

Original Grace: Excerpt

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Grace and justice are intertwined. Our ideas about justice shape our ideas about grace. And, in turn, how we think about justice will depend on how we think about the purpose of God's law.

If, then, we want to break with the underlying logic of original sin and experiment with the idea of an original grace, the most important question we can ask is this: what *is* the purpose of God's law?

In Mosiah 4:16, Benjamin promises his people that, if they will retain in remembrance the greatness of God and their own nothingness, they “will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain.” He then frames a hypothetical scenario that stages, simply and cleanly, the crucial difference between two divergent views of God's law and the nature of suffering:

Perhaps thou shalt say: the man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.

(Mosiah 4:17-18)

On my reading, this denial of the beggar's petition exemplifies a fundamental misunderstanding of God's law and, most helpfully, it forcefully dramatizes the logic—that is, the story used to explain the *reason* why people suffer—that underwrites this misunderstanding.

What, according to the logic of original sin, is the reason for the beggar's suffering? As Benjamin has it, the line of reasoning is straightforward. Denying the beggar, you will say, this “man has brought upon himself his misery; *therefore* I will stay my hand” (Mosiah 4:17, emphasis added). You will refuse to help the beggar because “his punishments are just” (Mosiah 4:17).

This denial of the beggar's petition is motivated by a certain understanding of God's law. It takes for granted that justice requires punishment and that a just punishment will take the form of suffering. The logic of original sin draws a straight line from justice to punishment to suffering. It assumes that the natural order of material things—manifest here in the beggar's obvious suffering—is identical to the moral order of things. If the beggar suffers, he must deserve to suffer.

At its most basic, this is the story told by original sin: the origin of all suffering is sin. And while this logic is natural enough, Benjamin roundly rejects it. He wants no part of it. In fact, Benjamin boldly claims that anyone who does think this way has “*great* cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 4:18, emphasis added).

As Benjamin tells it, the sinner isn't the beggar who, as a sinner, would deserve to suffer. The sinner is the person who *thinks* the beggar deserves to suffer. The sinner is the person who, in line with the logic of original sin, reads the beggar's suffering *as* a just punishment. In

contrast, Benjamin, like Jesus, sees the moral order as a divinely commanded response to the suffering we experience in the material order, not as a justification for that suffering.

Despite Benjamin's blunt disavowal of the logic of original sin, this way of thinking about justice and suffering runs deep in both the Christian tradition and the world at large. What's more, this way of thinking also appears to be commonplace in many parts of the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

However, Latter-day revelations like the second Article of Faith reject the doctrine of original sin. And, beyond this formal repudiation, the Restoration also rewrites—from top to bottom, from the inside out—the crucial Christian stories that bookend the tradition's reasoning about suffering. Our revelations thoroughly rewrite Christianity's tired stories about the world's beginning (especially its stories about Adam and Eve's blameworthy fall from paradise) and its scary stories about the world's end (especially its stories that justly consign most people to eternal punishment in the fires of hell).

Where the Christian tradition views our collective fall into mortality—and, thus, our collective fall into suffering, sickness, and death—as a catastrophic loss and a just punishment, Latter-day Saints view our fall into the troubles of mortality as, ultimately, one of God's greatest gifts. Our troubled mortal lives aren't a punishment. Our suffering in mortality isn't proof that God's original plan was ruined. As Latter-day Saints tell the story, our mortality *is* God's original plan. “Were it not for our transgression,” Eve exclaims in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible, “we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11).

And where the Christian tradition views the afterlife simply in terms of heaven's absolute rewards and hell's blistering punishments, Latter-day Saints view the afterlife—in light of D&C 76—as almost entirely composed of differing degrees of salvific glory that, in relation to traditional readings, effectively define “hell” out of existence. Despite the fact that the Book of Mormon alone uses the word “hell” almost sixty times, Latter-day Saints don't ultimately believe in anything like Dante's circles of hell where God perpetually exacts his just revenge on vile sinners.

