

The Moral Dilemma of Doing Good

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A few years ago I awoke in the middle of the night after dreaming that I had been asked to be a speaker in a BYU devotional. In that dream the complete outline of what I was supposed to talk about was clear to me. For the first time in my life I groped in the dark for a pencil and a Post-It pad on the nightstand and wrote the title of this talk. I promptly went back to sleep. The note was barely readable the next morning, and, worst of all, the memory of the details of the talk had faded from my mind just like dreams normally do. When I told my wife about this dream and showed her the note, we joked about the unlikely possibility of ever having to give the talk. During the next few years, however, I was intrigued by the topic and occasionally jotted down notes in my journal, not really thinking that I would have this opportunity.

Elder Scott's advice to immediately write down spiritual impressions you receive is important for all of us. Imagine how much more I might have remembered had I followed the impression of my dream by not just recording the title but getting up and recording the impressions of that dream. I am eternally grateful for how patient and long-suffering our Heavenly Father is.

The title on the Post-It note was "The Moral Dilemma of Doing Good." A dilemma is defined as an argument necessitating a choice between equally unfavorable or disagreeable alternatives or any situation in which one must choose between unpleasant alternatives. A synonym for *dilemma* is *predicament*. A moral issue involves choices between right and wrong. Why might doing good present a moral dilemma? Or, in other words, why might doing good present us with potentially unfavorable consequences? If I have choices between two good things, does it really matter which I choose? Immediately upon asking this question, I think you will realize that when we are trying to do good things with our lives, then frequently these are just the choices we have to make. These are not choices between good and evil but between two or more good things. If we choose to avoid evil, it is likely that more and more of our choices will be between good things. We are so blessed as members of this great church to have so many good things to choose between.

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Let me describe for you a recent situation involving good choices. I have been an advisor for several years for an extracurricular project involving mostly undergraduate students from BYU, the University of Utah, and Utah State University. They have been designing, building, and testing large hybrid rockets.

The latest rocket was scheduled to be launched September 13 of last year. Years of effort, including designing, building, and testing the various components of the rocket, had preceded this scheduled test. The events of September 11 postponed the test but gave additional time to refine details of the design and operation of the rocket.

In mid-April of this year we assembled the rocket out in the middle of the test area located in the west Utah desert area of the air force's Utah Test and Training Range. The years of planning and building, of component testing and refinement, and of repeated safety and operational evaluations to meet the air force's requirements for operation on their property had culminated in a completed rocket, detailed test and launch plans, and our being at the launch site. Every contingency had been considered and included in the launch plans. All of the procedures for preparing the rocket and launching and recovering it were in place. We assembled in the blockhouse a hundred yards from the launch site and began the countdown. The air force had three remote cameras and a tracking radar focused on the rocket, prepared to track it in its flight to the planned altitude of 10,000 feet above ground. Later, after we had demonstrated our ability to control the rocket, we hoped to launch this same rocket to an altitude of more than 100,000 feet.

The countdown proceeded: five, four, three, two, one, zero. The motor fired at zero. A cloud of dust enveloped the launch site, and we waited to see the rocket emerge and accelerate for the seven seconds the engine was supposed to burn. Seven seconds later, data was still coming from the rocket and black smoke

was appearing on the video screens showing the launch site. The rocket was still sitting in place on the launch rail. Forty seconds later the engine stopped. Fire engulfed the end of the launch rail and the trailer it was sitting on.

What went wrong? Obviously, despite all of our good planning, design, and testing, there was something more that we should have done. We were not totally successful, despite all of the good work that had been done on the rocket. The air force people were very sympathetic, telling us that million-dollar programs often do the same thing.

Is the experience of our mortal probation here on earth like our rocket experience? Will we reach the end and possibly fail because we didn't do everything right, even if we tried as hard as we could to do it right? How do we make the right choices? How can we do everything we are supposed to do?

As I thought about choice and the significance of our earthly experience—this mortal experience where we are exploring our agency—Adam and Eve's experience kept coming to my mind.

The first commandment to man as recorded in Moses 2:28 was "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." In the second commandment to Adam, God stressed the importance of agency. As recorded in Moses 3:16–17, the Lord said:

And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Was this a dilemma for Adam and Eve? "Thou mayest choose for thyself." What an ennobling concept that is. What a potentially frightening concept that is. If I can, or must,

choose for myself, then what are the consequences of my choice? Can I choose the consequences of my choices somehow independently of my choices? As an engineer and mathematician, I do not have the luxury of independently choosing the values on both sides of an equation. This is certainly true of relationships in the world of physics or engineering. Is it also true in the world of moral relationships?

I think it is.

