



William E. McLellan began serving a mission to the eastern states in 1831, but this commission was revoked "because of disobedience."

Courtesy of Church Archives

The Interplay between Forgiveness and Lost Opportunities

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Religious educators often encourage their classes with this statement: “It is better to prepare and prevent than it is to repair and repent.”¹ While inherently true, such statements need not imply that repentance is thus a flawed “plan B” approach to our mortal probation. Accordingly, those in need of mercy and forgiveness must not conclude that they will be forever flawed and left wanting, even after repenting. On the other hand, individuals in sin must not react bitterly to this principle. By so doing, they might deprive themselves of much-needed humility that is a consequence of their transgressions. Indeed, it is this very humility, accompanied by godly sorrow, that becomes the catalyst for true and lasting repentance. Unfortunately, those who demand mercy sometimes ignore or downplay the importance of justice. Likewise, some who become overzealous with justice may be prone to diminish the need for mercy. Finding balance between these two principles is challenging yet necessary.

A wonderful principle found in sections 66 and 75 of the Doctrine and Covenants can give added understanding to the process of repentance and the corresponding miracle of forgiveness of sin. This principle likewise helps discerning souls to properly balance the principles of justice and mercy, while understanding the sobering truth that true repentance does not mitigate consequences that come as a result of sin.

Background on Sections 66 and 75

Section 66 of the Doctrine and Covenants came as a response to a request made by William E. McLellin to know the Lord’s will concerning

him. At the time this revelation was given, William E. McLellin was in relatively good standing in the Church. McLellin was born January 18, 1806, in Smith County, Tennessee. He joined the Church at age twenty-five and was called as one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1835. McLellin, a schoolteacher by profession, demonstrated his dedicated service to the Church many times, yet his problematic relationship with Church leaders and doctrines eventually led to his excommunication in 1838. He is generally remembered as the individual who failed miserably in his attempt to produce a supposed revelation from God. This attempt came in response to the criticism of certain Church members and their disdain for the wording of the revelations in the soon-to-be-published Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord, in essence, issued a challenge to see if the “most wise” among the members of the Church could create a revelation comparable to “even the least” of the existing revelations (see D&C 67:6–7). If it were possible to create such a revelation, it would justify some of the Church members’ position that the revelations were not of God. Supposing that William McLellin was the most intelligent member at the time, several members chose him to make an attempt, but he ultimately failed.²

In section 66, the Lord commends William E. McLellin for turning away from iniquity and accepting the fulness of the gospel (see vv. 1–2). The Lord warns him, however, that he is not completely free from sin and specifically warns him of weaknesses and temptations to violate the law of chastity (see v. 10). The Lord extends the invitation to William E. McLellin to serve a mission in the “eastern lands” (v. 7) and gives him guidance and instruction relative to this mission. These items of instruction, the mission call, the warnings, and other items of counsel, were given on October 25, 1831. Although McLellin and his companion, Samuel Smith, did commence this mission on November 16, 1831, they were not able to continue for very long. Explaining the reason for limited service, Samuel Smith stated, “We went a short distance, but because of disobedience, our way was hedged up before us.”³

Several months later, on January 25, 1832, another revelation was received that, in part, again revealed the Lord’s will relative to William E. McLellin and his call to serve a mission. In this revelation, the Lord chastens him for his sins and murmurings (see D&C 75:7–8) and emphatically declares, “I revoke the commission which I gave unto him to go unto the eastern countries” (v. 6). The Lord then says, “I forgive him and say unto him again, Go ye into the south countries” (v. 8).⁴ President Joseph Fielding Smith explained: “William E. McLellin was rebuked for his failure to magnify a commission which had been given

him, and this commission was revoked. He was now appointed to travel with diligence and to labor with his might, as were all the others, but *he was to go to the south while formerly he was sent to the east*. The Lord, once more forgave him for his disobedience and he was to have as a companion Luke Johnson.”⁵

Despite the fact that McLellin eventually apostatized from the Church, this canonized revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants still has relevant application to each of us. The purpose in presenting the following is not to hold McLellin up as any sort of positive example but rather to “liken the scriptures” to ourselves by showing not only what the Lord was willing to do for William McLellin but also, more importantly, what He is willing to do for us.

