

On God's Grace

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MY FIRST INKLINGS OF THE POSSIBILITIES of God's grace in my life came through two personal experiences. The first occurred during a family Christmas dinner. My youngest sister had brought her boyfriend. They were leaving right after dinner to drive to Seattle, where they were going to live together, unmarried. This was a devastating thing for my parents. No one in my immediate, and very Mormon, family had ever lived with someone they weren't married to. By doing this, my sister was, in my father's own personal theology, crossing a serious line between the savable and the damned. Through her repeated violation of the law of chastity, she would no longer be "godhood material." His personal devastation could be seen in the fact that on that Christmas Day he refused to speak to her, to look at her, or even to acknowledge her presence in the room.

Later at home, as I hashed over the day's events in my mind, I realized that my own wish for my sister was that in the end she would be whole and happy, right with herself and God. I didn't care what sins she might commit along the way. If she needed to try different paths to find her own way through life, that was okay. I just hoped and prayed that at the end of it all, through whatever life experiences she had, things would come out all right for her.

As I thought about my feelings for my sister, a possibility occurred to me that forever changed my life. After all my years spent growing up fully active and immersed in the church, after a full-time mission spent preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the first time in my life it occurred to me that God might feel the same way about me as I felt about my sister. In that moment I realized it was possible that what God cared most about was me, not about what mistakes I made along the way. Maybe he wasn't keeping a list of my every sin, making sure each was erased only after proper completion of the five Rs of repentance. Maybe he just hoped that through all of life's twists and turns and experiences, I would learn truth and find happiness, and eventually return to him. In that moment I realized for the first time in my life that *I* matter to God more than my sins do.

The second experience occurred during a particularly difficult time with a supervisor at work. I was having an almost impossible time working with this woman. Our problems were spoiling much of the enjoyment I usually get from my work. At one point I remember thinking that my greatest wish was that this person would disappear completely from my life. I didn't care how or why she left, just as long as she did. Whether she won the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes and no longer needed to work, or was injured in a terrible accident, I didn't care. Just so long as I never had to deal with her again. I realized even as I thought this how awful such a wish was. In my mind I knew it was far from the Christian faith I believe in, but in my heart it was what I wanted, and I couldn't help it.

After one particularly difficult day with this supervisor, I drove up the canyon to find some relief from the stress I was feeling. Once again I wished this woman gone from my life, even if the cause was a personal tragedy in her life. And I remember telling God that the "born again" people who preach salvation by grace are certainly right about one thing: I am, at heart, a sinner. Despite active participation in the church throughout my entire life, and efforts to live every commandment I was taught, I was still a sinner, far from able to live the one thing Jesus taught was most important—that all people will know if we are truly his disciples by whether or not we love one another.

Then another realization came over me, one that again forever changed my spiritual life. In my heart I heard God's voice telling me, "You're right, you *are* a sinner, and *that* is what I have forgiven you for. In Christ I have forgiven you, not for every single sin you ever have or will commit and then repent of, but rather for *the very fact that you are a sinner*. And if you don't want to be a sinner, I'll help you. I'll give you my Spirit to be in your heart, to begin to change you, so that you can become less and less of a sinner, and more and more like Christ."

In the time since these two incidents occurred, my experiences of God's grace have continued, and I have tried to reconcile them with the spiritual experiences I had while growing up in the church. In the process I have begun to explore my own personal theology of grace. It is a reflection of my own experiences and understanding, which are continually evolving. I do not hold it up as the only way to view God or grace, and I realize that other people's experiences may be different from mine.

My personal journey to Christ had many small beginnings, in things like Family Home Evening lessons, Primary songs, Sunday school classes, bedside prayers, and family scripture study. Through these early experiences my faith in God was formed. In my teenage years I began to feel a conviction of my own sin and guilt before God, and a desire to be better. This was followed by a "change of heart" and a sincere attempt to

repent and sanctify myself by living all of the commandments and laws of the church. The spiritual experiences that accompanied my efforts during these early years were real. I believe they were from God and that God supported me in my efforts. Recognizing one's sinfulness and attempting to live the law are good things. They are a step forward from a previous state of being godless and unaware of, or unconvinced of, our sin.

Paul says in the New Testament that no one can be justified in the sight of God by keeping the law, but that the law serves only to bring us to a consciousness of our sin.¹ He says the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.² If this is so, then living under the law for a time can be a good thing. It can teach us and lead us towards a greater good than itself. Living under the law can prepare us to be born into the freedom and light of Christ's grace.

