

Understanding the Grace of Christ

Roald Peterson, October 2014

(Source: Brad Wilcox - his Grace Is Sufficient - BYU Devotional July 12, 2011)

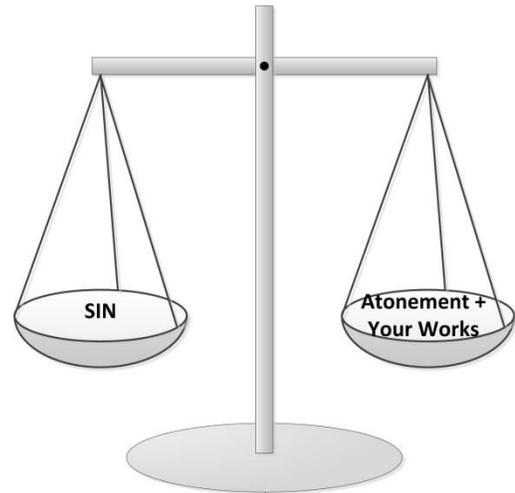
Christ's Grace Is Sufficient to Cover Us

- Few, if any, of us fully understand the grace of Jesus Christ. He is full of grace and truth but too often we are reluctant to take full advantage of the grace and truth he offers. We either want something else or we think we have to pay too high a price to receive them. We need to better understand these things.

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. (2 Nephi 25:23)

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- In paying the price for your sins, what percentage do you have to pay, and what percentage does Christ's atonement pay?

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

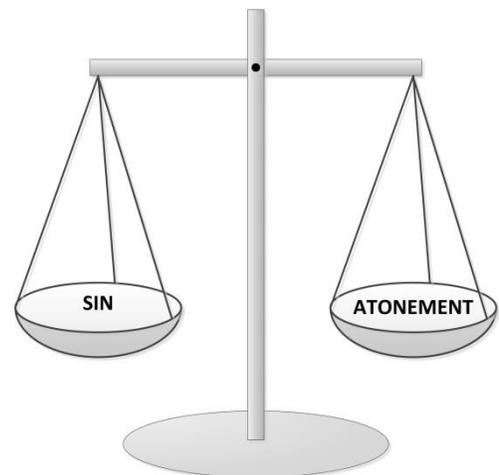


- These two scriptures may seem to be saying opposite things. The truth is Christ's atonement has already paid the full price. Your works, your repentance, your sincere sorrow do not pay the price of sin. The debt is already paid in full. Jesus doesn't make up the difference. He makes all the difference.

- We have fallen to the bottom of a deep, dark well. The walls are smooth and we can't climb out. We have no rope. And even if we did have a rope, what could we tie it to? Unless someone hears us calling for help and lowers a rope to pull us out, we will die at the bottom of the well. Christ is that someone.

Therefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:6)

Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered ... there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah ... (2 Nephi 2:7–8)



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Christ's Grace Is Sufficient to Transform Us

And even unto the great and last day, when all people, and all kindreds, and all nations and tongues shall stand before God, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil—(3 Nephi 26:4)

? Since Christ paid our entire debt, why are we to be judged for our works?

15 And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.

16 And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. (Alma 34:16–17)

- In other words, the atonement pays the price for sin and makes it possible for us to change the way we live. If we do not take advantage provided by the atonement to repent than the power of the atonement is removed from our lives and we are left to pay the full price of sin ourselves.

Mortgage and Rent, Savings and Debt

? What is the difference between paying a mortgage and paying rent? After 30 years of paying a mortgage you own a house. If you pay rent for the same time you own nothing.

? What is the difference between making deposits in a savings account and paying off a debt? After paying the debt you have no debt. But after putting money into a savings account for a period of time you have all your money, plus interest.