Understanding the Principle

The scriptures contain priceless principles that can be applied in our lives. President Boyd K. Packer observed, “A principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions. *Generally principles are not spelled out in detail*. That leaves you free to find your way with an enduring truth, a principle, as your anchor.”⁶ In light of President Packer’s definition, it is interesting to note that neither the Doctrine and Covenants nor Samuel Smith specifically reveals what William E. McLellin’s shortcoming was—only that he sinned and was forgiven. The fact that things were not spelled out in more detail invites us to discover a scriptural principle that we can apply to our lives.

McLellin sinned but then was forgiven. He was subsequently given another chance to serve a mission. However, the call to go to the eastern lands was revoked. The principle here is that although the Lord is willing and able to forgive, that does not preclude us from suffering certain consequences. In this case, an opportunity was forever lost—the opportunity McLellin had of fulfilling a mission call to the East. Although a similar opportunity was presented later, along with the promised forgiveness, the fact is that this particular opportunity was lost forever. With that lost opportunity, we can only speculate about all the experiences, associations, spiritual growth, and overall good that could have been realized had McLellin fulfilled the call. Forgiveness is real, and our Father in Heaven is willing and able to forgive when we follow His plan. But forgiveness does not bring about an automatic reinstatement of all opportunities and blessings that an individual may have squandered. The repentant transgressor can go on in faithful service in the kingdom. Yet, despite the miracle of forgiveness, sin can leave an indelible mark on our mortal lives. This principle is vividly portrayed in the following story from the life of President

Spencer W. Kimball:

One day, I came home from school to find one of the horses tangled in the wire fence, bleeding profusely. He had been struggling to extricate himself and had cut deep gashes in his shoulder and legs. I shall never forget that day. As I remember it, the larger gash was about six inches long and so deep that a heavy piece of flesh and hide hung down, leaving an ugly bleeding wound. What could I do? There was no veterinary in the town, my father was away, the neighbor men were at work, and perhaps none of the boys in the area could do any better than I could do and time was of the essence, and so I faced the task, with the help of my sister, realizing that at best, I might do a clumsy job, but there was no alternative. I must try.

I washed the wound with hot soapy water, spread over the gash some of the common liniment we always had for our animals, and, with a large needle and common thread, I began to sew it together. When I pushed the needle through his sensitive flesh and skin, he jumped back and struck at me with his front feet and bit me on the arm. I had some mixed emotions at this juncture as I nursed my own wound. Here I was trying so hard to relieve him and this was the thanks I received. I realized he did not fully comprehend what I was trying so earnestly to do for him.

Now, I put a noose on his lower lip with a stick in it and twisted his lip so that his attention was turned to his lip agony while I could sew up the gash and get the wound fixed so it could heal itself. I had my little sister hold the noose tight. In and out, I pushed the needle through the quivering flesh until the edges of the wound were tied tight together.

Even after I had released the noose and the wound was firmly sewed together, I was still sure that this horse never knew nor fully realized what I had done for him. If he remembered me at all, it was probably as the one who had pricked his tender flesh with needles and severely pinched his lip in a noose.

The wound healed. There was always an ugly scar on the shoulder but the horse lived to give much service on the little farm.⁷

This story highlights two very crucial principles relative to sin. First, as with William E. McLellin, sin can cause individuals to miss out on certain opportunities in life—opportunities that often never return. Additionally, sin can carry consequences that may last for a lifetime, even after an individual has repented. Often, visible and invisible scars are left that might not be removed during one's mortal life. An example of this is an individual who becomes a chronic smoker, later changes his ways, and faithfully abstains for the rest of his life—but he must endure irreparable lung damage. Even though he might repent, there are some things he can never get back. The same applies to a youth who is involved in illicit sexual relations. Pregnancy, defilement, emotional damage, and sexual disease may leave scars. Yes, such a youth may repent, have a change of

heart, and endure faithfully in the covenant; but that does not eliminate the fact that there are certain consequences they must live with for the rest of their mortal lives.