I believe the purpose of the atonement of Jesus Christ is to make us like him—to make us able to love as he loves. For me that is the whole point of religion and the gospel. This transformation within us isn't brought about by our just keeping all of the rules, all of the laws, for a long enough period of time. I think this may be what Jesus meant in his sermon in Matthew 5:27-48. In it he describes a righteousness that is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, who keep the law. He describes a condition of heart, one we are incapable of reaching by strict obedience to law. Who can prevent her heart from feeling anger? Who can prevent his heart from feeling sexual desire, or any of the other feelings Jesus describes in this sermon? Anyone who is fully alive and honest with herself experiences all of these feelings. Perhaps the point Jesus is making is that we are incapable of purifying our own hearts by our efforts to obey the law. Even if we could somehow manage to keep every outward observance of the law throughout our entire life, as the Pharisees attempted, inside of us our hearts would still condemn us.

So how are we to become like Christ? Only the gentle power of the Spirit³ acting in our hearts can work this miracle, gradually making us

1. "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets" (Rom. 3:20-21, KJV); "For no human being can be justified in the sight of God by keeping the law: law brings only the consciousness of sin. But now, quite independently of law, though with the law and prophets bearing witness to it, the righteousness of God has been made known" (RSV).

2. "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (Gal. 3:24-25, KJV); "The law was thus put in charge of us until Christ should come, when we should be justified through faith; and now that faith has come, its charge is at an end" (RSV).

3. I personally believe the Holy Spirit is female. However, not everyone shares this belief, so I refer to the Spirit with the gender neutral "it" to avoid distracting readers.

more and more like Christ, more and more able to love as he loves. And this transforming presence is not controlled or commanded into our lives by our obedience to law. The Spirit is like the wind—it blows where it wills (John 3:8). Its presence is a free gift of God's grace—given not because *we're* good, but because *God* is good, not because we have somehow earned it or deserve it, but because we need it. Because we are not yet capable of being where God and perfect love are, God and perfect love come to us, and they alone have the power to take us to where they are.

The Spirit accepts us wherever it finds us, at whatever stage we are at in our lives, and it leads us forward in God's own way and time, to whatever next step we are ready and willing to take. And if we are ready and willing but unable, the Spirit can change our hearts and make us able. That is its miracle. It does not transform us overnight into perfect people—people who obey the law perfectly or who love perfectly. Our transformation in the Spirit takes place over time, throughout our entire lifetime. The longer the Spirit acts in us, the more our capacity to love grows and the greater our desire for goodness becomes, even if it takes the Spirit working in us over a period of years before we are willing or able to follow it in some things. I believe it is the Spirit acting in us as we experience life with all of its twists and turns that, over time, makes our hearts and souls more like Christ's.

No two people's journeys in the Spirit look exactly alike. The Spirit's workings in each of us will be specific to our own soul's journey. The law gives one universal set of "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts." But I don't think true goodness can be defined for every person, at every stage of her development, and in every situation, by one pre-set list of moral rules. Perhaps this is the point of that awful Book of Mormon story in which Nephi says the Spirit commanded him to kill Laban. Perhaps this is only a story, meant to be taken as an extreme and dramatic illustration of the fact that goodness or right actions are defined by the Spirit of God speaking to our individual souls at any given point in time, not by one pre-determined list of moral "shoulds."

If we aren't doing everything on the church's list of laws or commandments, I believe the Spirit can still be with us. It will take us as we are at any given point in time, and can be with us throughout each step of our journey, even in our sins. The Spirit does not condemn us in our sins, because those who have realized their sinfulness and sought redemption through Christ are no longer under condemnation.

There is now no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus the lifegiving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death. What the law could not do, because human weakness robbed it of all potency, God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of our sinful nature . . . (Rom. 8:1-3, RSV).

While we don't command the Spirit into our lives by our obedience to law, we do play a part in receiving the gift of its presence within us. Our part is that we must genuinely want and accept this gift that is freely offered to us. We must open our hearts to it and allow it to work in us. I now believe that the only "commandments" we must obey to be born into a state of grace are the ones Jesus gave in 3 Nephi 11:32, 33, 38-49:

I bear record that the Father commandeth all people, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso repenteth and is baptized, the same shall be saved; . . . And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child. . . . this is my doctrine . . . And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock.

All that is required for us to be born into God's grace, into this individual journey in the Spirit, is to believe in and accept Christ, and then repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit.

Growing up I was taught that to truly "repent" meant to cease all sinning and do all righteousness. By this definition we must cease all sinning before we can be "worthy" to be baptized and receive the Holy Ghost. And our goal must then be to maintain that level of sinlessness for the rest of our lives, because we will lose the Spirit every time we violate the law after baptism. I no longer believe in this definition of repentance. It's like allowing us access to a physician only *after* we've cured *ourselves* of all disease. And it doesn't fit with the gifts of God I actually experience in my life. (It also made me neurotically obsessed with my own state of worthiness when I tried to live by it.) I now believe that true repentance is a state of heart, a desire for God and goodness, and a willingness to receive the Spirit's gifts in our hearts. I believe that to repent means to return to God in our hearts. The scriptures say:

The Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind (D&C 64:34).

