

GRACE VERSUS WORKS

Moroni 6:1-4

By Raymond White

It's that tired old argument: grace versus works, works versus grace. It's time to address that ongoing debate that never seems to have an end. It's a tired old argument because each side has merit that the other side cannot defeat. The debate never has an end because the issue is unresolvable — unresolvable because both sides are true. That is the paradox of it.

Now it's time to let Moroni weigh in on this. And since he has the final word in the Book of Mormon (he's the "lights out" prophet) maybe his words will have a bit more significance to us than all the rest. After all, he's the one who delivered the plates to Joseph Smith, so we probably should pay attention to what he has to say.

Most of this will be a review of all the things God expects of us. But then at the end, there will be a tiny surprise that changes it all. So hold on for that. Let's begin.

***Moroni 6:1** And now I speak concerning baptism. Behold, elders, priests, and teachers were baptized; and they were not baptized save they brought forth fruit meet that they were worthy of it. :2 Neither did they receive any unto baptism save they came forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, and witnessed unto the church that they truly repented of all their sins.*

Repentance, then, was and is a prerequisite for baptism. And that's what church leaders earnestly try to do: interview and qualify candidates, gleaning for signs of true repentance.

Baptism is the beginning of a new and sin free life — or as sin free as we can make it.

***Moroni 6:3** And none were received unto baptism save they took upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end.*

This is the point of baptism: to take the name of Christ.

But what exactly does that mean? It means what the symbolism of the act of baptism implies; namely, to die with Christ and come back to life, the new life. It means you dying, that is your old self, and coming back to life as a new person, "born again" as Jesus had said.

But it means something else too. Indeed baptism is a picture of your death, but more than that it is a picture of *his* death. You are accepting *his* death. Why is that important? Because he died in your behalf. So to be baptized into his death, means to accept that he had to die in your behalf; that is, you are a sinner for whom he had to die. Baptism then is first and foremost a confession that your sins caused Christ to die. That is what your baptism is committing you to.

Then there's the "determination to serve him to the end." Well that's pretty clear. "I hurt you once, Jesus, I'm determined not repeat that."

But how do we serve him? And so we come to the list.

***Moroni 6:4** And after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ; and their names were taken that they might be remembered and*

nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer...

Pause right there for a moment. What do we have so far? Repentance, baptism, the Holy Ghost, named and numbered with the people, read the scriptures, keep the right way, and keep praying to stick with it all. That's a long list, a lot to do. And no doubt they did all that as we strive to do today.

But wait, there's more — a tiny note, almost an afterthought, a small detail that we seldom mention but is critical to everything.

Moroni 6:4 *...relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and finisher of their faith.*

Pardon? Say that again? “Relying alone upon the merits of Christ.”

Wait a minute. How can that be? I thought we were relying on the repentance, the baptism, the keeping the right way, the praying, etc. and etc. But nope. This single sentence contradicts all that. After all that stuff we do, we are to rely alone on the merits of Christ. “Alone” means “only”; in other words, not on all that other stuff.

Let's understand that. We don't rely on *our* merits *at all*. We rely *only* on *his* merits. That's what the text says. In other words, our merits — repentance, baptism, all the rest of it — will not get us into heaven, or the heavenly kingdom, or the Celestial kingdom, whatever you want to call it. And why is that? Because our merits, *at their best*, are simply not good enough. We need, now and later, *his* merits. That is Moroni's point.

Yes, repent. Yes, be baptized. Yes, live the right way. But not because you think it's going to get you saved. What that Christian life does for you is to connect you, and keep you connected, to Jesus Christ so that his merits are applied on your behalf.

Now, you may resist it and say, “No, no, no. Our works must be sufficiently good or we can't get to heaven (i.e.: Celestial Kingdom)”. Well, if that be so, then how do you explain this?

Mosiah 4:11 *...as ye...have received a remission of your sins...even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures... :12 and always retain a remission of your sins...*

Alma 38:14 *Do not say: O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren; but rather say: O Lord, forgive my unworthiness, and remember my brethren in mercy — yea, acknowledge your unworthiness before God at all times.*

“But,” you ask, “I thought after baptism we're better people. Aren't we? Aren't we suppose to reach perfection so that we can get into the Celestial Kingdom?” Well, how are you doing with that? Are you perfect yet? No? I didn't think so. When do you think you might be? Anytime soon? Probably not going to make it are you? Well, that's a good thing because that is exactly what King Benjamin and Alma and Moroni are saying. You can't be good enough. You can't get there on your own merits, not now, not ever. You have to get there on Christ's merits. That is the critical message of the Book of Mormon, and of course the Bible

Isaiah 64:6 ...our righteousness is as filthy rags...

We call the Book of Mormon a “second witness for Christ.” Well and good, for so it is. But what does that mean? It means a lot. That he was born, he lived, and died a sacrificial death and atoned for our sins. But all of that also means that our lives are not good enough and never can be good enough to merit heaven. That’s why we need Christ’s merits to be applied to us. Thank you Moroni for reminding us. We sometimes forget.