The Lord told Adam and Eve that if they partook they should surely die. Why would they have been willing to partake—as they subsequently did—if they knew they would die? What if someone you know and trust connected two wires to a wall outlet and told you that if you grabbed one of them in each hand that you would certainly die. Your friend would tell you that, of course, you can choose for yourself. Would you be likely to grab the wires? What if someone you didn't really know told you that you would not really die but that your hair would become naturally curly if you grabbed the wires? Would you be likely to grab the wires? Evidently something more complicated than is indicated in these brief verses of scripture must have been known by Adam and Eve.

Certainly Adam and Eve understood that they had a choice and that it was not as simple as just dying if they partook. They must have understood that they could remain in the idyllic existence in the Garden of Eden if they chose. They would not be forced out, but by remaining there they would not be able to fulfill the purpose of their creation. They could continue to dress the garden and enjoy the beauties that surrounded them. But there could be no progress in becoming like God without understanding, by their own experience, the difference between good and evil. The dilemma Adam and Eve faced appears not to be a choice between good and bad. It was a choice between good things that both had unpleasant or difficult consequences. The

unpleasant consequence of remaining in the Garden of Eden was that they could not become like their Father. However, choosing to experience good and evil put them in a world where there were thorns and thistles. God told them, "Because thou hast . . . eaten of the fruit of the tree . . . , cursed shall be the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life" (Moses 4:23).

Notice carefully that the ground was cursed for their sake. This was a blessing for them. Their world was to be one of opportunity where they could learn to exercise faith and agency. Choices had to be made between good and evil. Significantly, also, choices had to be made between good and better. How grateful we should all be that they chose wisely. Our opportunity to experience this mortal probation was a direct consequence of a correct choice in the moral dilemma Adam and Eve faced. It was a choice that our Father could not make for them without compromising their agency.

What about us? There is no doubt that we all face choices between good and evil. We have ample warning about those choices. We know clearly that it is not right to murder, to steal, to bear false witness, to abuse our bodies with drugs, or to commit adultery and many other similarly wrong things. The scriptures are replete with injunctions against these evils. Modern prophets warn us continually about these and modern-day evils like pornography on the Internet. We also receive guidance about the good choices that we should consider. Always, however, behind all of this direction is the imperative "Thou mayest choose for thyself."

We may feel like the man who approached the Savior and asked, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16).

Jesus responded with an abbreviated list of the "thou shalt nots" and some "thou shalt" like we have just mentioned. The young man said that he had done all of these things and wanted to know what was lacking.

“Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

We may feel that we have, from our youth up, also kept the commandments and repented appropriately when we have done something wrong, and yet we may also ask the question “What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” Then comes the dilemma. Do I need to do more good things? One good thing more and the rocket launch might have been a success.

We are not left without further counsel. Joseph Smith was commanded of the Lord, “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means provided” (D&C 10:4).

Although this applied to Joseph’s translating, it must apply also to us. There really is only so much that we can have the strength and means to do. Are we to be judged by the quantity of good that we do? Can you imagine the Savior at the Judgment Day saying that only the swift, the strong, and the powerful may enter in? No, even the little child may enter in. More significantly, the Savior expects us to come to Him as a little child:

Therefore, whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive, for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved. [3 Nephi 9:22]

If it is not just the quantity of good that we do, then perhaps it is the quality of good that we do. We have all heard counsel that if we do our best then everything will be all right.

Once again, however, we are faced with a dilemma—perhaps even a moral dilemma. What does it mean to do my best? How many things can I choose to do my best at? I don’t know if I have ever done my best. It seems

that even when I tried to do my best that I could probably always have done just a little bit better. If doing my best is what is required, I fear I have failed.

Fortunately there is hope. Our Heavenly Father loves us and knows what we need to become like Him. A plan was prepared from before the foundation of the world. We were there when the plan was discussed, and we “shouted for joy” (Job 38:7) at the opportunities it presented to us. A world was organized where we would have the opportunity to live and experience all of the joys and sorrows of mortality and the opportunity to experience good and evil and make choices. The challenge is recorded in Abraham 3:25: “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.”

A Savior was chosen who would be willing to come to earth—the Only Begotten in the Flesh, the Son of God, who would redeem us by offering a perfect, eternal sacrifice. He would take upon Himself our sins, if we would be willing to follow Him and keep His commandments. A perfect and sinless Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross at Golgotha took upon Himself the sins of all who would receive Him. This was an eternal and infinite sacrifice. It was not something that we could do for ourselves. It was done willingly and lovingly, but at such a terrible cost in pain and suffering. It was done so that we would not need to suffer so much if we would repent and follow Him.

