

WORTHINESS
IS NOT
FLAWLESSNESS

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I once sent a message to my daughter and son-in-law using the voice-to-text feature on my phone. I said, “Hey, you two. Sure love you.” They received, “Hate you two. Should love you.” Isn’t it amazing how easily a positive and well-intentioned message can be misunderstood? This is what sometimes happens with God’s messages of repentance and worthiness.

Some mistakenly receive the message that repentance and change are unnecessary. God’s message is that they are essential. But doesn’t God love us despite our shortcomings? Of course! He loves us perfectly. I love my grandchildren, imperfections and all, but that does not mean I don’t want them to improve and become all they can become. God loves us as we are, but He also loves us too much to leave us this way. Growing up unto the Lord is what mortality is all about. Change is what Christ’s Atonement is all about. Not only can Christ resurrect, cleanse, console, and heal us, but through it all, He can transform us to become more like Him.

Some mistakenly receive the message that repentance is a onetime event. God’s message is that, as President Russell M. Nelson has taught, “Repentance … is a process.” Repentance may take time and repeated effort, so forsaking sin and having “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” are lifetime pursuits.

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Life is like a cross-country road trip. We can't reach our destination on one tank of gas. We must refill the tank over and over. Taking the sacrament is like pulling into the gas station. As we repent and renew our covenants, we pledge our willingness to keep the commandments, and God and Christ bless us with the Holy Spirit. In short, we promise to press forward on our journey, and God and Christ promise to refill the tank.

Some mistakenly receive the message that they are not worthy to participate fully in the gospel because they are not completely free of bad habits. God's message is that worthiness is not flawlessness. Worthiness is being honest and trying. We must be honest with God, priesthood leaders, and others who love us, and we must strive to keep God's commandments and never give up just because we slip up. Elder Bruce C. Hafen said that developing a Christ-like character "requires patience and persistence more than it requires flawlessness." The Lord has said the gifts of the Spirit are "given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do."

One young man I'll call Damon wrote: "Growing up, I struggled with pornography. I always felt so ashamed that I could not get things right." Each time Damon slipped, the pain of regret became so intense, he harshly judged himself to be unworthy of any kind of grace, forgiveness, or additional chances from God. He said: "I decided I just deserved to feel terrible all the time. I figured God probably hated me because I wasn't willing to work harder and get on top of this once and for all. I would go a week and sometimes even a month, but then I would relapse and think, 'I'll never be good enough, so what's the use of even trying?'"

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At one such low moment, Damon said to his priesthood leader: “Maybe I should just stop coming to church. I’m sick of being a hypocrite.”

His leader responded: “You’re not a hypocrite because you have a bad habit you are trying to break. You are a hypocrite if you hide it, lie about it, or try to convince yourself the Church has the problem for maintaining such high standards. Being honest about your actions and taking steps to move forward is not being a hypocrite. It is being a disciple.” This leader quoted Elder Richard G. Scott, who taught: “The Lord sees weaknesses differently than He does rebellion. ... When the Lord speaks of weaknesses, it is always with mercy.”

That perspective gave Damon hope. He realized God was not up there saying, “Damon blew it again.” Instead, He was probably saying, “Look how far Damon has come.” This young man finally stopped looking down in shame or looking sideways for excuses and rationalizations. He looked up for divine help, and he found it.

Damon said: “The only time I had turned to God in the past was to ask for forgiveness, but now I also asked for grace—His ‘enabling power’. I had never done that before. These days I spend a lot less time hating myself for what I have done and a lot more time loving Jesus for what He has done.”

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Considering how long Damon had struggled, it was unhelpful and unrealistic for parents and leaders assisting him to say “never again” too quickly or to arbitrarily set some standard of abstinence to be considered “worthy.” Instead, they started with small, reachable goals. They got rid of the all-or-nothing expectations and focused on incremental growth, which allowed Damon to build on a series of successes instead of failures. He, like the enslaved people of Limhi, learned he could “prosper by degrees.”

Elder D. Todd Christofferson has counseled: “To deal with something [very] big, we may need to work at it in small, daily bites.... Incorporating new and wholesome habits into our character or overcoming bad habits or addictions [most] often means an effort today followed by another tomorrow and then another, perhaps for many days, even months and years. ... But we can do it because we can appeal to God ... for the help we need each day.”

Now, brothers and sisters, the COVID-19 pandemic has not been easy for anyone, but the isolation associated with quarantine restrictions has made life especially difficult for those struggling with bad habits. Remember change is possible, repentance is a process, and worthiness is not flawlessness. Most important, remember that God and Christ are willing to help us right here and now.

Some mistakenly receive the message that God is waiting to help until after we repent. God’s message is that He will help us as we repent. His grace is available to us “no matter where we are in the path of obedience.” Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf has said: “God does not need people who are flawless. He seeks those who will offer their ‘heart and a willing mind’ [Doctrine and Covenants 64:34], and He will make them ‘perfect in Christ’ [Moroni 10:32–33].”

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So many have been hurt by broken and strained relationships that it is difficult for them to believe in God's compassion and long-suffering. They struggle to see God as He is—a loving Father who meets us in our need and knows how to "give good things to them that ask him." His grace is not just a prize for the worthy. It is the "divine assistance" He gives that helps us become worthy. It is not just a reward for the righteous. It is the "endowment of strength" He gives that helps us become righteous. We are not just walking toward God and Christ. We are walking with Them.

Across the Church, young people recite the Young Women and Aaronic Priesthood Quorum Themes. From New Zealand to Spain to Ethiopia to Japan, young women say, "I cherish the gift of repentance." From Chile to Guatemala to Moroni, Utah, young men say, "As I strive to serve, exercise faith, repent, and improve each day, I will qualify to receive temple blessings and the enduring joy of the gospel."

I promise those blessings and that joy are real and within reach for those who keep all the commandments and "him that seeketh so to do." When you feel like you have failed too many times to keep trying, remember Christ's Atonement and the grace it makes possible are real. "[His] arm of mercy is extended towards you." You are loved—today, in 20 years, and forever. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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