Youths today who desire missionary service have been counseled by prophets that their future opportunities to work in the vineyard may be compromised forever if they indulge in sin, even if they repent later. An example of this can be seen in Elder M. Russell Ballard's recent warning to prospective missionaries: "Please understand this: the bar that is the standard for missionary service is being raised. The day of the 'repent and go' missionary is over. You know what I'm talking about, don't you, my young brothers? Some young men have the mistaken idea that they can be involved in sinful behavior and then repent when they're 18 1/2 so they can go on their mission at 19. *While it is true that you can repent of sins, you may or you may not qualify to serve.*"⁸ This concept might seem harsh to some, but it underscores the seriousness of sin, especially the wasted opportunities that can occur in youth, a time that can never be repeated. President Joseph F. Smith lamented this awful predicament:

I wish that all young men could appreciate the value there is in this practice, and in giving their youthful days to the service of the Lord. Growth, development, progress, self-respect, the esteem and admiration of men naturally follow such a course in youth. . . . Waiting to serve the Lord until the wild oats of youth are sown, is reprehensible. There is always something lacking in the man who spends his youth in wickedness and sin, and then turns to righteousness in later years. Of course, the Lord honors his repentance, and it is better far that a man should late turn from evil than to continue in sin all his days, but the fact is clear that the best part of his life and strength is wasted. . . . There are regrets and heartburnings in repenting late in life from the follies and sins of youth, but there are consolation and rich reward in serving the Lord in the vigorous days of early manhood.⁹

God is merciful to the repentant sinner. Forgiveness is real. Sin, however, can carry consequences even after an individual has completely repented. The Book of Mormon speaks of the sons of Mosiah in this regard. "For they were the very vilest of sinners. And the Lord saw fit in his infinite mercy to spare them; nevertheless they suffered much anguish of soul because of their iniquities" (Mosiah 28:4). Even after their mighty change of heart, they still had to repair much of the damage that had been done (see Mosiah 27:34–35). We can only guess that perhaps there were some things they were never able to completely repair—wounded hearts of others and their own damaged reputations. How sobering it can be to realize that the availability of God's forgive-

ness cannot change or turn back the unrelenting forward motion of the clock of opportunity.

Second, although sin is serious—indeed, very serious—repentance is real. There is forgiveness and healing. There can be a genuine change of heart and a return to purity. To put it another way, the horse in President Kimball’s story did go on to give “much service on the little farm.” The fact that people might have the ailments of missed opportunities or lifelong trials caused by sin does not mean they are disqualified from eternal life. Did they miss out on certain blessings and joy in this earth life? Yes! Are they ultimately cast out from God’s presence? No! Not as long as there is sincere and lasting repentance.

Teachers and leaders must be careful not to steal hope from starving souls who sincerely come back to the table of the Lord only to be left to mistakenly think that only scraps remain. Individuals who sincerely repent must not rob themselves of hope. It is a precarious thing to deny ourselves and others of the Lord’s mercy. In the Book of Mormon, we read of the prophet Zenock, who taught, “Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son” (Alma 33:16). To fret, complain, or murmur about the availability of grace and forgiveness is displeasing to our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ. President Packer cautioned, “Some worry endlessly over missions that were missed, or marriages that did not turn out, or babies that did not arrive, or children that seem lost, or dreams unfulfilled, or because age limits what they can do. I do not think it pleases the Lord when we worry because we think we never do enough or that what we do is never good enough. Some needlessly carry a heavy burden of guilt which could be removed through confession and repentance.”¹⁰

Yes, sin causes pain, and blatant sin can cause us to squander many opportunities—some that are lost forever. But those who transgress should never be made to feel that all they can now offer to the Lord is feeble, worthless service. To communicate to repentant souls that they will be spiritual dunces the rest of their lives is not only callous but also entirely wrong. Elder Richard G. Scott said:

If you have repented from serious transgression and *mistakenly believe that you will always be a second-class citizen* in the kingdom of God, *learn that is not true*. . . . Find encouragement in the lives of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah. They were tragically wicked. Yet their full repentance and service qualified them to be considered as noble as righteous Captain Moroni.

To you who have sincerely repented yet continue to feel the burden of guilt, realize that to continue to suffer for sins when there has been proper repentance and forgiveness of the Lord is prompted by the master of deceit. Lucifer will encourage you to continue to relive the details of past mistakes, knowing that such thoughts can hamper your progress. Thus he attempts to tie strings to the mind and body so that he can manipulate you like a puppet to discourage personal achievement.¹¹

