., his grace) that will enhance our godly nature.

Sometimes we have a tendency to shy away from the word *grace* and instead to emphasize works (while certain others take the opposite approach)—but in truth, these two concepts go hand in hand. When the

lifeguard stretches out a pole to the drowning swimmer, the swimmer must reach out and hold on if he desires to be rescued. Both the lifeguard and the swimmer must fully participate if the swimmer's life is to be saved. Likewise, works and grace are not opposing doctrines, as is so often portrayed. To the contrary, they are indispensable partners in the process of exaltation.

The word *grace* occurs 252 times in the standard works, while the word *mercy* occurs 396 times. It is apparent that these words are not descriptive of fringe gospel principles. They lie at the core of LDS doctrine, flowing directly from the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Elder McConkie taught; "As justice is the child of the fall, so mercy is the offspring of the atonement."¹⁵ We might further add that grace is the offspring of mercy.

Grace, which denotes divine help or gifts from God, is, as the LDS Bible Dictionary tells us, "made possible by [Jesus'] atoning sacrifice."¹⁶ Each of these gifts is a form of "enabling power"¹⁷ designed to strengthen or assist us in our pursuit of godhood. The terms mercy and grace describe both God's loving nature and the actual gifts endowed upon us by God. By definition, these gifts are unearned by the recipient. Paul referred to grace as "the free gift" (Romans 5:15). Lehi made it clear that "salvation is free" (2 Nephi 2:4), and Nephi echoed the sentiments of his father when he preached that salvation was "free for all men" (2 Nephi 26:27). In certain circumstances these gifts are bestowed without any required action on the part of the recipient; in other circumstances the beneficiary must satisfy certain conditions, not as a means of earning the gift, for there is no equal *quid pro quo*, but because the giver will not bestow the gift until certain minimum conditions are satisfied.

Stephen E. Robinson tells of his little daughter, who anxiously pled for a bicycle. He promised her that if she saved all her pennies, she could one day have one. Motivated by her father's promise, she anxiously engaged in chores around the house, carefully saving every penny she earned. One day she returned to him with a jar full of pennies, anxious to now buy her bicycle. Good to his word, Brother Robinson took his elated daughter to the store where she soon found the perfect bike. Then came the moment of truth—the price tag was more than one hundred dollars. Despondent, she counted her sixty-one pennies. She quickly realized that at this rate she would never have enough to buy her dream. Then Brother Robinson lovingly came to the rescue. "I'll tell you what, dear. Let's try a different arrangement. You give me everything you've got, the whole sixty-one cents, and a hug and a kiss, and this bike is yours."¹⁸

The bicycle was certainly not totally earned by the young girl, but nonetheless, it was gladly given by a father who recognized she had given her all.

This is the spirit in which Nephi counseled, "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). In other words,

we contribute to our salvation, but we do not earn it. That was also the spirit of Paul's message: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Thus works alone cannot save us; grace is an absolute prerequisite. But a certain amount of works (i.e., the best we have to offer) are necessary to trigger God's grace and mercy. No matter how hard we work, how diligently we serve, or how righteously we live, we will never deserve more than we receive. We will never be too qualified for our kingdom of glory. Brigham Young taught this principle with his usual brevity: "There never was any person over-saved; all who have been saved, and that ever will be in the future, are only just saved, and then it is not without a struggle to overcome, that calls into exercise every energy of the soul."¹⁹

Alma revealed that only the repentant, meaning those who have given of their spiritual best, "have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son" (Alma 12:34). In this way, works and grace are complementary companions. In fact, they are inseparable partners in our pursuit of perfection. While discussing the superiority of faith or works, C. S. Lewis responded in his characteristically pragmatic fashion, "It does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary."²⁰ Perhaps Brigham Young summarized the relationship between grace and works as well as it can be said: "It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us."²¹

God's mercy, both conditional and unconditional, is manifest in abundant fashion. It was demonstrated by our spirit birth, by our physical birth, and by the creation of the world. These outpourings of mercy seem to be independent of the Atonement, yet each of them added power to our lives. Certain other acts of mercy or grace flow directly from the atoning sacrifice. In each instance they are manifestations of gifts or enabling powers conferred upon man.

Mercy—Compassion and Leniency

In one sense mercy is the father of grace (and all the powers that flow therefrom), as discussed above. In another sense, mercy means leniency and clemency; it is compassion shown to an offender. In its highest form, it is love and compassion and wisdom all mixed in divine proportion. Portia pled with an earthly tribunal to exercise this quality that is so quintessentially godlike in nature:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown. . . .
 It is an attribute to God himself.²²

That attribute was fully operative in the Savior at all times. He could have called upon his vast reservoir of celestial power, removed himself from the cross, and avenged himself of his persecutors with fiery indignation; to this he was justly entitled—but mercy, not retribution, was his governing scepter.

