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The Law of Justice and Mercy

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The Law of Justice and the Law of Mercy

13

H. Donl Peterson

Corianton, the prophet Alma's son, had left his field of missionary labor, traveled to a border town, and there engaged in sexual relations with a prostitute. This young elder had much repenting to do before he could obtain forgiveness from the Lord, receive the acceptance of the Church, and once again have personal peace of mind. In following the steps of repentance he was bothered by the exactness of the stipulations that he was asked to do. He was also troubled about related doctrinal matters:

1. Why did the doctrine of the Atonement of Christ need to be taught prior to the actual birth and ministry of Christ (Alma 39:15–19)?
2. Why does God require that sinners suffer in the spirit world between death and the resurrection and then judge them after the resurrection (Alma 40:11–14, 21)?
3. How does the doctrine of restoration relate to the justice and mercy of God (Alma 41:1–15)?
4. Why does a merciful Heavenly Father punish his wayward children (Alma 42:1)?

Alma tried to help his son find answers to his questions. Based upon Alma's teachings particularly in chapter 42, this paper will discuss (1) the consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve, (2) the atonement of Jesus Christ, and (3) how justice and mercy are compatible virtues of God. President Kimball said:

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“Perhaps the greatest scriptural expositions on the respective roles of justice and mercy, and God’s position in it all, is that of Alma to his son Corianton— (359).

The Fall of Adam and Eve

To enable Corianton to understand the law of justice, Alma explained the consequences of the Fall. After the Lord God sent forth Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he placed “cherubim and a flaming sword” (Alma 42:2–3) to keep them from partaking of the tree of life. This was for their blessing and protection. Not only had Adam and Eve become mortal, they had also become as God knowing good and evil (Alma 42:3). Had they partaken of the tree of life in their mortal state, it would have frustrated God’s eternal plan for his children in that, as Alma explained, they would “live forever” in their fallen, decadent state eternally alienated from God. Mortality was intended to be a temporary lay-over in man’s eternal journey, not his final destination.

After they fell, Adam and Eve were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord. They were left alone with the recollection that the Garden of Eden had been a higher realm of existence that the Father and Son had frequented and where tranquility and harmony prevailed. They had considerable time to reflect upon their lesser mortal state and to wonder about the purpose of their existence and the final state that God had in mind for them. It appears that the Lord did not reveal the specifics of the plan of salvation to Adam and Eve until after they felt a great void in their lives and needed to receive meaning and direction in their lives. The scripture states “after many days,” possibly after they had children and even grandchildren, an angel of the Lord appeared to Adam and Eve and taught them that a Savior had been provided and further explained the “plan of redemption” to them. They rejoiced in the gospel plan and taught it to their posterity (Moses 5:4–12).

Adam and Eve brought upon themselves their fallen state through their “own disobedience” (Alma 42:12); therefore,

justice demands that they be punished for their action. Their fall affected all of their posterity as well.

Adam and Eve had been placed in the Garden of Eden as immortal beings, that is, not subject to death. Since they voluntarily partook of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they brought mortality into the world. Some people believe that their transgression in the Garden of Eden caught heaven unaware. Adam and Eve were not inexperienced novices who destroyed the plan of God. Modern revelation teaches that they were seasoned leaders on the side of righteousness in their premortal state and their fall was foreordained. President John Taylor reasoned:

Was it known that man would fall? Yes. We are clearly told that it was understood that man should fall, and it was understood that the penalty of departing from the law would be death, death temporal. And there was a provision made for that. Man was not able to make the provision himself, and hence, we are told that it needed the atonement of a God to accomplish this purpose; and the son of God presented himself to carry out that object . . . hence it was written, he was the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. (*Journal of Discourses* 22:300; hereafter *JD*)

Adam, known as Michael the Archangel in his premortal existence, was the captain of the heavenly hosts who cast Satan and his fallen angels out of heaven (*JST Rev* 12:7). Adam and Eve were wisely chosen to lead the human family.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Alma explained to Corianton that were it not for the “plan of redemption,” a plan wherein a redeemer is provided, as soon as Adam and Eve died they would have been eternally “miserable being cut off from the presence of God” (*Alma* 42:11). The prophet Jacob taught that without the atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind would become “devils, angels to a devil” (*2 Nephi* 9:8–9).