Finding the Balance

Why might an individual deny himself of the Lord's mercy and forgiveness? Why might a parent, a teacher, or a leader be apt to do the same thing to the sinner? Perhaps it is a sincere yet misplaced desire to avoid giving license to sin. Elder Bruce C. Hafen cautioned that at times there are "some Church members [who] feel entitled to 'a few free ones' as they sow their wild oats and walk constantly along the edge of transgression. Or they believe that repentance requires little more than saying they are sorry. Constant emphasis on the availability of forgiveness can be counterproductive in such cases, suggesting—wrongly—that they can 'live it up' now and repent easily later without harmful consequences." Elder Hafen then warned, "Despite these reasons for caution, the blessing of making the Atonement more central to our lives outweighs any associated risks. When we habitually understate the Atonement's broad meaning, we do more harm than leaving one another without comforting reassurances—for some may simply drop out of the race, weighed down beyond the breaking point with self-doubt and spiritual fatigue."¹²

Teaching youth how to properly understand the meaning of forgiveness can be a rewarding yet daunting task. Striking the right balance between mercy and justice is easier to achieve when basic gospel principles are properly taught and understood. Two of these basic principles relating to forgiveness are justification and sanctification. There is a critical need to help youth understand the difference between the two. Justification, in essence, means to be forgiven—it is to be "pardoned from punishment for sin and declared guiltless."¹³ Sanctification, on the other hand, is more than simple forgiveness or pardon: it is "the process of becoming free from sin, pure, clean, and holy."¹⁴ Both of these come through the Atonement as an individual exercises faith in Jesus Christ, repents of sin, and lives according to the laws and ordinances of the gospel (see D&C 20:30–31).

Although these two terms might seem esoteric, they are nevertheless real and important principles of the gospel of forgiveness. Whatever

terms or expressions are used, these two concepts are vital for youth to better understand the repentance process. It is one thing for a youth to recognize sin, to confess, to abandon the sin, and to be forgiven. It is altogether another thing to have a mighty change of heart (see Alma 5:14) and thus overcome the very disposition to commit sin (see Mosiah 5:2). Through the Atonement of Christ, a person can not only be forgiven of a sin but over time can also have the desire to commit that sin completely purged. Elder Merrill J. Bateman once said that the Savior “has the infinite capacity not only to heal our wounds but also to lift us up to the Father as sanctified sons and daughters.”¹⁵ Understanding the difference between these two principles is crucial, not just in understanding scriptural phrases on these two topics but also in understanding exactly where one is in the repentance process.

In the Book of Mormon, there is a verse of scripture that, if understood incorrectly, can breed complacency and even give license to sin. If understood in its proper context, however, this verse can be very redeeming and can give the sinner needed hope to move on in life. “Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, *immediately* shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you” (Alma 34:31; emphasis added).

Some might be inclined to interpret this verse as saying that repentance is easy and forgiveness is quick. On the contrary, this verse is a wonderful summary of the process of justification, or, in other words, of being forgiven of sin and getting back on the strait and narrow path. As stated, this can happen immediately. What should not be confused is the process of sanctification—the “becoming” part of repentance. Although a person can be forgiven of sin in an instant, he or she may still have a long road to travel as far as having nature changed. Sanctification, becoming like the Savior, is a lifelong process. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s words are instructive regarding these two aspects of repentance:

You can change anything you want to change, and you can do it very fast. Another satanic suckerpunch is that it takes years and years and eons of eternity to repent. That’s just not true. It takes exactly as long to repent as it takes to say, “I’ll change”—and mean it. Of course there will be problems to work out and restitutions to make. You may well spend—indeed, you had better spend—the rest of your life proving your repentance by its permanence. But change, growth, renewal, and repentance can come for you as instantaneously as they did for Alma and the sons of Mosiah.¹⁶

Elder Holland's statement highlights these two important aspects of repentance. First, forgiveness of a sin, getting back on the path—this is what would be called justification. As Elder Holland says, this change can happen immediately, just as we read in Alma 34:31. Second, overcoming sinfulness, the disposition to sin, becoming like Christ, and coming to have His mind—this is the process of sanctification, and it can take years, even “the rest of your life.” It is imperative to help youth understand that they can get on the path quickly, that they can repent immediately and start to feel the Holy Ghost again; but growing in the light and moving along the path of righteousness (and staying on) is not always easy or quick. Hope comes from the realization of the merciful immediacy of justification. Humility is born when the just and staggering process of sanctification is understood. Both these come by way of Christ's Atonement. When youth understand these valuable principles and how both are essential elements of the repentance process, it is less likely that teachers, parents, and leaders will need to worry about youth thinking they can get away with “a few free ones.” Grace, mercy, justice, and the law of the harvest—all these principles stay intact and work together!