Nehemiah spoke of this boundless benevolence of God: “Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful” (Nehemiah 9:17). David used the same imagery: “Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy” (Psalm 86:5). One can almost visualize the imagery of those scriptures—God, anxiously and tenderly watching over his creations, so as to detect every righteous act or benevolent thought that he might reward in abundant measure. He is constantly seeking for the good—“his bowels of mercy are over all the earth” (Alma 26:37; see also D&C 101:9). It is he who “delight[s] to bless with the greatest of all blessings” (D&C 41:1). To the tender Saints of the newly restored Church, the Savior said, “I will have compassion upon you. . . . [F]or mine own glory, and for the salvation of souls, I have forgiven you your sins” (D&C 64:2-3). Even in God’s day of wrath, he has said, “with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee” (Isaiah 54:8; see also D&C 101:9). All of God’s faculties, all of his inclinations are poised and bent on blessing at the slightest provocation. Oh, how God loves to be merciful and bless his children! Perhaps that is his greatest joy. It is that inherent quality that drives him with tireless vigilance to save his children. Lehi so observed: “Because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!” (1 Nephi 1:14). Indeed, our God “is mighty to save” (Alma 34:18).

Mercy was an attribute that Abraham Lincoln possessed in magnificent measure. Robert Ingersoll penned this tribute of him:

Nothing discloses real character like the use of power. It is easy for the weak to be gentle. Most people can bear adversity. But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy.²³

Lincoln was entitled to this tribute—Christ infinitely more so.

How Does Justice Relate to Mercy?

At one end of the law is mercy in all its compassionate splendor, at the other is justice in all its stern reality. The Atonement is the one act in recorded history that demonstrated the maximum mercy, yet never robbed justice of one ounce of payment. The Atonement ran the full gamut of the

law, end to end, mercy to justice. It was all-inclusive, infinite, so to speak, in its compliance with the law. Lehi explained this doctrine: “He offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered” (2 Nephi 2:7; see also 2 Nephi 2:10).

Those who do not repent will suffer everything, Brigham Young said, that “justice can require of them; and when they have suffered the wrath of God till the utmost farthing is paid, they will be brought out of prison.”²⁴ Elder Marion G. Romney also spoke of the awful consequences of those who fail to repent: “Without complying with these requirements and the other principles and the ordinances of the gospel, one is left beyond the reach of the plan of mercy, to rely upon the law of justice, which will require that he suffer for his own sins, even as Jesus suffered.”²⁵ Justice will exact its full penalty, every ounce of its crushing weight, upon the unrepentant; from this there is no escape.

But what of the repentant? Is there any leniency on their behalf? Elder Bruce R. McConkie gave the answer: “It is through repentance and righteousness that men are freed from the grasp of that justice which otherwise would impose upon them the full penalty for their sins.”²⁶ Amulek taught that the unrepentant are “exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16), thus implying that the repentant suffer something less. In pursuing this thought Amulek concludes, “Only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16). Alma taught of this sequential relationship between repentance and mercy: “Whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest” (Alma 12:34).

The unrepentant person is like the criminal who is forced to serve every year, every month, every day of his ten-year term. On the other hand, the repentant person is like the prisoner who is released for good behavior after five years of his ten-year term. Both paid the legal price; both satisfied the laws of justice; but one received a “reduced sentence” by availing himself of the laws of mercy.

In the process of leniency, the Lord has not exempted the repentant from all suffering. Orson F. Whitney taught, “Men and women still suffer, notwithstanding Christ’s suffering and atonement but not to the extent that they would have to suffer if such an atonement had not been made.”²⁷

Repentance still requires remorse of conscience and godly sorrow, but the Lord does allow the repentant to escape the type and depth of suffering he experienced. Thus, mercy has its claim and the repentant are not “exposed to the whole law.” Leniency and clemency are extended to their fullest, but no further, and by so doing are able “to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15).

