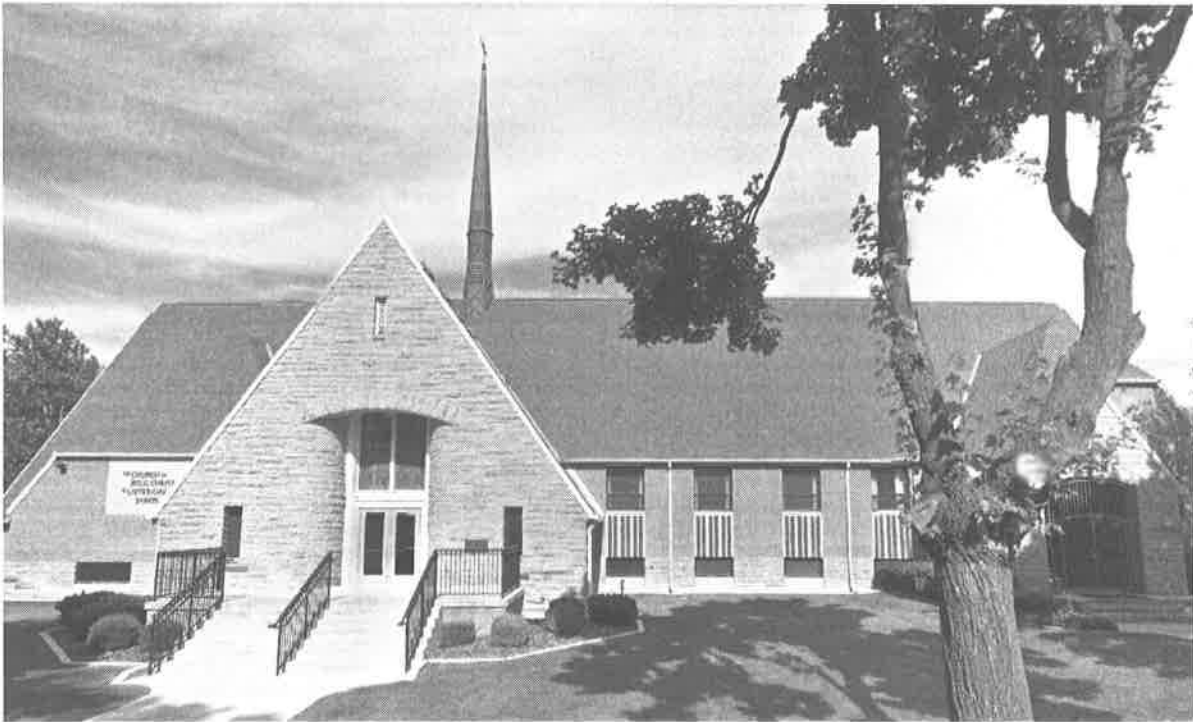


From our ward: Grace

by Geoff Nelson | Jun 19, 2017 | Atonement, Book of Mormon, Church, Faith, Featured, Gospel Topics, Mormonism | 0 comments



This talk was given in the Statford East Ward in Salt Lake City on June 18th, 2017.

By way of introduction, happy father's day.

A few days ago, we were watching some old family videos. It was fun to see the kids trying to perform basic feats, like staying upright and forming words in squeaky voices. They wandered around like so many cats, seemingly incapable of following simple instructions, dependant on us for everything. I will fully admit that it was far less stressful on this side of the events, looking at the chaos through the haze of nostalgia. While I do remember the stress and frustration of having so many tiny people all at once, I also remember how proud we were at every little accomplishment- the first time they spit out their baby food, the first word, the first step, the first time rolling over. Each new milestone happened after many failed attempts. Every single one of them backed themselves under a chair trying to learn to crawl. That was still a milestone. The mistakes themselves were progress, because they were learning.

One of the more meaningful passages in the Book of Mormon to me is found in Alma chapter 7, verses 11-12:

"And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities."