- This is the difference Christ's atonement makes for us. We still have to work, but it is for a totally different reason. We don't work to pay for sin. We work to change ourselves, to become like him, perfect and godly. We will all be resurrected and return to God's presence. We are choosing by the laws we live what kind of body we will be resurrected with—celestial, terrestrial, or telestial. We are also choosing how comfortable we will be in God's presence.
- Our faith, repentance, and keeping commandments does not pay the demands of justice—not even the smallest part. Instead, it shows appreciation for what Jesus Christ did for us by using the atonement to learn to live a life like his.
- Justice requires immediate perfection—or punishment when we fall short. Because Jesus took that punishment, he offers us the opportunity to become perfect over time (Matthew 5:48, 3 Nephi 12:48) and helps us reach that goal. He can forgive what justice never could, and turn to us with his own set of requirements (2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20).

Parable of the Piano Lessons

- Here is a parable that helped me better understand grace and works.

A mother provides piano lessons for her child by paying a piano teacher. Because the mother pays the debt in full, she turns to her child and asks for something—practice. Does the child's practice pay the piano teacher? No. Does the child's practice repay Mom for paying the piano teacher? No. Practicing is how the child shows appreciation for the mother's gift. It is how he takes advantage of the wonderful opportunity his mother is giving him to live his life at a higher level. The mother's joy

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is found not in getting repaid but in seeing her gift used—seeing her child improve. So she continues remind him to practice, practice, practice.

The child may get tired of the work and want to quit because he wants to spend his time on things that are more important to him. He doesn't yet see with his mother's eyes. He doesn't see how much better his life could be if he would choose to live on a higher plane.

In the same way, because Jesus has paid justice, he can now say to us, "Follow me (Matthew 4:19) and keep my commandments" (John 14:15). If we think he is asking too much, it may be because we do not yet see through his eyes. We have not yet comprehended what he is trying to make of us.

- Elder Bruce C. Hafen said, "The great Mediator asks for our repentance *not* because we must 'repay' him in exchange for his paying our debt to justice, but because repentance initiates a developmental process that, with the Savior's help, leads us along the path to a saintly character" (*The Broken heart*, 1989, 149).
- Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, "The repenting sinner must suffer for his sins, but this suffering has a different purpose than punishment or payment. Its purpose is change" (*The Lord's Way*, 1991, 223). Like the piano student, we must work. But the purpose is neither punishment nor payment; its purpose is change.

Answering Questions About Grace and Works

- Sometimes our born-again Christian friends will say to us, "You Mormons are trying to *earn* your way to heaven." And we should answer, "No, we are not earning heaven. We are learning heaven. We are preparing for it. We are practicing for it."

For if you will that I give unto you a place in the celestial world, you must prepare yourselves by doing the things which I have commanded you and required of you. (D&C 78:7)

- When they ask, "Have you been saved by grace?" We should answer, "Yes. Absolutely, totally, completely, thankfully—yes!"
- The question that we should ask them is: "Have you been changed by grace?" They are so excited about being saved that maybe they are not thinking enough about what comes next. They are so happy the debt is paid that they may not have considered why the debt existed in the first place. Latter-day Saints know not only what Jesus has saved us from but also what he has saved us for.
- Brett Sanders said, "A life impacted by grace eventually begins to look like Christ's life."
- Omar Canals said, "While many Christians view Christ's suffering as only a huge favor he did for us, Latter-day Saints also recognize it as a huge investment he made in us."
- As Moroni puts it, grace isn't just about being saved. It is also about becoming like the Savior (Moroni 7:48).

Unchanged People Can't Bear God's Presence

- The miracle of the Atonement is not just that we can be cleansed but that we can be transformed (Romans 8). While the scriptures teach us that no unclean thing can dwell with God, we need to understand that no unchanged thing will even want to.
- People who do not rise above their fallen, telestial state will not be at all comfortable in the company of exalted, holy beings. There will probably be nothing more important to them than getting out of their presence. The final judgment will not likely see the unrepentant begging Jesus to

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let them stay, but rather, Jesus saying to all of us, “Please, choose to stay. Please, use my Atonement—not just to be cleansed but to be changed so that you want to stay.”

- Another miracle of the Atonement is that we can not only go home but that we can feel at home there. If Christ did not require faith and repentance, then there would be no desire to change. If Jesus did not offer ordinances, covenants, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, then we would have no way to change. We would be left forever with only our own willpower and no access to his power. If Jesus did not require endurance to the end, then there would be no internalization of those changes over time. They would forever be surface features rather than sinking inside us and becoming part of us—part of who we are. If Jesus didn’t require practice, then we would never become pianists.

