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Justice and Mercy

OBJECTIVE Each young man will better understand the relationship between God's justice and mercy.

PREPARATION

1. Prayerfully study 2 Nephi 2:6–8, 26–29, and Alma 42.
2. Materials needed:
 - a. Copies of the scriptures (each young man should bring his own).
 - b. Pencils for marking scriptures.

**SUGGESTED
LESSON
DEVELOPMENT**

A Parable about Justice and Mercy

Quotation

Read aloud the following parable presented by Elder Boyd K. Packer:

“Let me tell you a story—a parable.

“There once was a man who wanted something very much. It seemed more important than anything else in his life. In order for him to have his desire, he incurred a great debt.

“He had been warned about going into that much debt, and particularly about his creditor. But it seemed so important for him to do what he wanted to do and to have what he wanted right now. He was sure he could pay for it later.

“So he signed a contract. He would pay it off some time along the way. He didn't worry too much about it, for the due date seemed such a long time away. He had what he wanted now, and that was what seemed important.

“The creditor was always somewhere in the back of his mind, and he made token payments now and again, thinking somehow that the day of reckoning really would never come.

“But as it always does, the day came, and the contract fell due. The debt had not been fully paid. His creditor appeared and demanded payment in full.

“Only then did he realize that his creditor not only had the power to repossess all that he owned, but the power to cast him into prison as well.

“ ‘I cannot pay you, for I have not the power to do so,’ he confessed.

“ ‘Then,’ said the creditor, ‘we will exercise the contract, take your possessions, and you shall go to prison. You agreed to that. It was your choice. You signed the contract, and now it must be enforced.’

“ ‘Can you not extend the time or forgive the debt?’ the debtor begged. ‘Arrange some way for me to keep what I have and not go to prison. Surely you believe in mercy? Will you not show mercy?’

“The creditor replied, ‘Mercy is always so one-sided. It would serve only you. If I show mercy to you, it will leave me unpaid. It is justice I demand. Do you believe in justice?’

“ ‘I believed in justice when I signed the contract,’ the debtor said. ‘It was on my side then, for I thought it would protect me. I did not need mercy then, nor think I should need it ever. Justice, I thought, would serve both of us equally as well.’

“ ‘It is justice that demands that you pay the contract or suffer the penalty,’ the creditor replied. ‘That is the law. You have agreed to it and that is the way it must be. Mercy cannot rob justice.’

“There they were: One meting out justice, the other pleading for mercy. Neither could prevail except at the expense of the other.

“ ‘If you do not forgive the debt there will be no mercy,’ the debtor pleaded.

“ ‘If I do, there will be no justice,’ was the reply.

“Both laws, it seemed, could not be served. They are two eternal ideals that appear to contradict one another. Is there no way for justice to be fully served, and mercy also?

“There is a way! The law of justice *can* be fully satisfied and mercy *can* be fully extended— but it takes someone else. And so it happened this time.

“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.

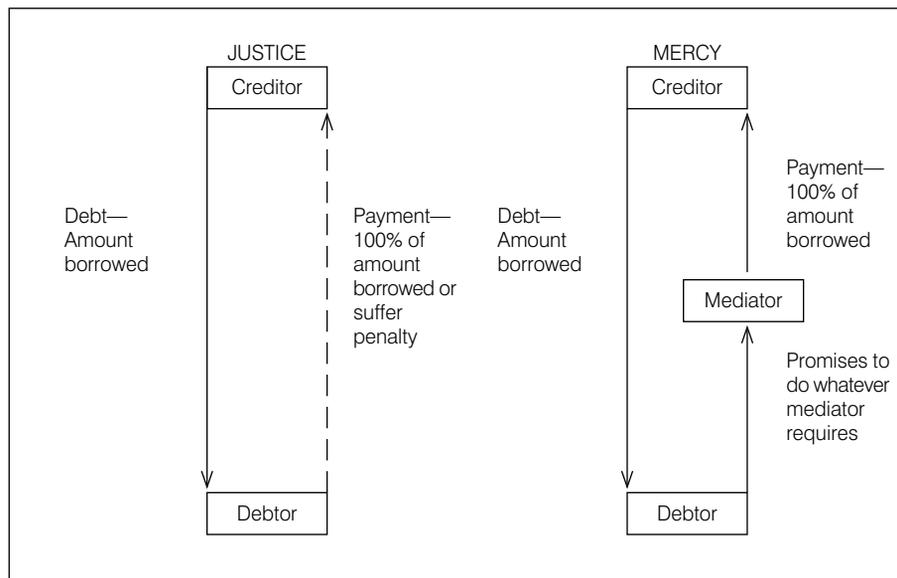
“The debtor, in turn, had been extended mercy. Both laws stood fulfilled. Because there was a mediator, justice had claimed its full share, and mercy was fully satisfied” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1977, pp. 79–80; or *Ensign*, May 1977, pp. 54–55).