In both cases, the Restoration's comprehensive revisions to these traditional stories about Eden and hell have the same effect: while preserving Christian canon, they sharply undercut the logic that organizes a traditional Christian understanding of *why* we suffer in mortality. This logic has been supplanted by additional revelations that tell a very different story about our suffering and, ultimately, a very different story about justice and grace.

Does sin cause suffering? Yes. Does God's justice require suffering as punishment for sin? No. Sin adds to our suffering because wickedness never was happiness, not because God insists that we suffer (see Alma 41:10). Suffering is a problem, not a punishment.

This, I think, is the upshot of D&C 19. “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I” (D&C 19:16-17). God doesn't insist that I suffer. God's work is to relieve and redeem that suffering. He suffered for my sins so that I wouldn't have to. If I *still* suffer because of sin, this is because I insist on suffering. I insist on refusing God's grace. I refuse to repent. “And surely every man must repent or suffer” (D&C 19:4).

Does suffering, in general, have a purpose? No. Suffering is a just a fact of life. But suffering can, by way of grace, be *given* a purpose. In addition to being relieved, it can be redeemed. It can teach and strengthen and empower. It can, in God's hands, be repurposed for growth and progress.

The logic of original sin takes the purpose of the law to be punishment. The law's purpose is to judge what is *deserved*. The law is a divine mechanism for judging who deserves to suffer (or not) and to what degree. The point of the law is accusation.

The logic of grace, on the other hand, takes the purpose of the law to be love. The law's purpose is still to judge—but, now, to judge what is *needed*. The law is a divine mechanism for judging what is needed to relieve suffering and liberate sinners. The point of the law is grace.

The contrast between these two logics is sharp. Where sin reasons *backward* about whether someone's suffering is deserved, grace reasons *forward* about how best to respond to that suffering. Where sin understands God's law as a tool of condemnation, grace understands God's law as a discipline of compassion. Where sin uses the law to obligate suffering, grace uses the law to command succor.

Sin begins from the original assumption of guilt and concludes that suffering is deserved. Grace begins from the original reality of suffering and concludes that relief is needed.

Sin uses God's law to ask: what is deserved?

Grace uses God's law to ask: what is needed?

If the purpose of justice isn't punishment, then what is justice? And what does justice have to do with grace?

In the opening pages of Plato's *Republic*, a young man named Polemarchus, prompted by Socrates, defines justice as the art of "giving to each man what is proper to him."ⁱ Socrates doesn't object to this definition, but he wants Polemarchus to spell out what it means. In reply, Polemarchus offers a definition of justice that would appeal to most of us, most of the time. He gives a natural, common sense definition of justice. What properly belongs to each, Polemarchus argues, is only and exactly what each deserves. Or, as Polemarchus puts it: "Justice is the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies."ⁱⁱ

According to this definition, justice is a kind of mirror. It reflects back whatever we are. It balances the books. It demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It returns good for good and evil for evil. It loves friends and hates enemies.

Socrates, though, is skeptical about Polemarchus' claim that justice returns evil to enemies. If justice is *good*—perhaps, even, the greatest good—how can it return *evil*? Moreover, wouldn't doing evil to evildoers just make them more evil? If so, then justice would be responsible both for doing evil to evildoers and making evildoers more evil. And this, Socrates thinks, is absurd. It's like claiming that heat makes things cold or that water makes things dry. "To injure a friend or anyone else," Socrates concludes, "is not the act of a just man, but of the opposite."ⁱⁱⁱ

The law is about justice, not punishment. Punishment—defined as the work of returning evil to those who have done evil—can only compound evil. Punishment, as the work of giving people what they deserve, can only make the world more unjust.