This principle is beautifully illustrated in a parable shared by Elder Boyd K. Packer. He tells of a man who incurred substantial debt in order to acquire some coveted goods. The man was warned against incurring the debt, but he felt he could not wait for the luxuries of life. He must have them now. He signed a contract to pay the obligation in what then seemed to be the distant future. The date of payment seemed to be a long time off, but as the days passed the thought of the creditor loomed in the back of the debtor's mind. Eventually, as it always does, the day of reckoning came. The debtor did not have the means to pay. The creditor threatened foreclosure on the debtor's goods if payment were not made. The debtor pled for mercy, but to no avail. The creditor demanded justice—stern, unflinching justice, to which he was entitled. The creditor reminded the debtor that he had signed the contract and agreed to the consequences. The debtor responded that he had no means of repayment and begged for forgiveness. The creditor was not swayed. There would be no justice if the debt were forgiven. Just at the moment when all apparent avenues of escape had vanished, a deliverer appeared on the scene. Elder Packer continues the parable as follows:

The debtor had a friend. He came to help. He knew the debtor well. He knew him to be shortsighted. He thought him foolish to have gotten himself into such a predicament. Nevertheless, he wanted to help because he loved him. He stepped between them, faced the creditor, and made this offer.

“I will pay the debt if you will free the debtor from his contract so that he may keep his possessions and not go to prison.”

As the creditor was pondering the offer, the mediator added, “You demanded justice. Though he cannot pay you, I will do so. You will have been justly dealt with and can ask no more. It would not be just.”

And so the creditor agreed.

The mediator turned then to the debtor. “If I pay your debt, will you accept me as your creditor?”

“Oh yes, yes,” cried the debtor. “You save me from prison and show mercy to me.”

“Then,” said the benefactor, “you will pay the debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible. I will provide a way. You need not go to prison.”

And so it was that the creditor was paid in full. He had been justly dealt with. No contract had been broken.

The debtor, in turn, had been extended mercy. Both laws stood fulfilled. Because there was a mediator, justice had claimed its full share, and mercy was fully satisfied.²⁸

The debtor of this story was not fully forgiven of his debt, but through the intercession of the friend, the terms of payment were made more

palatable, and when those terms were satisfied the debt was erased. Likewise, the Savior made it possible for us to pay our debt on more merciful terms through the divine principle of repentance. He is always offering the maximum mercy without ever encroaching on the demands of justice.

President John Taylor spoke of the engaging relationship between justice and mercy in the gospel setting: “Justice, judgment, mercy and truth all harmonize as the attributes of Deity. ‘Justice and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’”²⁹ Eliza R. Snow has taught in lyric form that same celestial truth:

How great, how glorious, how complete,
Redemption’s grand design,
Where justice, love, and mercy meet
In harmony divine!³⁰

Christ Becomes Our Advocate

The Savior pleads our case for mercy. He is our advocate.³¹ He is the champion of our cause as no other can be. We have seen advocates of law before earthly tribunals—mere mortals who have argued their cases with spellbinding suspense, whose logic was flawless, mastery of the laws disarming, and powerful petitions compelling. Before such mortals, juries have sat in awe, almost with breathless wonder, moved and swayed by every glance, every crafted word, every passionate plea. Yet such advocates, almost Herculean heroes to their patrons, are no match to Him who pleads our case on high. He is the perfect proponent “to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24). How fortunate we are that he is our “advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1).

On more than one occasion, a devoted mother pleaded with Abraham Lincoln for the life of a son who had committed a serious offense while serving in the Union forces. Often, touched by that mother’s own sacrifice for her country, Lincoln granted the pardon. Perhaps he thought, “Not for your son’s sake, but for your sake I will pardon him.” Likewise, God the Father must have been deeply moved by the incomparable sacrifice of the Savior. Like the mother who pleaded for the life of her son, the Savior pleads for the spiritual lives of his spiritual children. Not because of their own worthiness, but because of the Savior’s sacrifice, they will be spared. This is the Son’s plea to the Father:

Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life (D&C 45:3-5; see also Hebrews 7:25; D&C 38:4; 110:4).

For the Savior's sake, the Father of us all granted the necessary pardon. Zenos readily acknowledged this truth: "Thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son" (Alma 33:11).

The Prophet Joseph noted these influential powers of the Savior. While offering the inspired dedicatory prayer at the Kirtland Temple, he made reference to the Savior's power to influence the Father: "Thou . . . wilt turn away thy wrath when thou lookest upon the face of thine Anointed" (D&C 109:53). It seems that there was something so noble in the Savior's countenance, so moving and powerful in reflection upon his sacrifice, that it profoundly affects the Father.

Christ's advocacy was not meant to change the nature of an already perfect God, any more than Moses' plea to save Israel (Deuteronomy 9:13-29; Exodus 32:10-14) or Abraham's "bargaining" with the Lord to spare Sodom (Genesis 18:23-33) transformed God into a more merciful or compassionate being. The scriptures plainly state, "Notwithstanding their sins, my bowels are filled with compassion towards them" (D&C 101:9; see also Isaiah 54:8). Regardless of man's wickedness, God's bowels are *already filled* with compassion, *before* any pleading or advocacy commences.