Conclusion

Sections 66 and 75 of the Doctrine and Covenants contain priceless principles that can be very powerful in the lives of those who apply them properly. From these verses we learn that our Father in Heaven is a God of forgiveness and that through repentance sin can be forgiven. Despite the availability of God's forgiveness, however, sin can cause an individual to lose opportunities forever.

As religious educators, we must be careful never to give students license to sin. However, and more importantly, we cannot understate the power and ability of Christ's Atonement to change, redeem, and bless. No, mercy cannot rob justice (see Alma 42:25), but mercy can and does overpower justice (see Alma 34:15). We must not be either afraid or ashamed to speak of mercy, forgiveness, grace, and God's divine love.¹⁷ “And now, beloved, marvel not that I tell you these things; for why not speak of the atonement of Christ?” (Jacob 4:12).

In the end, everyone needs the Atonement. We cannot save and redeem ourselves. All of us inevitably sin to some degree (see Romans 3:23). We all fall short and thus miss out on certain opportunities. Will we squander the precious gift of forgiveness that Christ has offered us? Or will we come down into the depths of humility and accept His great atoning sacrifice? Elder Ballard asked:

Are you struggling with some sin or weakness? It can be something as simple as not having the willpower to rise in the morning early enough to have time for scripture study and prayer. It can be something so powerful, such as Internet pornography or lack of moral self-control, that you feel like you have been pulled down into an abyss and there is no hope for you. Do you find yourself hating what you are doing but not able to find the willpower to turn away from it? Then reach out and humble yourself. The Lord's enabling power is sufficient to change your heart, to turn your life, to purge your soul. But you must make the first move, which is to humble yourself and realize that only in God can you find deliverance.¹⁸

May we all humbly and gratefully recognize the wonderful gift of repentance in our own lives and in the lives of those we love and teach. May we continually remember that the Savior's grace and love really are "sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify."¹⁹ RE

Notes

1. Although not the originator of this statement, President Ezra Taft Benson often used this axiom. For example, see *The Law of Chastity*, Brigham Young University devotional, October 13, 1987.

2. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:226.

3. As found in Jan Shipp and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin: 1831–1836* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 300. Original quote in Samuel H. Smith Journal, 1831–33, LDS Church Archives.

4. In Hoyt Brewster's *D&C Encyclopedia* (pp. 547–48), the "south countries" referred to in D&C 75 are explained as follows: "This charge did not include territory foreign to the United States, but merely meant he was to go into the southern states, or, that country which was south of his present location. Similarly, Major Ashley and Burr Riggs were sent into the 'south country' (D&C 75:17)."

5. *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: The Council of The Twelve Apostles, 1946), 46; emphasis added. A similar situation occurs in the Book of Mormon with Alma's wayward son, Corianton. He is rebuffed for immorality (see Alma 39) but is ultimately called again to preach the gospel (see Alma 42:31).

6. Boyd K. Packer, "The Word of Wisdom: The Principle and the Promises," *Ensign*, May 1996, 17; emphasis added.

7. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 91–92.

8. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2002, 46; emphasis added.

9. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 334–35.

10. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, October 2004, 86.

11. Richard G. Scott, in Conference Report, October 2000, 26; emphasis added.

12. Bruce C. Hafen, "Beauty for Ashes: The Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Liahona*, April 1997, 39.

13. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "Justification."
14. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "Sanctification."
15. Merrill J. Bateman, "A Peculiar Treasure," Brigham Young University devotional, September 3, 1996.
16. Jeffrey R. Holland, *However Long and Hard the Road* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 6.
17. See Neal A. Maxwell, "Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King," *Ensign*, May 1976, 26; see also Russell M. Nelson, "These . . . Were Our Examples," *Ensign*, November 1991, 61; Gardner H. Russell, "Touching the Hearts of Less-Active Members," *Ensign*, November 1986, 28; Victor L. Brown, "A Lifetime of Learning," *Ensign*, November 1989, 77; Robert E. Wells, "The Beatitudes: Pattern for Coming unto Christ," *Ensign*, December 1987, 10; W. Mack Lawrence, "Sunday Worship Service," *Ensign*, May 1991, 30; Robert J. Whetten, "True Followers," *Ensign*, May 1999, 30.
18. M. Russell Ballard, "Be Strong in the Lord, and in the Power of His Might," fireside for young adults, March 3, 2002.
19. "I Stand All Amazed," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 193.