If evil is what evildoers deserve, then giving people what they deserve is not the work of justice. And if evil is what evildoers deserve, then deciding what people deserve is not the purpose of God's law. Using the law to decide what is deserved—for example, using God's law to decide if the beggar “deserves” your help—is a sinful misuse of the law. Punishment isn't what justice looks like from God's perspective. It's what justice looks like from sin's perspective.

Despite Polemarchus' misstep, Socrates still likes the idea of defining justice as the art of “giving to each man what is proper to him.” And if this is right, the next question is simple: what *is* proper to each man?

For Socrates, the answer is obvious. What's proper is what's good. What's proper to each is whatever is good for them. Or, what's proper to each is whatever they *need* in order to become good. Justice is the art of determining what good is needed.

Justice doesn't fight against itself by returning good on one occasion and evil on another. Rather, justice adopts an entirely different logic: justice returns good for good *and* good for evil.

If you've suffered evil, justice takes your measure by way of the law and prescribes what good is needed to make you whole. If you've done what's good, justice takes your measure by way of the law and prescribes what good is needed to make you even more just. And if you've done evil, justice takes your measure by way of the law and *still* prescribes what good is needed to make you more just. What is good for a liar? To no longer be a liar. What is good for a thief?

To no longer be a thief. What is good for an adulterer? To no longer be an adulterer. What is good for the unjust—and, for that matter, for everyone that suffers evil at the hands of the unjust? What’s good for everyone is for the unjust to become just.

Justice is the work of saving people from evil—both the evil we suffer and the evil we do—not the work of doing evil to them. It’s the work of making bad people good and good people better.

The logic of justice is not: good for good and evil for evil.

The logic of justice is: good for good and good for evil.

Jesus makes this same argument in the Sermon on the Mount. He knows that people have “heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” (Matthew 5:38). He knows that this is how people commonly define justice and he knows that any departure from this logic will look like he’s destroying the law. But he also knows that if the kingdom of God is going to arrive, that logic must give way. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law,” Jesus tells the multitude, “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

How does Jesus intend to fulfill the law? Not by changing the letter of the law, but by investing that law with a different purpose. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you . . . whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have they cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain” (Matthew 5:39).

Now, again, Jesus knows this is not what you’ve been told. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy” (Matthew 5:43). But this is

exactly the problem. Using the law in this specific way—that is, using the law in accordance with the logic of punishment—*this* is what prevents the law from being fulfilled. This is what prevents justice from being accomplished.

How then should the law be used? “I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

In Jesus’ hands, the logic of the law is clear: not good for good and evil for evil, but good for good *and* good for evil. And, what’s more, returning good for evil is not here positioned as an act of mercy that counterbalances justice. Rather, returning good for evil *is* justice. Returning good for evil is how you fulfill the law.

As Jesus describes it, this is how God himself judges. This is how God fulfills the law and accomplishes justice. This is God’s own logic. “Love your enemies . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:44-45). God, too, sends good for good and good for evil. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

What does this have to do with grace? If we take Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as our guide, the logic of justice *is* the logic of grace.

Grace is the art of giving good for good and good for evil. Grace is the art of giving whatever good is needed. And if justice is the art of giving whatever good is needed—and not, instead, the business of giving only what’s deserved—then justice and grace are two names for the same thing.

And, further, if justice and grace are two names for the same thing, then grace is no exception to the law. Grace is the law. Grace is not a way around justice, it is justice. Only grace can fulfill the law and only grace can justify the world.

In a letter to his son Corianton, Alma takes a different approach to justice. Justice, he says, requires restoration and “the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (Alma 41:13).

What should we make of the fact that Alma appears to side with Polemarchus rather than Jesus?

What’s more, in this same letter, Alma also clearly divides the afterlife into only two kingdoms: a traditional heaven where “the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God” and a traditional hell where the wicked suffer “an awful death” and are “consigned to partake of the fruits of their labors or their works, which have been evil” (Alma 40:25, 26).

What should we make of the fact that Alma also appears to disagree with Joseph Smith’s stunning vision of the afterlife in D&C 76?

