

His grace is sufficient

Brad Wilcox

Brad Wilcox was serving as a member of the Sunday School General Board of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as a BYU associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education in the David O. McKay School of Education when this devotional address was given on 12 July 2011.

I am grateful to be here with my wife, Debi, and my two youngest children—who are currently attending BYU—and several other family members who have come to be with us.

It is an honor to be invited to speak to you today. Several years ago I received an invitation to speak at Women’s Conference. When I told my wife, she asked, “What have they asked you to speak on?”

I was so excited that I got my words mixed up and said, “They want me to speak about changing strengths into weaknesses.”

She thought for a minute and said, “Well, they’ve got the right man for the job!”

She’s correct about that. I could give a whale of a talk on that subject, but I think today I had better go back to the original topic and speak about changing weaknesses into strengths and about how the grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient (see Ether 12:27, D&C 17:8, 2 Corinthians 12:9)—sufficient to cover us, sufficient to transform us, and sufficient to help us as long as that transformation process takes.

Christ’s Grace Is Sufficient to Cover Us

A BYU student once came to me and asked if we could talk. I said, “Of course. How can I help you?”

She said, “I just don’t get grace.”

I responded, “What is it that you don’t understand?”

She said, “I know I need to do my best and then Jesus does the rest, but I can’t even do my best.”

She then went on to tell me all the things she should be doing because she’s a Mormon that she wasn’t doing.

She continued, “I know that I have to do my part and then Jesus makes up the difference and fills the gap that stands between my part and perfection. But who fills the gap that stands between where I am now and my part?”

She then went on to tell me all the things that she shouldn’t be doing because she’s a Mormon, but she was doing them anyway.

Finally I said, “Jesus doesn’t make up the difference. Jesus makes all the difference. Grace is not about filling gaps. It is about filling us.”

Seeing that she was still confused, I took a piece of paper and drew two dots—one at the top representing God and one at the bottom representing us. I then said, “Go ahead. Draw the line. How much is our part? How much is Christ’s part?”

She went right to the center of the page and began to draw a line. Then, considering what we had been speaking about, she went to the bottom of the page and drew a line just above the bottom dot.

I said, “Wrong.”

She said, “I knew it was higher. I should have just drawn it, because I knew it.”

I said, “No. The truth is, there is no line. Jesus filled the whole space. He paid our debt in full. He didn’t pay it all except for a few coins. He paid it all. It is finished.”

She said, “Right! Like I don’t have to do anything?”

“Oh no,” I said, “you have plenty to do, but it is not to fill that gap. We will all be resurrected. We will all go back to God’s presence. What is left to be determined by our obedience is what kind of body we plan on being resurrected with and how comfortable we plan to be in God’s presence and how long we plan to stay there.”

Christ asks us to show faith in Him, repent, make and keep covenants, receive the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end. By complying, we are not paying the demands of justice—not even the smallest part. Instead, we are showing appreciation for what Jesus Christ did by using it to live a life like His. Justice requires immediate perfection or a punishment when we fall short. Because Jesus took that punishment, He can offer us the chance for ultimate perfection (see Matthew 5:48, 3 Nephi 12:48) and help us reach that goal. He can forgive what justice never could, and He can turn to us now with His own set of requirements (see 3 Nephi 28:35).

“So what’s the difference?” the girl asked. “Whether our efforts are required by justice or by Jesus, they are still required.”

“True,” I said, “but they are required for a different purpose. Fulfilling Christ’s requirements is like paying a mortgage instead of rent or like making deposits in a savings account instead of paying off debt. You still have to hand it over every month, but it is for a totally different reason.”

Christ’s Grace Is Sufficient to Transform Us

Christ’s arrangement with us is similar to a mom providing music lessons for her child. Mom pays the piano teacher. How many know what I am talking about? Because Mom pays the debt in full, she can turn to her child and ask for something. What is it? 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 Mom’s incredible gift. It is how he takes advantage of the amazing opportunity Mom is giving him to live his life at a higher level. Mom’s joy is found not in getting repaid but in seeing her gift used—seeing her child improve. And so she continues to call for practice, practice, practice.