Discussion

- What was the relationship between the debtor and creditor before the mediator appeared? (The debtor owed the creditor more than he could pay.)
- How did the mediator change the relationship between the debtor and creditor? (The mediator stood between the debtor and creditor. To the creditor, the mediator paid the full demands of justice. To the debtor, the mediator extended mercy.)

Chalkboard discussion

Place the following diagram on the chalkboard as you discuss the relationships between the creditor, the debtor, and the mediator in the parable:



- In the parable, does anyone force the debtor to go into debt? (No, the debtor chooses to go into debt in order to acquire something of great value and importance to him.)
- What is the expectation of the creditor concerning repayment of the debt? (The creditor expects to get paid in full, 100 percent.)
- What does the debtor promise to the creditor? (That he will repay the debt in full, the entire 100 percent.)
- What will satisfy justice? (Nothing less than 100 percent payment of the debt.)

Explain that justice is often illustrated as a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales. She is blindfolded to symbolize that she is no respecter of persons, that she cannot give her friends an advantage.

- Does justice care who makes repayment of the debt? (No, justice only cares about being paid.)
- Will justice expect or demand that someone other than the debtor pay the debt? (No, that would not be just or fair. Justice will accept payment from anyone, but justice will not force another person to pay the debtor's debt.)
- How much of the debt does the mediator pay? (All of it.)
- What does the debtor promise to the mediator? (To do everything the mediator requires to repay the debt.)
- Could mercy be extended to the debtor if the debtor did not fulfill his promises to the mediator? (Apparently not. The mercy of the mediator was extended only on conditions of submission to the will of the mediator.)

The Justice and Mercy of Heavenly Father

Quotation

Explain that the parable of the debtor and creditor is really an explanation of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Elder Packer explained:

“Each of us lives on a kind of spiritual credit. One day the account will be closed, a settlement demanded. However casually we may view it now, when that day comes and the foreclosure is imminent, we will look around in restless agony for someone, anyone, to help us.

“And, by eternal law, mercy cannot be extended save there be one who is both willing and able to assume our debt and pay the price and arrange the terms for our redemption.

“Unless there is a mediator, unless we have a friend, the full weight of justice untempered, unsympathetic, must, positively must fall on us. The full recompense for every transgression, however minor or however deep, will be exacted from us to the uttermost farthing.

“But know this: Truth, glorious truth, proclaims there is such a Mediator.

“ ‘For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’ (1 Tim. 2:5.)

“Through Him mercy can be fully extended to each of us without offending the eternal law of justice.

“This truth is the very root of Christian doctrine. You may know much about the gospel as it branches out from there, but if you only know the branches and those branches do not touch that root, if they have been cut free from that truth, there will be no life nor substance nor redemption in them.

“The extension of mercy will not be automatic. It will be through covenant with Him. It will be on His terms, His generous terms, which include, as an absolute essential, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins.

“All mankind can be protected by the law of justice, and at once each of us individually may be extended the redeeming and healing blessing of mercy.

“A knowledge of what I am talking about is of a very practical value. It is very useful and very helpful personally; it opens the way for each of us to keep his spiritual accounts paid up.

“You, perhaps, are among those troubled people. When you come face to face with yourself in those moments of quiet contemplation—that many of us try to avoid—are there some unsettled things that bother you?

“Do you have something on your conscience? Are you still, to one degree or another, guilty of anything small or large?

“We often try to solve guilt problems by telling one another that they don’t matter. But somehow, deep inside, we don’t believe one another. Nor do we believe ourselves if we say it. We know better. They do matter!

“Our transgressions are all added to our account, and one day if it is not properly settled, each of us, like Belshazzar of Babylon, will be weighed in the balance and found wanting.