When our Heavenly Parents sent us to mortality, they had no expectation that we would be perfect. Our making mistakes was always part of the plan. Through our mistakes, we would have the opportunity to learn and grow stronger. And so they chose a Savior for us, who suffered not only for our sins, but for our transgressions, pains, illnesses, and every bump and bruise we'd experience along the way. Christ paid our mortal tuition and bought us the time we'd need to learn from our experience. Having a Savior was the most critical element of this plan. He was chosen before we even came here to begin falling down or crawling backwards under chairs. He was not a divine response to us ruining everything; he was chosen so that we'd have the opportunity to ruin everything until we were strong enough to stand on our own. This divine help is called grace, and it is embodied by the Savior and his atonement.

The scriptures teach us that it is only through the Savior's grace that we are saved:

Acts 15:11: "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."

Romans 3:23-25: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

And of course, 2 Nephi 9, which has so much on this topic that it was difficult to whittle down verses: "And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever. Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered. Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that 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, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit..."

Lehi points out that by the law, none of us is justified. This is kind of a hard thing for us to grapple with. We are given a law, and we have a propensity to take to it like a checklist. "Tithing? Check. Read a scripture? Check. Went to church. Check. I guess I'm going to heaven because I did all the things!" Sometimes we add extra things to the checklist, by way of hedges around the commandments and policies and overwrought interpretations. It feels nice to have more items to check off. There have been occasions in the past where I've added increasingly menial tasks to my daily to-do list so that I'd have the visual of something, anything, being

crossed off. "Got dressed. CHECK!" Unfortunately, it only served to make a long list longer. Adding items didn't really make it possible to get everything done, particularly the more important and more challenging items. It's not possible to do everything perfectly in a day, much less in a life.

So why would our Heavenly Parents give us a law that we can't possibly keep? It would be cruel if our success depended upon it. Thankfully, our success doesn't depend on it. The law is little more than a set of tools given to us by loving parents to help us develop love and faith in them so that we can accept the grace that's freely given. The law given is really quite simple- Jesus boiled it down to love God and love your neighbor. All of the other commandments hang on those two items. It doesn't show love to God to curse him, nor does it show love to your neighbor to steal his things or spread lies about her. Those commandments help us be better, and more Christlike. They help us develop faith.

Then there are the laws of ordinances given. For ancient Israel, it was the law of animal sacrifice. Were they saved by those sacrifices? Not hardly, and some of them knew it. Nephi explained why they performed those sacrifices anyway: "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. And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled" (2 Nephi 25:23-25)

This is reiterated in Alma: "Now they did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith in Christ; and thus they did retain a hope through faith, unto eternal salvation, relying upon the spirit of prophecy, which spake of those things to come."

How could a law matter so much and so little at the same time? Again, these laws and ordinances are merely tools for coming to Christ. Abinadi taught that salvation came by Christ, but "there was a law given them, yea, a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him," (Mosiah 13:30). The commandments are not salvation in and of themselves. If we take elements of the law, or in other words the commandments, ordinances, and policies, and believe that by using those tools we have guaranteed our own salvation, then we have made those very tools into graven images. We begin to measure our own worth by how effectively we swing the hammer of temple attendance or how adeptly we use the chisel of covering our shoulders.

Worse than that, we can take these tools that are supposed to bring us to Christ and weaponize them against others. Faith and learning are individually gained; if we use the commandments to judge others for what we esteem is inadequate faithfulness, we have ironically broken both of the only two commandments that Jesus truly cared about.

Again, the commandments will not save us. They are gifts to help us grow, but used incorrectly, they can become stumbling blocks to our faith and ability to connect to God and others. As self reflection can be difficult, it is perhaps easiest to see this in those who have gone before us. Ancient Israel is always our favorite, easy target. They took the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy, which day was made for man, and decided that they could improve upon it.