If the child sees Mom's requirement of practice as being too overbearing ("Gosh, Mom, why do I need to practice? None of the other kids have to practice! I'm just going to be a professional baseball player anyway!"), perhaps it is because he doesn't yet see with mom'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 turn to us and say, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19), "Keep my commandments" (John 14:15). If we see His requirements as being way too much to ask ("Gosh! None of the other Christians have to pay tithing! None of the other Christians have to go on missions, serve in callings, and do temple work!"), maybe it is because we do not yet see through Christ's eyes. We have not yet comprehended what He is trying to make of us.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen has written, "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 [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 149; emphasis in original).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has said, referring to President Spencer W. Kimball's explanation, "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 [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991], 223; emphasis in original). Let's put that in terms of our analogy: The child must practice the piano, but this practice has a different purpose than punishment or payment. Its purpose is change.

I have born-again Christian friends who say to me, "You Mormons are trying to earn your way to heaven."

I say, "No, we are not earning heaven. We are learning heaven. We are preparing for it (see D&C 78:7). We are practicing for it."

They ask me, "Have you been saved by grace?"

I answer, "Yes. Absolutely, totally, completely, thankfully—yes!"

Then I ask them a question that perhaps they have not fully considered: "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. As my friend Brett Sanders puts it, "A life impacted by grace eventually begins to look like Christ's life." As my friend Omar Canals puts it, "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 (see Moroni 7:48).

The miracle of the Atonement is not just that we can live after we die but that we can live more abundantly (see John 10:10). The miracle of the Atonement is not just that we can be

cleansed and consoled but that we can be transformed (see Romans 8). Scriptures make it clear that no unclean thing can dwell with God (see Alma 40:26), but, brothers and sisters, no unchanged thing will even want to.

I know a young man who just got out of prison—again. Each time two roads diverge in a yellow wood, he takes the wrong one—every time. When he was a teenager dealing with every bad habit a teenage boy can have, I said to his father, “We need to get him to EFY.” I have worked with that program since 1985. I know the good it can do.

His dad said, “I can’t afford that.”

I said, “I can’t afford it either, but you put some in, and I’ll put some in, and then we’ll go to my mom, because she is a real softy.”

We finally got the kid to EFY, but how long do you think he lasted? Not even a day. By the end of the first day he called his mother and said, “Get me out of here!” Heaven will not be heaven for those who have not chosen to be heavenly.

In the past I had a picture in my mind of what the final judgment would be like, and it went something like this: Jesus standing there with a clipboard and Brad standing on the other side of the room nervously looking at Jesus.

Jesus checks His clipboard and says, “Oh, shoot, Brad. You missed it by two points.”

Brad begs Jesus, “Please, check the essay question one more time! There have to be two points you can squeeze out of that essay.” That’s how I always saw it.

But the older I get, and the more I understand this wonderful plan of redemption, the more I realize that in the final judgment it will not be the unrepentant sinner begging Jesus, “Let me stay.” No, he will probably be saying, “Get me out of here!” Knowing Christ’s character, I believe that if anyone is going to be begging on that occasion, it would probably be Jesus begging the unrepentant sinner, “Please, choose to stay. Please, use my Atonement—not just to be cleansed but to be changed so that you want to stay.”

The miracle of the Atonement is not just that we can go home but that—miraculously—we can feel at home there. If Christ did not require faith and repentance, then there would be no desire to change. Think of your friends and family members who have chosen to live without faith and without repentance. They don’t want to change. They are not trying to abandon sin and become comfortable with God. Rather, they are trying to abandon God and become comfortable with sin. If Jesus did not require covenants and bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost, then there would be no way to change. We would be left forever with only willpower, with 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 and cosmetic rather than sinking inside us and becoming part of us—part of who we are. Put simply, if Jesus didn’t require practice, then we would never become pianists.

Christ’s Grace Is Sufficient to Help Us

“But Brother Wilcox, don’t you realize how hard it is to practice? I’m just not very good at the piano. I hit a lot of wrong notes. It takes me forever to get it right.” Now wait. Isn’t that all

part of the learning process? When a young pianist hits a wrong note, we don't say he is not worthy to keep practicing. We don't expect him to be flawless. We just expect him to keep trying. Perfection may be his ultimate goal, but for now we can be content with progress in the right direction. Why is this perspective so easy to see in the context of learning piano but so hard to see in the context of learning heaven?

Too many are giving up on the Church because they are tired of constantly feeling like they are falling short. They have tried in the past, but they always feel like they are just not good enough. They don't understand grace.

There are young women who know they are daughters of a Heavenly Father who loves them, and they love Him. Then they graduate from high school, and the values they memorized are put to the test. They slip up. They let things go too far, and suddenly they think it is all over. These young women don't understand grace.