By the way, when, if ever, will we be good enough? The scriptures do speak of sanctification and purification, so there does seem to be a time when we do finally leave sin entirely behind us. When is that? Well, here’s a hint. When Christ visited Nephi’s America, as always, there were good people and bad people and people in between. I’d wager that the best of the good people were the twelve disciples that Jesus chose, and that the best of them were the Three Nephites. Now here’s what the text says about them. And this is instructive.

3 Nephi 28:38 Therefore, that they might not taste of death there was a change wrought upon their bodies, that they might not suffer pain nor sorrow save it were for the sins of the world. :39 Now this change was not equal to that which shall take place at the last day; but there was a change wrought upon them, insomuch that Satan could have no power over them, that he could not tempt them; and they were sanctified in the flesh, that they were holy, and the powers of the earth could not hold them.

Imagine that. Now, think though this with me about the meaning of what you just read. When these good men were “changed,” (translated?), they were “sanctified”; that is, nothing external could influence them, they were “holy”; that is, “apart.” And so Satan “could not tempt them”; that is, Satan could *no longer* tempt them.

Here’s the point: Before the change, Satan *could* tempt them. They were *not* sin free *until* the change and its sanctification. If not so, if they were already sinless, then the change didn’t change them, did it? That’s the point! Before the change, they were subject to sin, as the other nine disciples still were, and as we are ‘till the day we die.

Disquieting isn’t it? Actually, its not. Actually, it’s comforting. Why? Because God has already factored in all of that into the atonement.

Yes, struggle to be sinless, to be perfect. Jesus demanded that we do. But know that when you fail (and you will), that Jesus Christ has got you covered — quite literally, in fact. The Hebrew word atonement, kippurim, means “to cover.” After all, Jesus is

Moroni 6:4 ...the author and finisher of [our] faith.

Is he not? Or perhaps you think *you* are the author and finisher of your own faith. You want to keep that burden? Be my guest. Maybe you’re better than Benjamin and Alma and Moroni and the three Nephites. As for me, I’m just glad that Jesus took it all on, my sins that is.

I just don’t much care to be straddled with an unachievable task. And when I used to think it was achievable — that one day I’d be perfect — I realize now that, well, that was pretty smug. After all, when that day finally does arrive, and you are perfect and secure in heaven, who will you want to give the credit to? Will you expect to say, “I did it” or “Jesus did it”? That’s a

fair question. I, personally, don't think I deserve much credit at all, and that's just fine because it's someone else's merit that I'm relying on.

Does all that mean that we can flop on Christ's merit and abandon the struggle to live righteously? Not at all. The struggle is required. Just quickly, there is this:

Jude 4 ...ungodly men turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness...

That's an interesting accusation. Some people do take God's grace as permission to live sinful lives. That's like Jesus' second temptation to jump off a pinnacle to see if God will catch you. Well, that would have been a stupid thing to do. That's antinomianism; that is, the extreme view that, freed by grace, we are no longer bound by law at all, and therefore licensed to live whatever sinful lives we wish. Moroni was not an antinomianist and neither was Paul.

But now there's the opposite problem.

2 Nephi 25:23 ...it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

This implies that you can't get grace until you've first done everything you can do. Well, what kind of grace is that? You can't do everything you can do. Such a demand brings us right back to where we started. You have to be perfect to receive grace is no better than you have to be perfect to be saved. "All we can do" is a call to perfection, isn't it? But that misses the essential point that I am flawed and therefore I need grace. So what's the point of demanding that I do all that I can do? From experience I know that I fail, even in the doing "all I can do."

Try this: Ask any general authority, ask the president of the church if you're brave enough, "Have you done all you can do?" He will reply, "No, I haven't." Then you can smugly accuse him, "Ahah! Then you haven't received grace, have you?" I think he will respond with a glare and rightly so because such a literal interpretation of this verse misses its point.

This verse does not require such a stern reading. Grammatically, it could just as accurately mean this: Go ahead, try to be perfect. See if you can earn your salvation. But you will fail. And when you fail, then perhaps you will finally realize that it's more about God's grace than your righteousness. In other words, "do all you can do" is, yes, a commandment, but more, it is an observation. You need grace even though you are doing all you can do, whatever that is. It also means, however, don't be an antinomianist.

That's how I read the verse. Of course, you can read it the harsher way if you want. But that doesn't leave you much wiggle room for mistakes, does it? You need to be perfect to get grace? Well, okay, but then, if you're perfect, why would you need grace?

I think "all we can do" means: struggle with it. And when you fail, grace is there *because* you struggle with it. But if you give up the struggle, you also give up the grace. And that, I believe, is the right mid-point between salvation by works which is hopeless, and salvation by faith and grace alone (antinomianism) which is dangerous.