“There is a Redeemer, a Mediator, who stands both willing and able to appease the demands of justice and extend mercy to those who are penitent, for ‘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 Ne. 2:7).

“Already He has accomplished the redemption of all mankind from mortal death; resurrection is extended to all without condition.

“He also makes possible redemption from the second death, which is the spiritual death, which is separation from the presence of our Heavenly Father. This redemption can come only to those who are clean, for no unclean thing can dwell in the presence of God.

“If justice decrees that we are not eligible because of our transgression, mercy provides a probation, a penitence, a preparation to enter in” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1977, pp. 80–81; or *Ensign*, May 1977, pp. 55–56).

Scriptures and discussion

Explain that with the help of the parable by Elder Packer, we should be better able to understand scriptural passages that speak about the relationship between justice and mercy.

Read and discuss Alma 42.

- What was Corianton worried about? (“The punishment of the sinner” [verse 1].)

Explain that in the Garden of Eden Heavenly Father planted the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. He instructed Adam and Eve that they could partake of the fruit of every tree except the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If they partook of this fruit, they would surely die. Heavenly Father gave the law and explained the consequences for transgressing it.

- Did anyone force Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit? (No. That would have violated their agency. They chose to eat.)
- What was the consequence of eating the forbidden fruit? (According to verse 7, they were “cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord.”)
- Was it fair that Adam and Eve suffer temporal and spiritual death? (Yes. The law was given, agency was allowed, and the consequences were fully explained.)

Remind the young men that by partaking of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve made it possible for all of us to be born.

Explain that Heavenly Father placed cherubim, which are heavenly creatures, and a flaming sword to prevent anyone from partaking of the fruit of the tree of life.

- Why did Heavenly Father do this?

Help the young men understand that if Adam and Eve had eaten of the tree of life after their transgression, they would have lived forever in their sins. They would not have had a time to repent and prepare to live again with Heavenly Father. This would have frustrated the plan of salvation and destroyed the plan of happiness. Heavenly Father in his mercy granted us a time in which to repent and serve him before being saved from temporal

death. We were given a time “to prepare to meet God” (Alma 34:32), a time to overcome our fallen nature.

- What could we have done to save ourselves from this fallen state? (Nothing. We bring the consequences upon ourselves by our own disobedience, and we have “no means to reclaim” ourselves [Alma 42:12, 14].)
- What is Heavenly Father’s law of justice? (It is that no unclean thing can dwell in his presence. Anyone who disobeys his commandments is “cut off from his presence” [Alma 42:14].)
- How many people are in the grasp of justice—how many are in a fallen state, cut off from the presence of God? (All people [see Alma 42:14].)
- How did God provide for us to escape the grasp of justice? (By the plan of mercy under which Jesus Christ would pay for the sins of the world, thus satisfying the demands of justice. We then must repent in order to qualify for forgiveness. [See Alma 42:15].)
- Why is there a punishment affixed, and why is a law given? (To help us feel remorse of conscience and to lead us to repent rather than suffer the consequences of sin [see Alma 42:18].)
- How does the plan of mercy satisfy justice?

Explain that through the plan of mercy the demands of justice are completely satisfied. Justice does execute the law and inflict the punishment for the broken law. But mercy shifts the punishment to the Savior for those who repent. Those who do not repent cannot claim mercy and are left to suffer the punishment. Those who do repent are covered by the atonement of Christ. The law of justice does not allow mercy to be extended to any but the truly penitent.

Have a young man read 2 Nephi 2:6–8, 26–29.

- What are our choices in this probationary state? (We have only two choices. We can choose captivity and death or liberty and eternal life. The plan of justice exposes us to misery, captivity, and death. The plan of mercy redeems us through the Atonement from the grasp of justice and brings us happiness, liberty, and eternal life.)

Adviser presentation

Explain that in order to accept the plan of mercy, we must—

1. Be humble. We must realize that we cannot escape the grasp of justice on our own merits.
2. Repent of all our sins by coming unto Christ, pleading for mercy, exercising faith in the Atonement, and submitting to the ordinances of baptism and confirmation.
3. Endure to the end of our probationary state, with a broken heart and contrite spirit.

Conclusion

Testimony

Bear testimony that we should seek for mercy, not justice, by following the plan of mercy, which is also the plan of salvation.