In the great gospel plan, instituted before the world was, Christ was foreordained to compensate for the anticipated fall

of Adam and Eve (1 Peter 1:20). Paul explained it well when he said: “For since by man [Adam] came death, by man [Christ] came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21–22). Justice required that Adam and Eve be placed in the Garden as immortal beings capable of becoming mortal. Likewise, Jesus inherited mortality from his mother Mary and immortality from his Eternal Father. Paul referred to these two unique beings as the “first Adam” and the “last Adam” and the “first man” and the “second man” (1 Cor 15:45–47).

All of us in mortality must die; only Adam and Christ, two beings who possessed immortality by their natures, had the option to live on indefinitely or to die. The Book of Mormon states: “Adam fell that men might be” (2 Nephi 2:25) that is, Adam’s choosing to become mortal enabled us, his offspring, to be born into this second phase of our eternal existence. Likewise, Jesus explained, “I lay down my life, that I take it up again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. This commandment have I received of my Father” (John 10:17–18). Adam and Eve as immortal beings introduced death into the world, and Jesus, an immortal being, who chose to die for us and alone was able to resurrect himself and all humankind, brought back immortality. Immortality, therefore is a gift of God for all mankind prescribed by the law of justice.

Alma continued to explain to Corianton that “according to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance . . . in this probationary state” and except for repentance mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice” (Alma 42:13).

Alma continued: “And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore, God himself atoneth for the sins of the world to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15).

Alma stated that “repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment . . . eternal as the life of the soul” which would parallel “the plan of happiness which also was as eternal . . . as the life of the soul” (Alma 42:16). A savior by definition is “one that saves from danger or destruction” (Webster’s 1045). A redeemer is “one who frees one from what distresses or harms” or “frees one from the consequences of sin” (Webster’s 986). Jesus was willing and able to take upon himself the suffering justice required because of man’s disobedience in this “carnal, sensual and devilish” state (Alma 42:10). As finite beings, we can but fragmentarily comprehend what Jesus endured during his whippings, the intense suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, the many mockings and humiliations, the terrible aloneness, his beatings, and finally the anguish he endured on the cross, in order to qualify as our Savior and our Redeemer. The Savior stated that his “suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink that bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men” (D&C 19:18–19). Jesus volunteered to be our mediator, therefore, justice was satisfied in that as a consequence of sin a punishment was imposed. Jesus willingly accepted the required punishments for the sins of the world. Isaiah explained “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa 53:5; see also Mosiah 14:5).

Justice and Mercy: Compatible Qualities in God

All virtues originate from God himself. In order for humankind to have faith in God, they must accept the idea that justice and mercy are attributes of God. The Lectures on Faith state:

It is also necessary that men should have the idea of the existence of the attribute justice in God in order to exercise faith in him unto life and salvation. For without the idea of the existence of the attribute

justice in the Deity, men could not have confidence sufficient to place themselves under his guidance and direction. For they would be filled with fear and doubt lest the Judge of all the earth would not do right, and thus fear or doubt existing in the mind would preclude the possibility of the exercise of faith in him for life and salvation. But when the idea of the existence of the attribute justice in the Deity is fairly planted in the mind, it leaves no room for doubt to get into the heart; and the mind is enabled to cast itself upon the Almighty without doubt, and with the most unshaken confidence, believing that the Judge of all the earth will do right. (78)

Relative to mercy the Lectures on Faith state:

And again, it is equally important that men should have the idea of the existence of the attribute mercy in the Deity in order to exercise faith in him for life and salvation. For without the idea of the existence of this attribute in the Deity, the spirits of the Saints would faint in the midst of the tribulations, afflictions, and persecutions which they have to endure for righteousness' sake. But when the idea of the existence of this attribute is once established in the mind, it gives life and energy to the spirits of the Saints, who believe then that the mercy of God will be poured out upon them in the midst of their afflictions, and that he will be compassionate to them in their sufferings, and that the mercy of God will lay hold of them and secure them in the arms of his love, so that they will receive a full reward for all their sufferings. (79)

Alma stated to Corianton, "My son, I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (Alma 42:1). Corianton apparently had failed to understand or accept the unalterable fact that to be just, God must impartially mete out rewards or punishments in relation to his children's obedience or disobedience to eternal gospel principles. It is not the nature of men and women in our sinful and fallen state to plead for justice upon ourselves. We don't want to receive that which we justly deserve. Like Corianton, we prefer to focus on God's love, compassion and mercy and ignore the fact that our Heavenly Father is a God of justice also. Corianton's sin ranks

next to denying the Holy Ghost and murder in its seriousness before God (Alma 39:5). Justice would demand dire consequences.

The prerequisite for both justice and mercy is law. A law is given to all things by the perfect lawgiver, even God the Father, through his son Jesus Christ. The term *law* in the scriptures refers primarily to the law of the Lord, including the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the saving ordinances, and the authority of the priesthood. Alma reasoned: “Now, how could a man repent except he could sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?” (Alma 42:17). The prophet Lehi succinctly explained how basic law is to the gospel plan when he stated:

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Nephi 2:13)

All who have lived, do live, or will live upon the earth and who are accountable before God, have sinned or will sin, save Jesus. We have indulged in sin and punishment is required. In God’s court of justice rewards or punishments are meted out impartially according to our works. Christ alone, who excelled in righteousness in the pre-earth life, and who never yielded to temptation on earth, would receive from the bar of justice the reward of eternal life. He merited being chosen as our Savior and God. The Savior’s calling was not an unwarranted political appointment. Justice and mercy are based upon law.

In order for justice and mercy to harmonize and yet not lose their identity as they pertain to the individual soul, it is imperative that each person has a conscience. Without a conscience a person would not hesitate to violate divine law and would play the game of life with a different set of rules or with no rules at all. Alma explained “Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto

man. Now, if there was no law given—if a man murdered he should die—would he be afraid he would die if he should murder? And also, if there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin?” (Alma 42:18–20). Everyone born into this world has been given a conscience as a guide. It is referred to in the scriptures as the light of Christ. The Lord said: “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world” (D&C 84:46). The prophet Mormon explained that “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man that he may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16). However, when people continue to sin and ignore the promptings of the Spirit, they become calloused against spiritual things and after a time they are no longer protected by the promptings of the spirit to do right. Nephi, son of Lehi, said his brothers Laman and Lemuel were “past feeling, that they could not feel his [the Lord] words” when they were still wicked even after they had had many miraculous affirmations of spiritual things (1 Nephi 17:45; compare Eph 4:19). The Apostle Paul prophesied that people in the last days will depart from the faith “having their conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim 4:2). This “true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9; see also D&C 93:2) is that inner voice that aids us in “feeling” the saving words of Christ. Without people having a conscience, the law of justice and mercy would fall on deaf ears.

Elder Orson Pratt explained that justice and mercy are placed in our souls by God himself:

God is perfectly just, being just according to our notions of justice, for among the original qualities of our mind we have correct notions of justice implanted in our bosoms originally by God himself; also what we know of mercy originated from God. He implanted the principles of justice and mercy in our hearts, and he implanted the same principles that swell in his own bosom. What is justice with us, when we are truly enlightened, is justice with God; and what is mercy with us, when we are truly enlightened, is mercy with God; and these great attributes will be magnified in the dealing out of punishments and rewards. Every man who has lived, or ever will live, will be dealt with according to his works and the law of the Gospel. (Lundwall 268–69)

When we become aware of our wickedness before God and the consequences we face because of the demands of justice for a broken law, our troubled consciences will help us want to repent and return to Christ. Therefore, both law and conscience are basic to understanding and implementing the law of justice and mercy.

