



# A PERFECT BALANCE OF JUSTICE AND MERCY

Brent L. Top

**W**HILE PRESIDING OVER the Illinois Peoria Mission, my wife- and I had the privilege of taking every group of departing missionaries on their last day in the mission field to the Nauvoo Temple for an endowment session. It became my practice to greet each elder and sister as they entered the celestial room with a big hug and a whispered expression of my love and appreciation for their service and commitment. I had been the beneficiary of just such a hug and tender expressions by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, at an area mission presidents' seminar at the first of our mission. It was a critical turning

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point of our mission—a time when I felt totally overwhelmed and inadequate. Elder Uchtdorf’s expression of love at that moment was a monumentally transforming event for me, and I wanted my missionaries to feel something akin to what I felt from him. I must admit, however, that it was easier to express those sentiments to some missionaries than it was to others. (Perhaps Elder Uchtdorf had the same feelings about me!)

One elder in particular had given me more than his share of grief. In fact, many of the gray hairs that came after I was called as mission president can be attributed to him. He seemed to be in trouble all the time. On more than one occasion, I told him that I was going to send him home. Yet he would always promise me that he would try harder. His renewed commitment seldom lasted very long, however. And the cycle of rebuke, repentance, recommitment, and relapse would start all over again. Perhaps it would have been easier to have just sent him home. Yet I could see some of me in him, and I wanted him to succeed. I wanted him to return with honor. He wasn’t an all-star, but now he had made it. He completed his mission and accompanied us to the temple before he flew home.

As he came into the celestial room, I greeted him with the customary “I love you.” Tears streamed down his face. “Thank you for extending me mercy,” he whispered as his whole body shook with weeping. It was a tender moment, and both of us shed many tears of



Christ's mercy is the very essence of the message of Easter.  
(James Tissot, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

gratitude. Almost as if the veil parted, I sensed a coming day when I would embrace the Savior and with tears of thanksgiving and love say, “Thank you for extending me mercy.”

It is of the Savior’s mercy that I wish to speak. His mercy is the very essence of the message of Easter, and I wish to add my personal testimony and expression of gratitude for his mercy that has been extended to me individually and for his “plan of mercy” that is available to all people. I echo the words of the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob: “O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:10). It is easy, especially at Easter time, to celebrate God’s infinite goodness and his tender mercy. Not often, however, do we hear declarations or observe celebrations of his perfect justice. Yet each is an integral by-product of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. In fact, the gospel of Jesus Christ—what the scriptures call “the merciful plan of the great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:6), the “plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16), “the great plan of the Eternal God” (Alma 34:9), “the plan of restoration” (Alma 41:2), “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8), and the “plan of mercy” (Alma 42:15)—is the perfect balance between God’s justice *and* his mercy. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma explained, “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).

How can this be? How can the Lord be both merciful and just? How can he mercifully save some individuals who don’t “deserve” or “merit” being saved (see Alma 22:14) and yet, as some Christians teach, damn those who lack the knowledge of Jesus in this life and thus the opportunity to be saved? How can the Perfect One be perfectly loving and longsuffering, perfectly kind and caring, perfectly merciful and magnanimous, and yet perfectly and uncompromisingly earnest when he says the following?

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. (Mark 16:16)

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

And by him all that believe are justified from all things. (Acts 13:39)

If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. (Romans 10:9)

There are numerous scriptural statements, not just in the Bible but throughout all the standard works, that teach and testify of the uncompromising conditions and commandments linked to salvation. King Benjamin taught that salvation comes to none “except it be through repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 3:12) and that mercy has no claim on the unbelieving and unrepentant (see Mosiah 2:38–39). Similarly, Alma taught that “whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end . . . shall be saved” (Alma 32:13). In this dispensation, the Lord has further declared:

And we know that all men must repent and believe on the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God. (D&C 20:29)

Yea, repent and be baptized, every one of you, for a remission of your sins; yea, be baptized even by water, and then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.

Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and remember that they shall have faith in me or they can in nowise be saved. (D&C 33:11–12)

Thus saith the Lord; for I am God, and have sent mine Only Begotten Son into the world for the redemption of the world, and have decreed that he that receiveth him shall be saved, and he that receiveth him not shall be damned. (D&C 49:5)

And he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned. (D&C 68:9; see also D&C 112:29)

Many similar passages could be cited, but these excerpts are sufficient to show that God's word is clear and unequivocal regarding what he requires of his children for eternal salvation. There doesn't appear to be much "wiggle room." And if there were "wiggle room," how would that affect the perfect justice of God? Does the Lord say one thing and then do something different—changing the rules in the middle of the game, or changing the score after the game? The answer seems to be a clear-cut no. A perfectly just God will change neither the rules of the game nor the final score, so to speak. To do so would not be just. But that fact of life—the eternal law of justice, in and of itself—also raises difficult questions and real-life dilemmas. Let me illustrate this concept from a relatively recent best-selling book and the spirited reactions to it that followed (and that continue today).

Rob Bell was the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, which became one of the fastest-growing congregations in the United States. His sermons, writings, and videos applying gospel teachings to real-life needs made him one of the most visible, influential, and sought-after religious voices in the country. In 2011, *Time* magazine named him one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World.” His book *Love Wins* became a *New York Times* best seller, and it became as controversial as it was popular. The very first chapter begins with these challenging examples and even more challenging questions:

Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling.

But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it.

On the piece of paper was written: “Reality check: He’s in hell.”

Really?

Gandhi’s in hell?



He is?

We have confirmation of this?

Somebody knows this?

Without a doubt?

And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number “make it to a better place” and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life?

This doesn’t just raise disturbing questions about God; it raises questions about the beliefs themselves.

Why them?

Why you?

Why me?

If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever

or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few?

Chance?

Luck?

Random selection?

Being born in the right place, family, or country?

Having a youth pastor who “relates better to the kids”?

What kind of faith is that?

Or, more important: What kind of God is that?<sup>1</sup>

Bell provides another example that leads to more questions and challenging issues.

Several years ago I heard a woman tell about the funeral of her daughter’s friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident. Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian. She said that he told people he was an atheist. This person then said to her, “So there’s no hope then.”

No hope?

Is that the Christian message?

“No hope”?

Is that what Jesus offers the world?<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Pastor Bell raises the issue of the age of accountability. Was the young man actually accountable for the decisions he made (or did not make) at such a young age? Could he have changed his mind or his life with a little more time and maturity? What could he have done differently to not be in the “no hope” status? The author continues:

Would he have had to perform a specific rite or ritual?

Or take a class?

Or be baptized?

Or join a church?

Or have something happen somewhere in his heart?

Some believe he would have had to say a specific prayer. Christians don't agree on exactly what this prayer is, but for many the essential idea is that the only way to get into heaven is to pray at some point in your life, asking God to forgive you and telling God that you accept Jesus, you believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for your sins, and you want to go to heaven when you die. Some call this “accepting Christ,” others call it the “sinner's prayer,” and still others call it “getting saved,” being “born again,” or being “converted.”

That, of course, raises more questions. What about people who have said some form of “the prayer” at some

point in their life, but it means nothing to them today?

. . .

What about people who have never said the prayer and don't claim to be Christians, but live a more Christlike life than some Christians? . . .

Which leads to a far more disturbing question. So is it true that the kind of person you are doesn't ultimately matter, as long as you've said or prayed or believed the right things?<sup>3</sup>

This book has created a firestorm of reaction. Some applauded the fact that the author was willing to ask tough questions and challenge traditional beliefs. Others—many, many others—passionately renounced his suppositions and declared his teachings as unbiblical at best and heretical at worst. Some even characterized him as “worse than the infidel” and condemned him to the very hell he was challenging. Pastor Bell did not create the theological controversy, nor did his words settle the issue. He once again raised an important question, and the question still remains—the same question that was asked in the early days of Christ's church in the meridian of time and is asked today by both scholars and seekers: “What is the fate of those who die never hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ?” In the book *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* Christian theologian John Sanders wrote:

Are all the “heathen” lost? Is there an opportunity for those who have never heard of Jesus to be saved?