Of all the answers we might give, I think the simplest is suggested by a talk Elder Dallin H. Oaks gave in October 2007: while some ways of talking may be good, others are better, and still others are best.^{iv} Alma’s way of talking may be a good fit for his circumstances—and, perhaps especially, for his wayward son’s circumstances. But, at the end of the day, it seems clear to me that Joseph Smith’s account of the afterlife is better and Jesus’s own account of justice is best.

These kinds of variations, though, aren't unusual. Revelations are always "given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). And, moreover, this is how continuing revelation works: little by little, layer by layer, line by line. Reflecting on the extension of priesthood and temple blessings in 1978 to Latter-day Saints of every race, Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught: "We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past."^v Like Alma, our job is embrace all the light we've been given, even as we continually pray for more (cf. Alma 40:3).

How do we decide in any given instance between what's good, what's better, and what's best? The rule is simple: God decides, prophets reveal, and the Spirit applies.

If justice and grace are two names for the same thing, then the art of justice is more like the work of healing the wounded than executing the guilty. It's more like what happens in an emergency room than in a courtroom.

When beggars are wheeled into the ER, doctors don't use the laws of medicine to decide if treatment is deserved. They don't assume the beggar's punishments are just. They don't look for reasons to stay their hand. Just the opposite. Bound by law and morality, doctors do all they can to meet every need, heal every wound, and improve every life. Here, justice is bound by a Hippocratic oath: give what good is needed and *do no harm*.

This is not to deny, of course, that we need laws and standards and discipline—these are good things after all. (Without laws and standards, the good would be lost. Assessing what good

someone needs is never a subjective affair. Needs are always defined by what's good, and what's good is always defined by God's law.) Moreover, it is not to deny that good things like surgeries and stitches can themselves be difficult and painful. And it is certainly not to deny the brute fact that suffering, even in the best of circumstances, is knit into the fabric of reality by both time and agency.

But it *is* to deny that any of this suffering is divinely mandated as a punishment. It is to deny that justice is ever in the business of returning evil for evil. And it is certainly to deny that justice ever decides on a course of treatment by asking what is deserved rather than needed.

Sin is self-inflicted suffering. As a result, sinful actions always result in unnecessary suffering. In other words, our moral choices always have natural consequences in the material order of things. But, I'm arguing, these natural consequences are dictated by the *material* order of things, not by the moral order of things. The suffering that follows from sin is a material fact not a moral imperative. In this respect, a kind of "punishment" for sins is naturally built into the material order such that there's always a "punishment that is affixed in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer the ends of the atonement" (2 Nephi 2:10). But, again, this suffering is a natural, self-inflicted consequence of sin, not a *moral* obligation, required by justice.

Punishment, as an ethical obligation to return evil for evil, is never demanded by the moral order. The obligation imposed by the moral order—by the logic of justice—is to respond to all suffering, whatever its cause, with whatever good is now needed.

Is there, then, no part for punishment to play in the execution of justice? If, by punishment, we mean a moral imperative to return evil for evil, the answer is no. There's no such thing as a

moral imperative to do evil. But if, by “punishment,” we mean a moral imperative to return good for evil by helping people to learn discipline and take responsibility for the natural consequences of their actions, then the answer is yes. But in this latter case, “punishment” is clearly a *good* that is needed—a grace that is required regardless of what someone deserves—not an evil to be imposed. This kind of “punishment” can then be good—even if different choices with different consequences in a different world would have allowed instead for something better, or even for what would have been best.

This, then, is my hypothesis: it is never morally legitimate to use God’s law to judge what someone deserves. Rather, God’s law can only be used to judge what good someone needs.

ⁱ Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, 332c.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

ⁱⁱ *The Republic*, 332d.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Republic*, 335d.

^{iv} Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” October 2007.
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2007/10/good-better-best?lang=eng>

^v Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike Unto God,” *BYU Speeches*, August 18, 1978.
<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>