There are young men who grow up their whole lives singing, "I hope they call me on a mission," and then they do actually grow a foot or two and flake out completely. They get their Eagles, graduate from high school, and go away to college. Then suddenly these young men find out how easy it is to not be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, or reverent. They mess up. They say, "I'll never do it again," and then they do it. They say, "I'll never do it again," and then they do it. They say, "This is stupid. I will never do it again." And then they do it. The guilt is almost unbearable. They don't dare talk to a bishop. Instead, they hide. They say, "I can't do this Mormon thing. I've tried, and the expectations are just way too high." So they quit. These young men don't understand grace.

I know returned missionaries who come home and slip back into bad habits they thought were over. They break promises made before God, angels, and witnesses, and they are convinced there is no hope for them now. They say, "Well, I've blown it. There is no use in even trying any more." Seriously? These young people have spent entire missions teaching people about Jesus Christ and His Atonement, and now they think there is no hope for them? These returned missionaries don't understand grace.

I know young married couples who find out after the sealing ceremony is over that marriage requires adjustments. The pressures of life mount, and stress starts taking its toll financially, spiritually, and even sexually. Mistakes are made. Walls go up. And pretty soon these husbands and wives are talking with divorce lawyers rather than talking with each other. These couples don't understand grace.

In all of these cases there should never be just two options: perfection or giving up. When learning the piano, are the only options performing at Carnegie Hall or quitting? No. Growth and development take time. Learning takes time. When we understand grace, we understand that God is long-suffering, that change is a process, and that repentance is a pattern in our lives. When we understand grace, we understand that the blessings of Christ's Atonement are continuous and His strength is perfect in our weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:9). When we understand grace, we can, as it says in the Doctrine and Covenants, "continue in patience until [we] are perfected" (D&C 67:13).

One young man wrote me the following e-mail: “I know God has all power, and I know He will help me if I’m worthy, but I’m just never worthy enough to ask for His help. I want Christ’s grace, but I always find myself stuck in the same self-defeating and impossible position: no work, no grace.”

I wrote him back and testified with all my heart that Christ is not waiting at the finish line once we have done “all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). He is with us every step of the way.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen has written, “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 [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 155). So 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 (see Hebrews 12:2).

In twelve days we celebrate Pioneer Day. The first company of Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847. Their journey was difficult and challenging; still, they sang:

Come, come, ye Saints, no toil nor labor fear;

But with joy wend your way.

Though hard to you this journey may appear,

Grace shall be as your day.

[“Come, Come, Ye Saints,” Hymns, 2002, no. 30]

“Grace shall be as your day”—what an interesting phrase. We have all sung it hundreds of times, but have we stopped to consider what it means? “Grace shall be as your day”: grace shall be like a day. As dark as night may become, we can always count on the sun coming up. As dark as our trials, sins, and mistakes may appear, we can always have confidence in the grace of Jesus Christ. Do we earn a sunrise? No. Do we have to be worthy of a chance to begin again? No. We just have to accept these blessings and take advantage of them. As sure as each brand-new day, grace—the enabling power of Jesus Christ—is constant. Faithful pioneers knew they were not alone. The task ahead of them was never as great as the power behind them.

Conclusion

The grace of Christ is sufficient—sufficient to cover our debt, sufficient to transform us, and sufficient to help us as long as that 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—as some Christians believe—that Christ requires nothing of us. Rather, we discover the reason He requires so much and the strength to do all He asks (see Philippians 4:13). Grace is not the absence of God’s high expectations. Grace is the presence of God’s power (see Luke 1:37).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said the following:

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. [CR, October 1976, 14, 16; "Notwithstanding My Weakness," Ensign, November 1976, 12, 14]

With Elder Maxwell, I testify that God's grace is sufficient. Jesus' grace is sufficient. It is enough. It is all we need. Oh, young people, don't quit. Keep trying. Don't look for escapes and excuses. Look for the Lord and His perfect strength. Don't search for someone to blame. Search for someone to help you. Seek Christ, and, as you do, I promise you will feel the enabling power we call His amazing grace. I leave this testimony and all of my love—for I do love you. As God is my witness, I love the youth of this church. I believe in you. I'm pulling for you. And I'm not the only one. Parents are pulling for you, leaders are pulling for you, and prophets are pulling for you. And Jesus is pulling with you. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.