These questions raise one of the most perplexing, provocative and perennial issues facing Christians. It has been considered by philosophers and farmers, Christians and non-Christians. In societies where Christianity has had strong influence, just about everyone has either asked or been asked about the final destiny of those dying without knowledge of the only Savior, Jesus Christ. Far and away, this is the most asked apologetic question on U.S. college campuses.<sup>4</sup>

Sanders provided a poignant insight into the very personal nature of this issue. He explained that he and his wife adopted three children from India. One of those children later asked if there was any hope for the salvation of her birth parents since they probably had never even heard about Jesus. Those Indian birth parents are but two of the vast majority of the human family who have ever lived or will yet live on this planet who have never known the Savior or heard his gospel taught. He then explained that as we have more and more contact with people from different countries, cultures, and religious traditions, we will more frequently encounter questions concerning the ultimate destiny of friends and family who have never heard of the “good news” of Christ’s gospel. “What may be said,” Sanders asked,

“about the destiny of countless billions who have lived and died apart from any understanding of the divine grace manifested in Jesus?”<sup>5</sup>

Much has been written through the years by Christian scholars in response to these questions. It is not my purpose in this setting—nor am I qualified—to adequately review the various philosophical schools of thought or theological explanations. Professor Robert L. Millet has done a wonderful job in doing just that in an article entitled “The Soteriological Problem of Evil.”<sup>6</sup> What I do know, however, is that each explanation, at least to my understanding, is inadequate in maintaining the delicate balance between God’s justice and his mercy. At one end of the philosophical continuum is pluralism (or universalism) and at the other end is exclusivism. A pluralist would advocate for a universal salvation—that God is working his will in all the world, gradually lifting and transforming them to a condition where all will eventually be saved in God’s heaven, regardless of race, religion, culture, or tradition. We can certainly see, in such a view, God’s infinite mercy. However, this doesn’t seem to account for much of God’s justice. On the other hand, an exclusivist would declare that people are saved only if they accept the Lord Jesus Christ *in this life*. Sanders summarized the exclusivist position: “Our destinies are sealed at death and no opportunity for salvation exists after that.”<sup>7</sup> Such a view certainly emphasizes that God really means it when he talks about the necessity of accepting Christ and meeting the conditions of salvation established in scripture. That is justice. However, there

doesn't seem to be any mercy—any exceptions or provisions for those who never had the opportunity to hear the gospel and embrace it.

Exclusivism, in varying forms, was a prevalent notion in Joseph Smith's religious milieu. No wonder he was surprised when, in his vision of the celestial kingdom, he saw his deceased brother Alvin in that exalted condition, "seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins" (D&C 137:6). Reverend Benjamin Stockton, who was minister of the Presbyterian church that Lucy Mack Smith attended and who conducted Alvin's funeral, declared that Alvin was likely in hell because he died without a proper Christian baptism and had not been a regular church attender.<sup>8</sup> No doubt this statement had a powerful impact on young Joseph and his family—an impact that is reflected in the Prophet's teachings even two decades later. "The idea that some men form of the justice, judgment, and mercy of God, is too foolish for an intelligent man to think of," Joseph wrote in an editorial in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. "For instance, it is common for many of our orthodox preachers to suppose that if a man is not what they call converted, if he dies in that state he must remain eternally in hell without any hope. Infinite years in torment must he spend, and never, never, never have an end; and yet this eternal misery is made frequently to rest upon the merest casualty."<sup>9</sup> On another occasion, the Prophet declared: "One dies and is buried, having never heard the Gospel of

reconciliation; to the other the message of salvation is sent, he hears and embraces it, and is made the heir of eternal life. Shall the one become the partaker of glory and the other be consigned to hopeless perdition? Is there no chance for his escape? Sectarianism answers ‘none.’ Such an idea is worse than atheism.”<sup>10</sup>

With the remarkable vision of the celestial kingdom that Joseph Smith received in the Kirtland Temple on January 21, 1836, the Lord revealed to the Prophet that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom” (D&C 137:7–8). Although at the time the Prophet may not have fully understood all the details regarding the redemption of the dead, it was abundantly clear that for his brother Alvin and the billions of God’s children who lived and died without knowledge of the gospel, the Lord’s arms of saving mercy are outstretched—to all peoples of the earth in all dispensations of time (see Alma 5:33). Neither the exclusivists nor the universalists are right. The plan of salvation, revealed in this dispensation through the Prophet Joseph Smith, with its unique provisions for those who never had an opportunity to come unto Christ, cut a new path between the two. The very next phrase in the scriptural account reveals the divine balance between mercy and justice. “For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to



the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:9). With this new revelation, the Apostle Peter’s ancient teachings become clearer.