Behold he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered (2 Ne. 2:7; see also 3 Ne. 9:20).

I don't think having "a broken heart and a contrite spirit" means to be continually sad or anguished over our sinful nature. For me, it means being honest and sincere in heart—realizing and acknowledging my true thoughts and feelings, including my many "sinful" ones—and wanting to be better or at least *wanting* to want to be better. I think it means being open and genuine the way a little child is—opening myself to both sorrow and joy, and allowing God's Spirit to act in my heart and change me.

Paul says repeatedly throughout the New Testament that we receive salvation and are born into the new life of the Spirit through faith alone, not through our own works in obeying the law.

... Answer me one question: did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message? ... When God gives you the Spirit and works miracles among you, is it because you keep the law, or is it because you have faith in the gospel message? (Gal. 3:2, RSV; see all of Gal. 3 and 4)

For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of (Eph. 2:8-9, RSV).

What room then is left for human pride? It is excluded. And on what principle? The keeping of the law would not exclude it, but faith does. For our argument is that people are justified by faith quite apart from any question of keeping the law (Rom. 3:27-28, RSV; see also Rom. 3:21-8:39).

What, then, are we to say about Abraham, our ancestor by natural descent? If Abraham was justified by anything he did, then he has grounds for pride. But not in the eyes of God! For what does scripture say? Abraham put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him as righteousness.

Now if someone does a piece of work, his wages are not "counted" to be a gift; they are paid as his due. But if someone without any work to his credit simply puts his faith in him who acquits the wrongdoer, then his faith is indeed "counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:1-5, RSV).

I no longer believe that we have to demonstrate a sufficient number of good works, or obedience to all of the laws of the church, before the Spirit can dwell in us. I don't believe we have to qualify to receive the Spirit by somehow proving ourselves "worthy" of it. In fact, without its presence in our lives long *before* we are worthy, we could never become truly worthy. This is not to say that as we live our life in the Spirit, we will not do good works. It only means that the good works we do are the *result* of God's Spirit acting in us, not a pre-condition for receiving it. Good works are the *fruit* of the Spirit,⁴ not the pre-requisite *roots*.

The moral virtues and standards taught by the church are desirable and no doubt inspired of God. These standards, such as honesty, fidelity, respect for life, service, forgiveness, the Word of Wisdom, prayer, etc.,

4. "But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:18, 22-23, KJV); "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to law. . . . But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (RSV).

have inherent value. We will generally be happier if we live by them than if we don't. They can be a blessing to us as we try to navigate the difficulties of mortal life. The consequence of choosing not to live by any of these teachings is that we will not have the positive consequences and benefits that result from living by them. We may cause unhappiness in our own life and in the lives of others. But I reject the notion that one consequence of *not* living by them is that "God isn't speaking to us anymore" or that "the Spirit will no longer be with us." I think that idea is a human invention, based on human experience with imperfect, conditional love which has been projected onto God. I think it is also sometimes used as a scare tactic to coerce obedience. God's love for us and willingness to be with us do not depend on a certain performance level on our part.

I discovered for myself the unconditional nature of God's love and faithfulness during a period in my life after my mission, when I made the decision to cease activity in the church for awhile. I felt the need to find my own voice, to discover my own thoughts and desires, in the absence of the strong voice of the church telling me what they ought to be. When I first stopped attending church and keeping all of the rules of orthodoxy, I did not expect that God would continue to answer my prayers or be with me because I was deliberately walking away from the things I had been taught would entitle me to the companionship of the Spirit. For a long time I didn't even try to pray because I did not expect that God would listen to me. Spiritually I felt I had decided to walk blindfolded into the dark, and I believed I would be making the journey alone.

What followed were such scandalous acts as spending my tithing money at the bookstore, going to the movies on Sunday afternoons, and tasting alcohol for the first time. (Two and a half cans of beer to be exact, after which I threw up for what seemed like an eternity and wished for death to release me from my suffering. It's too bad I wasn't active in the church at the time. I could have given a firsthand testimonial of the Word of Wisdom.)

Wonderful discoveries came during this period of my life, the two most important being the discovery of my own voice and the discovery that God did not abandon me when I ceased activity in the church. In an especially dark moment when I cried out to God, partly out of habit and partly because I had nowhere else to turn, much to my surprise God was there for me, and the answer wasn't, "Meet me at church on Sunday and we'll talk." It was during my inactivity that I first began to understand God's unconditional love for and acceptance of me and his willingness to be with me wherever I was at in my life. This discovery has brought a tremendous amount of healing to my life.