President John Taylor explained how justice and mercy are united through the atonement of Jesus Christ:

Is justice dishonored? No; it is satisfied, the debt is paid. Is righteousness departed from? No; this is a righteous act. All requirements are met. Is judgment violated? No; its demands are fulfilled. Is mercy triumphant? No; she simply claims her own. 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." Justice and judgment triumph as well as mercy and peace; all the attributes of Deity harmonize in this great, grand, momentous, just, equitable, merciful and meritorious act. (167)

Alma continued and explained that "mercy claimeth the penitent" (Alma 42:23). We may be beneficiaries of God's blessings only if we are submissive to the teachings of Christ. Both Peter and Paul use the expression that God "bought us" with a price (1 Cor 6:20, 7:23; 2 Peter 2:1). Without repentance refining our lives based upon the example and teachings of the Savior, we will not be able to enjoy God's plan of mercy. Many scriptures confirm this statement. "And he shall come into the world to redeem his people; and he shall take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name; these are they that shall have eternal life, and salvation cometh to none else" (Alma 11:40). Amulek stated that Jesus

shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. And this mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircle them in the arms of safety, while he that exerciseth no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. (Alma 34:15-16)

Alma further instructed Corianton:

For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved. What do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so God would cease to be God. And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes, which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery. (Alma 42:24–26)

Corianton surely understood by then that if the Lord blessed him, without his sincere repentance, God would be a respecter of persons.

Toward the conclusion of his profound remarks Alma reminded Corianton that the gospel is taught, so “whosoever *will* come *may* come and partake of the waters of life freely” but that no one was “compelled to come”; however, in the last day “it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds” (Alma 42:27; emphasis added). Justice embodies the principle of restoration. Alma continued: “If [anyone] has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God” (Alma 42:28). Alma counseled Corianton to no longer let the doctrinal questions trouble him but “only let your sins trouble you with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance” (Alma 42:29). Alma’s final admonition summarizes his thesis on the relationship of justice and mercy:

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. (Alma 42:30)

Conclusion

In consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve, mortality was introduced which brought both physical and spiritual death. Jesus Christ overcame both deaths by breaking their bonds

through his resurrection and paying for the sins of the repentant through the atoning sacrifice of his suffering and life. Adam and Eve overcame spiritual death by living the commandments of God. This is the same way that all of us, their children, can overcome alienation from God. The quality of our resurrection and our eternal lifestyle is contingent upon our obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. This is the doctrine of restoration. Alma succinctly stated:

Mercy claimeth the penitent and mercy cometh because of the atonement and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead; and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according their works, according to the law and justice. For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus none but the truly penitent are saved. What do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God. (Alma 42:23–25)

Eliza R. Snow summarizes the heart of this great message of God's divine harmonizing of justice and mercy in the hymn "How Great the Wisdom and the Love":

How great the wisdom and the love
That filled the courts on high
And sent the Savior from above
To suffer, bleed, and die!
His precious blood he freely spilt;
His life he freely gave,
A sinless sacrifice for guilt,
A dying world to save.
By strict obedience Jesus won
The prize with glory rife:
"Thy will, O God, not mine be done,"
Adorned his mortal life.
He marked the path and led the way,
And ev'ry point defines
To light and life and endless day

Where God's full presence shines.
In mem'ry of the broken flesh
We eat the broken bread,
And witness with the cup, afresh,
Our faith in Christ, our Head.
How great, how glorious, how complete,
Redemption's grand design,
Where justice, love, and mercy meet
In harmony divine!
(Hymns 195)

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