If God's nature is not altered by such actions, then why does Christ advocate and plead our case? Such pleading may open doors for God that would otherwise be closed under the laws of justice. For example, faith opens the door to miracles. Moroni declared, "For if there be no faith among the children of men *God can do no miracle*" (Ether 12:12; emphasis added; see also Mark 6:5-6; 3 Nephi 19:35). Asking opens the door to revelation: "If thou shalt ask, thou shall receive revelation upon revelation" (D&C 42:61). In a similar manner, perhaps advocacy, when combined with the Savior's sacrifice, opens the door to divine pardons. It may be that under the laws of justice, advocacy is a necessary prerequisite to invoking God's mercy—a manifestation of that eternal principle that all available resources must be exhausted before harnessing the powers of heaven.³² In other words, it may be that man, or his divine advocate, must plead his best case before divine pardons are dispensed.

Thus it may be that the ardor of the Savior's request for mercy—coupled with his infinite sacrifice—permits the God of heaven, under the laws of justice, to respond in like fashion. It is a fulfillment of the scriptural truth that "mercy hath compassion on mercy" (D&C 88:40). Faith precedes miracles, asking precipitates revelation, and pleading prompts pardons.

There may be yet another reason for advocacy, particularly Christ's: it brings about a spiritual bonding between Christ and his children that cannot be achieved in any other way. It is the thread that knits our hearts and souls

together. Who among us could watch him plead our case with fervent passion, listen to him rehearse the grueling events of Gethsemane, hear his expressions of unbridled love, and not feel a spiritual kinship with him?

As a result of the Savior's Atonement and advocacy, at the judgment day, when the eternal fate of all hangs in the balance, the Savior will stand "betwixt them and justice" (Mosiah 15:9). He will then "make intercession for the children of men" (Mosiah 15:8). He will plead the perfect balance between mercy and justice. He will be each man's advocate and hope for salvation.

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Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign*, May 1985, 9.

2. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, edited by John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), 418.

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:280.

4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, selected and arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 351–52.

5. *Journal of Discourses*, 3:356.

6. *Journal of Discourses*, 25:165–66.

7. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 354.

8. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:354 (emphasis added).

9. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), 84 (emphasis added).

10. *Journal of Discourses*, 25:57.

11. *Journal of Discourses*, 15:134 (emphasis added).

12. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 181.

13. William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, in *Complete Works*, edited by G.B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), 4.1.198–200.

14. LDS Bible Dictionary, in Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 697.

15. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1978), 245.
16. LDS Bible Dictionary, 697.
17. *Id.* at 697.
18. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 30–32.
19. Brigham Young, *The Discourses of Brigham Young*, selected and arranged by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 387.
20. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 131.
21. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:301.
22. Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, 4:1.184–89, 195.
23. Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll* (New York: The Ingersoll League, 1929), 3:172.
24. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 382.
25. Marion G. Romney, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 9.
26. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, 326.
27. Orson F. Whitney, *Baptism, the Birth of Water and of the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927), 4.
28. Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 319.
29. John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1977), 171–72.
30. Eliza R. Snow, “How Great the Wisdom and the Love,” in *Hymns* (1985), no. 195.
31. We have previously discussed that Christ is our judge. If that is the case, one might wonder how he can also be our advocate. Does it make sense that he would plead with himself for leniency on our behalf? The scriptures are clear that the Savior is not pleading with himself, but rather is our “advocate *with the Father*” (D&C 45:3; emphasis added; see also 1 John 2:1; D&C 38:4; 110:4). If that be the case, then the Father must also be a judge. The Doctrine and Covenants confirms this assertion: “God and Christ are the judge of all” (D&C 76:68; see also 2 Timothy 4:1). This is consistent with John’s observation that the Father “hath given [the Son] authority to execute judgment *also*” (John 5:27; emphasis added). Evidently, the Father is somewhat like a “presiding judge”—the other judges, the trial judges (i.e., the Savior and his apostles), hear the evidence and render the verdict, but each such trial judge is ultimately accountable to the presiding judge for his actions. The Father delegated judicial powers to his Son (who delegated certain powers to his apostles), but the Son still accounts to the Father. John helps us understand the role of each in the judgment process: “As I [the Son] hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). In the process of advocating, the Father’s will is made manifest in the most favorable circumstance to man, which will the Son then carries out through his judgments.
32. This principle is taught by the Lord in Section 101 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Mobs had driven many of the Saints from their homes in Missouri;

they had threatened and persecuted many others. The Lord instructed the Prophet Joseph as to the order of redress the Saints should take. First they should importune the judge, and then the governor, and then the president. If none of those worked “then will the Lord arise and come forth out of his hiding place, and in his fury vex the nation” (D&C 101:89).