I also learned that my spiritual well-being is tied to my emotional and psychological well-being, and that living the kind of moral lifestyle

taught by the church is often more the *result* of good psychological and emotional health than the *cause* of it. Failure to live by church standards can be as much a matter of being emotionally and psychologically wounded and in need of healing as it is a matter of being "evil" or "giving in to temptation." Years ago I remember reading an article by President Spencer W. Kimball in which he said that while Jesus condemned sin as wrong, he understood that sin usually springs from deep, unmet needs on the part of the sinner.

When we have unresolved needs or pain which leads us, either consciously or unconsciously, to make unwise choices, it is *then* that we most need God's love and help. It has been my experience that God's unconditional love and acceptance can help to heal our wounds and meet our needs, so that we can become free from the wounds that drive us to sin. Our lives become healthier, and we are better able to live the kind of virtues the church teaches.

My firsthand experiences of God's grace have altered my understanding and experience of the church. I love Mormonism and have chosen to remain a part of it, but I no longer view the church or its leaders as my spiritual parent. I've found a spiritual and psychological freedom I never experienced before. And I've found peace, a relief from the anxiety and self-doubt I used to feel along with all of the good experiences I had growing up in the church. It feels as though I've gained what Jesus promised in Matthew 11:28-30 when he said, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Perhaps the best way to express my own experience of God's grace is with an analogy from nature, in the form of a story about two different fields of sunflowers. In one field there exists an elaborate and efficient educational system whereby the oldest sunflowers teach all of the others how to bloom properly. They give daily instruction in important topics such as the correct sequence in which to unfold one's petals, the optimal angles at which to hold unfolded petals, and the best times of day to unfold.

In this field there are written guidelines on blooming which all flowers are encouraged to study regularly. There are daily practice exercises in unfolding, and regular meetings in which individual flowers can share their successes and failures, and warn others of the pitfalls and snares that can threaten one's unfolding.

Here flowers are taught the importance of following correct blooming procedures. They learn that without these techniques, no flower would be able to open itself to receive the life-giving warmth and light of the sun. "If you open your petals just so," they are told, "and hold them

this way every day, then the sun will begin to shine on you, and you will be filled with it's warmth and light." The oldest flowers sincerely believe this, based on what they were taught as young sunflowers and their own experiences with the sun.

Most of the flowers in this field endeavor with all diligence to bloom as they are told. They listen to every instruction and strive to implement all they are taught. They rise early each morning to begin their exercises, and many even keep daily logs of their successes and failures so that they can constantly improve their techniques. They develop strong muscles in each petal and give the utmost care and attention to holding them in the correct positions. Some do so well that they become instructors for other, less skilled, flowers.

All in all, this field seems to be a success. Flowers are constantly unfolding, or at least practicing and learning to unfold. Most flowers do receive sunlight and generate many seeds which in turn grow into new flowers. Attendance at blooming meetings is always on the rise, and everything seems to be following its proper course.

Except for one or two minor problems. All of that study and practice seems to wear some flowers out. There can be muscle strain from trying to hold the correct petal position hour after hour, and a great deal of frustration and discouragement when the wind blows one's carefully placed petals out of order. Some flowers weary of the effort and end up dropping their petals. While many others do manage to get it right and are able to receive the sun's warmth and light, it takes so much concentration to maintain their positions that they can't give their full attention to receiving everything the sun has to give. Sadly, some live their whole lives without ever realizing that the sun was always shining on them. On the other hand, those who become especially skilled in the proper techniques sometimes begin to believe that it is their correct unfolding which *causes* the sun to shine. But, all in all, the field is confident that it is providing the most good possible for the most flowers possible.

In the second field, the educational system is different. Flowers here need learn only one skill: to turn towards the sun and surrender to it. It isn't a difficult skill to learn, or one that needs much teaching for that matter, as it is in the nature of sunflowers to face into the sun. They soon discover that when they turn their faces to the sun, its warmth and light reaches down and unfolds their petals, creating in each a perfect blossom.

As the sun's rays open each flower, the position of its petals corresponds perfectly with the sun's position in the sky, pulling optimal warmth and light into each flower. Interestingly, these flowers often end up in the same positions as some of the flowers in the first field, because that is the direction in which the sun pulls them, and a good position to be in.

This field includes some fortunate flowers from the first field, who, after spending years in a valiant and sincere attempt to unfold and hold their petals correctly, became exhausted and gave up, surrendering to the forces of nature around them. In doing so, they discovered the freely given gifts of the sun and its ability to reach down and hold them in its warm rays.

For the flowers in this field, every morning brings another day of blooming in the sun's warmth. The sun and the flowers are drawn to one another, and the flowers grow to love the sun fiercely for its daily gifts to them. The flowers here grow tall and strong and beautiful, reaching closer and closer each day to the sun that causes them to bloom.