How does that redeeming sacrifice help with the dilemma of how to do what is needed in choosing between good things to find the course we should follow? One answer that has given me great hope—an answer that has helped me understand the personal significance of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice—is found in section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In this section we are counseled regarding spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are, among

other things, blessings that help us fulfill the purposes of this mortal probation. Let us consider the instruction in verse 7:

But ye are commanded in all things to ask of God, who giveth liberally; and that which the Spirit testifies unto you even so I would that ye should do in all holiness of heart, walking uprightly before me, considering the end of your salvation, doing all things with prayer and thanksgiving, that ye may not be seduced by evil spirits, or doctrines of devils, or the commandments of men; for some are of men, and others of devils. [D&C 46:7]

In this verse there is much to consider. We are commanded to ask. We must listen to the Spirit and do what it testifies to us. We need to walk uprightly—that is, do what we know we should be doing. We should do all that we do with prayer and thanksgiving.

Verse 8 continues: “Wherefore, beware lest ye are deceived; and that ye may not be deceived seek ye earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given” (D&C 46:8).

Not only do we need to ask, listen, and do what the Spirit testifies, but we need to earnestly seek the best gifts. If we do not have these gifts then we may be deceived. I think at this point it is important to consider what “seek” might mean.

A newly returned missionary is preparing for his first date with the young woman who has so faithfully waited for him the two years he has been gone. That is how it is supposed to work, isn’t it? He lives in Orem. She lives in Spanish Fork. It is time to leave to pick her up, and he can’t find the car keys. Does he just “look” for them or does he “seek” for them? I think *seek* implies significantly more anxious activity than just *looking*, don’t you?

Now let’s read the beginning of verse 9: “For verily I say unto you, they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments” (D&C 46:9).

I think I have a little problem here. I do love God, but I am a little unsure about how I am doing in keeping all of His commandments. I am in trouble here because although I certainly am trying to keep the commandments, I am sure that I am not doing it perfectly. If perfection or even just doing my best is required, then I fear I have failed again. As much as I would like to benefit from the gifts that I know I need if I am ever to become perfect, I am just not sure that I qualify.

The next words in verse 9, however, have helped me to understand an essential part of the Atonement and how it critically affects my life. Let me repeat the first part of the verse as well: “For verily I say unto you, they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do” (D&C 46:9). *And him (or her) that seeketh so to do.* The Lord says that they are given for the benefit of those who love Him and keep all His commandments. That can include me, also, because I am seeking to love Him and keep all His commandments. It can include all of us when we are trying and perhaps not really even succeeding very well. We can be blessed just as if we had succeeded if we are trying. Is that what it really means?

I hope my daughter will forgive me for using her as an example. There were many mornings when I would go down to her room after calling a few times from upstairs and say, “Sherry, it’s time to get up.”

Her initial response would often be: “I’m trying.”

It was impossible to see the slightest movement of mouth or lip or anything else. I knew, however, that she really was trying, though without any visible sign. I believe that Heavenly Father is equally understanding of our efforts. My experience, and probably yours, says that He is.

Consider how many times you have received blessings that you did not totally deserve—blessings that you had not really

earned yet. It happens all the time, doesn't it? What does that mean? I believe it means that Heavenly Father and our Savior truly love us and want us to succeed. I believe it means that They will do anything to help us succeed that does not violate our agency to choose. I believe that it would be impossible for us to become perfect if we did not receive the blessings that enable us to become increasingly better. And often those blessings are necessary for us to be able to take the next steps to becoming better. I believe that those blessings help protect us from the deceptions in the world around us.

We have an important part in the process. The Lord has blessed us with the scriptures; we must search them and do what they teach us. The Lord has blessed us with a prophet; we must listen to him and do what he asks of us. We must seek and ask for the best gifts and use them to bless the lives of all around us. We must seek and strive to love God and to keep all His commandments. And we must be thankful and even rejoice in the great blessings and opportunities we receive from our Father in Heaven.

Yes, and even the rocket launch attempt wasn't really a failure because of all the good things we learned from it. How we will strive even more to get it to work!

What do we have that we can offer in return for all the good gifts of our Father in Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ? We can offer our hearts and our free will—our obedience. We can sacrifice a broken heart and a contrite spirit. The promise is that He will baptize us with fire and with the Holy Ghost. Like the Lamanites who received this blessing, we may already have this great blessing and “[know] it not” (3 Nephi 9:20).

We are loved, we are blessed—even when we have not totally earned the right to the blessings. The Atonement of our Savior, Jesus Christ, has made it possible for us to receive blessings that will make us worthy to return to our Heavenly Father.

We have President Gordon B. Hinckley, a prophet, to guide us. The Holy Ghost has been given to us to teach us how to resolve the moral dilemma of doing good. We can make right choices between good things. With this help we can make the righteous choices that will enable us to reach our eternal goals. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.