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison. (1 Peter 3:18–19)

For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, *that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit*. (1 Peter 4:6; emphasis added)

The justice of God requires that all be “judged according to men in the flesh”—meaning that the standard or law by which men can receive salvation is the same for all. There are no sliding scales, grades on the curve, bargain days, or backroom deals. That is justice. Yet humankind will be judged “according to the desire of their hearts” and by whether they “live according to God in the spirit”—meaning that all will be given a full and fair opportunity, in this life or the next, to hear the gospel, understand its principles, feel the Spirit bear witness of its truth, and choose either to have faith in Christ and submit to his gospel or to reject it. That is mercy. The doctrine

of salvation for the dead as revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in the last days provides the perfect balance between justice and mercy. Without that balance—without that plan—God could neither be all loving and merciful nor perfectly fair and just.

In his remarkable vision of the redemption of the dead, President Joseph F. Smith learned that the disembodied Savior of the world, in his infinite love and mercy for mankind, “organized his forces and appointed messengers [in the postmortal spirit world], clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, *even to all the spirits of men*; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead” (D&C 138:30; emphasis added). Those who died without an opportunity as well as those who had been taught, yet rejected the truth and died in their sins, will once again be taught and given every chance to repent of their sins and come unto the Lord (see v. 32). God’s mercy is manifest in *who* is taught in the spirit world. His justice is manifest in *what* is taught there.

These were taught *faith* in God, *repentance* from sin, vicarious *baptism* for the remission of sins, the *gift of the Holy Ghost* by the laying on of hands,

And *all other principles of the gospel* that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves *that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit*. (vv. 33–34; emphasis added)

At this Easter season we rejoice in and testify of the reality of Christ's Resurrection—the culmination of his infinite Atonement. Because of that, we can also rightly rejoice in the plan of salvation—the perfect balance between justice and mercy—that is made available to all mankind. As Alma declared:

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 to 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. (Alma 42:23–24)

I return, in closing, to the Nauvoo Temple and the missionary who, through his tears, exclaimed, “Thank you for extending me mercy.” On this Easter—and every day—I see myself in him. In the coming day, I hope it will be me who is “clasped in the arms of Jesus” (Mormon 5:11), tearfully and with eternal gratitude saying, “Thank you for extending me mercy.” But my gratitude will extend beyond just my own salvation. I will further declare, “Thank you for extending mercy to my family—those of my earthly family and

the billions constituting that portion of humanity who never knew of the Savior's mercy in mortality. Thank you for the plan of salvation—the plan of mercy—that justly and mercifully reaches out to all my brothers and sisters.” I gratefully add my testimony to that of the Prophet Joseph Smith. “All are within the reach of pardoning mercy,” he taught in the October 1841 general conference in Nauvoo. “This doctrine appears glorious, inasmuch as it exhibits the greatness of divine compassion and benevolence in the extent of the plan of human salvation . . . [and] is well calculated to enlarge the understanding, and sustain the soul under troubles, difficulties and distresses.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus is risen. He lives. His mercy is more than I can comprehend. My gratitude and love are more than I can adequately express. My heart exclaims with Jacob, “O how great the goodness of our God” (2 Nephi 9:10)!

## NOTES

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 1–3.
2. Bell, *Love Wins*, 3.
3. Bell, *Love Wins*, 5–6.
4. Gabriel Fackre, Ronald H. Nash, and John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 7.
5. Fackre, Nash, and Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 9.
6. Robert L. Millet, “The Soteriological Problem of Evil,” *Religious Educator* 2, no. 2 (2001): 73–82. See also David L. Paulsen, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead: Tender Mercies, Turning of

- Hearts, and Restoration of Authority,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 28–51.
7. Fackre, Nash, and Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 13.
  8. William Smith, quoted in an interview with E. C. Briggs, *Deseret News*, January 20, 1894, cited by Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, The First Mormon* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 60, 460n17. See also Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 110.
  9. *The Teachings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 603.
  10. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:425–26.
  11. *Teachings of Joseph Smith*, 602.

For too many faithful disciples in the Church,  
the message of Easter does not fall on  
deaf ears but on discouraged ones.



(Doc Christensen, *Line of Authority*,  
courtesy of the artist.)