Christ’s Grace Is Sufficient to help Us

- So here we are, imperfect beings in an imperfect world, trying to become perfect. It is difficult and oftentimes seemingly impossible work. It seems to be taking forever, that we’ll never get there. Even when we succeed at making something better there are plenty of other things still lacking, reminding us that we have fallen short.
- Too many give up on the gospel because they feel like they’re never good enough, that they’re always falling short. They don’t understand grace.
- There are those who realize they have made serious transgressions and think that they have gone too far, that there’s no way back. They don’t understand grace.
- There are some who, because they don’t go on a mission or they don’t take advantage of some other great opportunity, feel that they have ruined their life and that they can never fulfill their life’s mission. They don’t understand grace.
- There are those who serve the Lord well for several years and then fall away. The adversary tries to make them think that they have committed an unpardonable sin and they would never be acceptable to their Heavenly Father again. They don’t understand grace.
- There are couples who find that marriage is much more difficult than they imagined. They look at themselves and their spouses only in their present, imperfect states, and do not look into the future at what they might become. They don’t understand grace.
- There are individuals who have sufficient desire and faith that God will help them if they’re worthy. But they always view themselves as too unworthy to ask for his help. They don’t understand grace.
- In all of these cases people think that there are only two options: perfection or failure. That is a false doctrine. When people are learning to play piano we don’t require or even expect them to be expert musicians right away. We hear them practicing and we accept their imperfect playing because we know that concert pianists are not born. They are the product of years of work and mistakes and change. If we were imperfect can be long-suffering in the case of the piano student, can we not then believe in a God whose perfections include long-suffering toward his children? Do we not believe in a God who is not always a God? Who knows from personal experience how long and difficult the road to godhood is? He, better than anyone, understands that change is a process and that repentance is a pattern in our lives. In his plan of happiness grace is not just an option that is offered to a select few. Rather, it is the essential, central, and enabling power that lifts us all, and keeps lifting us if we will allow Christ to help, every hour of every day, day after day and year after year, until we have returned in glory to our Father in Heaven in glory.

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- The Savior is not waiting for us at the end of a journey; he wants to be with us each step of the way. The grace extended to us through Christ's Atonement is continuous and his strength is perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). When we understand grace, we can continue in patience until we are perfected (D&C 67:13).
- Elder Bruce C. Hafen said, "The Savior's gift of grace to us is not necessarily limited in time to 'after' all we can do. We may receive his grace before, during and after the time when we expend our own efforts" (The Broken heart, 1989, 155).
- "Grace is not a booster engine that kicks in once our fuel supply is exhausted. Rather, it is our constant energy source. It is not the light at the end of the tunnel but the light that moves us through the tunnel. Grace is not achieved somewhere down the road. It is received right here and right now. It is not a finishing touch; it is the Finisher's touch (Hebrews 12:2)." (Wilcox)

Conclusion

- The grace of Christ is sufficient—
 - Sufficient to cover our debt,
 - Sufficient to transform us,
 - Sufficient to help us as long as the transformation process takes.
- "The Book of Mormon teaches us to rely solely on "the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Nephi 2:8). As we do, we do not discover that Christ requires nothing of us. Rather, we discover the reason he requires so much and the strength to do all he asks (Philippians 4:13). Grace is not the absence of God's high expectations. Grace is the presence of God's power (Luke 1:37)." (Wilcox)
- Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:
 - Now may I speak ... to those buffeted by false insecurity, who, though laboring devotedly in the Kingdom, have recurring feelings of falling forever short ...*
 - This feeling of inadequacy is... normal. There is no way the Church can honestly describe where we must yet go and what we must yet do without creating a sense of immense distance...*
 - This is a gospel of grand expectations, but God's grace is sufficient for each of us. ("Notwithstanding My Weakness," Ensign, Nov 1976, 12, 14)*