Before long, they were stoning people who gathered wood, counting their steps, denigrating anyone who wore a sewing needle in his cloak, and condemning the Lord of the Sabbath for healing on his own day. In fact, Jesus got in trouble for inadequately obeying the law as defined by pharisees all the time. He spent his time with sinners, touched the unclean, refused to yell at the woman who anointed his feet with expensive oil, made a scene at the temple, claimed to be the Messiah, and performed miracles, in general, among other things. The pharisees were the religious leaders, and his most scathing critiques were reserved for their hypocrisy. I'm not so sure that we're much better than they. When the law replaces charity or knowing Christ, the law is no longer serving its intended purpose in your life. Jesus showed us how to prioritize and how to use the commandments to develop love, faith, and humility. We must ask ourselves repeatedly how we are using the law in our own lives. Do we keep the law "unto the Lord," or unto ourselves? Have we complicated the commandments in our lives? Do we concern ourselves with lists of appropriate behaviors instead of the underlying purpose of the principle upon which the rules are based? Has a rule taken on a life of its own and become an obsession? Have we built our own policies and hedges around the commandments and then enforced those hedges on others, even if just in our own heads? How much time do we spend trying to guess why a particular law is so inspired, and how we know better than everyone outside the church, instead of focusing on how it's improving our faith in Christ? Do we believe that by following the rules, we've earned a reward? Have we made policies that do more harm to others than build faith and trust in God? How do we keep ourselves from weaponizing the commandments against ourselves and others? I certainly have not figured it all out, but I believe the answer to overcoming these tendencies is the same as the way we must overcome any weakness- we need to turn to God and trust that we'll receive help.

These commandments were given as a gift to know the Savior. Jesus came to earth and showed us how to use those tools, and then he died for us so that when we inevitably use the tools wrong anyway, or discard them completely, we'll still have a way back to him. Then he sent his Spirit of grace to abide with us so that we can keep learning and moving forward, despite our mistakes. The Spirit can help us learn to prioritize the commandments. The Savior's parable about the good Samaritan addressed the need to choose the higher law: the priest and the Levite were obeying the Levitical law by passing by, because if they had touched a dead man or blood they would have been unclean. Yet they clearly didn't make the right choice. The law had become a stumbling block for them that hurt others more than it drew them to Christ. Perhaps if we can remember that it is by Christ's grace that we're saved, we might be more willing and better able to hear the Spirit tell us when a policy or guideline needs to give way to a higher law. Specifically, the Spirit can help us recognize when our adherence has become so strict that it's harming others or ourselves. Grace is freely given, and faith is the price. The commandments can help us develop faith, but that's as far as they go. Our works will not save us. No man can be justified by the law. We cannot ever "earn" our place in heaven. It's impossible to ever keep up with God's grace because it's delivered so abundantly. By grace we were given breath, and by grace we were given the Spirit of Christ. By grace we are taught and by grace we conquer death. King Benjamin taught: "I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another- I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants," (Mosiah 2:21)

God's grace is so abundant that it applies to all. The apostle Paul taught extensively that this grace would extend to all, Jew and Gentile. Every person born on this earth, regardless of whether or not they believe in God, will rise again by the Messiah's grace and power. Our Heavenly Parents love their children unconditionally and immeasurably. They want us to succeed- it is their work and glory; and success is measured by growth and a willingness to accept their help. It is not measured by successful completion of checklist items, but by how much we let those items change our hearts. Our divine parents would rather see us scootching backwards under a proverbial chair while doing our best to move forward, crying for help when we've gotten stuck, than to see us walking around vaingloriously, stepping on everyone and everything in our path with no regard to pain inflicted.

Learning requires a willingness to admit our own frailty and learn from it. We must be willing to see how messy life can be, and with the aid of the Spirit, make complicated choices, sometimes defying the hedges we set up for ourselves. We'll make mistakes, but if we allow ourselves to grow from the mistake, then it is still a success. Christ will not be angry at us for making mistakes as part of a learning process any more than you'd be angry at a child for falling down while learning to walk. It was Satan's plan for us to gain salvation by successfully completing a set of tasks. God takes us in our brokenness and imperfection, encouraging us to keep a law so that we can find him.

What has been asked of us can feel daunting, but it is much simplified when we realize that it's not up to us. It's up to Christ, and what we've been asked to do is develop faith in him. The commandments are tools for our own benefit to help us reach our potential, to be better, and to know Him. They are a vehicle for finding Him, not saving ourselves. His grace will attend us always, and moreso when we allow it in our lives. He loves us. Our eternal parents will never stop fighting for us, and they will rejoice in every milestone, even if it seems like a failure by our own metrics. I hope we can learn to trust them and trust in the grace that saves.

I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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