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Grace, Legalism, and Mental Health among the Latter-day Saints

Daniel K Judd and W. Justin Dyer

Martin Luther (1483–1546), a central figure of the Protestant Reformation, is one of many who have experienced tension between the perceived necessity of their own good works and the grace of God in the process of salvation. Soon after the young Luther entered the monastery in preparation to become a priest, he began to experience the consequences of his legalistic beliefs. Reflecting on this experience later in life, he wrote:

The more someone tries to bring peace to his conscience through his own righteousness, the more disquieted he makes it. When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins . . . ; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt. . . . The longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it. In this way, by observing human traditions, I transgressed them even more; and by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it.¹

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 27: *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, chapters 5–6; 1519, chapters 1–6, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 13.

Luther's description of his psychological state is indicative of what has been described as a "psychiatric condition."² In the years that followed Luther's attempts to overcome his spiritual and psychological concerns by becoming obsessively and compulsively more religious, he came to understand the impotency of his legalistic beliefs and practices and the transformative power of the grace of Jesus Christ.³ Elsewhere the first author of this article has made the case that "Martin Luther's experiences with depression, anxiety, scrupulosity, sin, and grace provided the historical and theological context for the Protestant Reformation."⁴ President Gordon B. Hinckley described Luther as "one of the great and courageous forerunners of the Restoration."⁵

Similarities can be observed between the beliefs and practices of the young Martin Luther and a subset of Latter-day Saints living in the twenty-first century. Serving as mission president in West Africa, the first author witnessed the tensions that exist between the grace of Christ and the demands of personal obedience in the lives of some of the young missionaries with whom he served. As one of these young men wrote:

Although not guilty of serious sin, the emotions I felt were what you expect to be associated with serious transgression. I spoke with the MTC [Missionary Training Center] president who reassured me that I was worthy to serve a mission. His reassurance only aided me for a day or so. Anxiety quickly returned. I prayed to be forgiven often and did all I could to find peace, but it was to no avail. I entered the mission field and found no peace. . . . I felt an emptiness; I more or less stopped trying to improve myself. This, however, was not a good solution. As I tried to improve, the anxiety came back and even worsened. At times I suffered so much that I could work no longer. Although, I did not recognize that I was suffering from a mental illness but [felt] that I was feeling guilt for sin. The only relief I could find was from confessing my mistakes to my mission president. At first, I was focused on mistakes and sins of a more sexual nature[,] and as time went on I confessed

2. Ian Osborn, *Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008), 14.

3. Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 55–78.

4. Daniel K Judd, "Clinical and Pastoral Implications of the Ministry of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation," *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 324–37.

5. Gordon B. Hinckley, "God Hath Not Given Us the Spirit of Fear," *Ensign* 14, no. 10 (October 1984): 2.

every sin of this nature that I could think of. I then began to unhealthily obsess on other sins and mistakes, such as speaking out of anger.⁶

This young man suffered much during the first year of his mission, but later he wrote the following concerning what helped him understand and work through what would later be diagnosed as an obsessive-compulsive disorder clinicians have termed “scrupulosity”: “My healing, while greatly attributed to counseling and medication, was only made possible by a deeper understanding of the Grace of Jesus Christ. I had learned about grace earlier in my life but never really understood it. My first experience with understanding grace came during the beginning months of my mission when confessing to my mission president. He told me ‘grace, by definition, is undeserved.’ *I never before thought that I could gain something from God that I did not deserve.*”⁷

Some claim The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a legalistic religion that privileges humankind’s good works over the grace of God “by establishing requirements for salvation beyond repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.”⁸ Indeed, some confusion likely exists on this point. For instance, although the Prophet Joseph Smith affirmed, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (A of F 1:3), the Book of Mormon prophet Moroni emphasized the importance of “relying *alone* upon the merits of Christ” (Moro. 6:4, emphasis added) in seeking salvation. The soteriological tension between the necessity of obedience to God’s commands described by Joseph Smith and the salvific singularity of the grace of Christ described by Moroni is an illustration of the doctrinal “contrarities”⁹ that exist in the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and provides the theological context for the study that is described in the pages that follow. This article includes a description and discussion of the recent research we

6. Personal correspondence with the first author.

7. Personal correspondence with the first author, italics added.

8. Gerald L. Sittser, “Legalism,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid and others (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 641–42. See also Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 175.

9. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “By proving contrarities, truth is made manifest.” “Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844,” 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/1>.

have published that examines the relationships among the grace of God, the understanding of obedience to God's commands, and the mental health of a sample of the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

While largely understood as unique to Christianity, the theological principle of the grace of God is found in the teachings of many other world religions and is integral to the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁰ While the doctrine of God's grace has been given greater institutional and personal attention among Latter-day Saints during the last several decades,¹¹ this is a report of the first experimental study to be conducted. We recently published an empirical analysis of the relationship between God's grace and the mental health of Latter-day Saints in an American Psychological Association (APA) journal, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.¹² What follows is an overview and summary of the results of our research and a discussion intended for those who are participants in and observers of the Latter-day Saint community.

GRACE AND LEGALISM

In traditional Christian theology, grace is defined as a gift of God, mediated through Jesus Christ, that is "bestowed freely and without regard to merit, and which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation."¹³ Inasmuch as the theology of grace is not exclusive to Christian belief,¹⁴ grace has also been defined more inclusively as a "benevolent divine influence acting upon humanity to impart spiritual enrichment or purity, to inspire virtue, or to give strength to endure trial

10. Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall, eds., *Sin, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016). See also Jonathan Rosen, "Grace, Punishment, and the Torah," *American Scholar* 71, no. 1 (2002): 61–63; and Robert L. Millet, "The Perils of Grace," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014): 7–19.

11. Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2000), 54–61.

12. Daniel K Judd, W. Justin Dyer, and Justin B. Top, "Grace, Legalism, and Mental Health: Examining Direct and Mediating Relationships," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2020): 26–35, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000211>.

13. OED Online, s.v. "grace, *n.*," 1a, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80373>.

14. Tikva Frymer-Kensky and others, *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2000).

and resist temptation.”¹⁵ The (Latter-day Saint) Bible Dictionary defines grace as follows:

[Grace] is divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ. It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, made possible by His atoning sacrifice, that mankind will be raised in immortality, every person receiving his body from the grave in a condition of everlasting life. It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ and repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts.¹⁶

The last sentence of this definition has been understood by some to mean that humankind can't experience grace *before* or *while* but only *after* they have expended their own best efforts.” The understanding that experiencing God's grace *follows* good works is an interpretation of the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi's statement that “it is by grace that we are saved, *after* all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23, emphasis added). Elder Bruce C. Hafen made the following statement by way of clarification concerning the relationship between the grace of Christ and the works of humankind: “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.”¹⁷

Given what appears to some to be conflicting definitions, individuals may find themselves on a continuum where at the one end are those who believe grace can be experienced only “after” one's “best efforts” are put forward and at the other end are those who believe grace may be experienced without respect to their good works. It would be expected that those who feel they can experience grace “all along the way” would have more experiences with grace than those who feel grace is restricted to only after one's best efforts have been put forward. Those who believe grace must be earned are sometimes referred to as “legalistic” in the sense

15. *OED Online*, s.v. “grace, *n.*,” 1b, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80373>.

16. *Bible Dictionary* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), s.v. “Grace.”

17. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 155–56.

that they feel it is necessary to complete certain requirements or “laws” before any grace can be experienced (see below for additional detail).

The little research that has been done on the relationship between grace and mental health indicates that individuals who scored higher on measures of experiencing grace (that is, they say they experience God’s grace more frequently) had less depression and greater self-compassion.¹⁸ Professor Rodger Bufford and his colleagues at George Fox University, some of the first social scientists to study grace from an empirical perspective, reported that individuals who reported experiencing grace to a greater degree had better “religious coping and . . . existential, religious, and spiritual well-being.”¹⁹

Legalism has been defined as a “strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code”²⁰ and is hypothesized to influence mental health as well as religious belief and practice. “Legalism, in the eyes of Protestant scholars of the New Testament, is the worst of all possible religious defects.”²¹ Many non-Christian religions, while acknowledging the importance of obedience to God’s law, also resist a legalistic understanding of obedience where law is elevated above the Lawgiver.²² While the relationship between correlation and causation in these empirical studies is tentative, research has shown legalism to be related to increased perfectionism, scrupulosity, anxiety, depression, and shame (feelings of self-loathing and worthlessness).

Though the significance of these connections is not limited to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, understanding the religious and psychological implications of the relationships between the grace of God, obedience to divine command, and the cultural

18. Rodney L. Bassett and the Roberts Wesleyan College Psychology Research Group, “An Empirical Consideration of Grace and Legalism within Christian Experience,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 32, no. 1 (2013): 43–69.

19. Rodger K. Bufford, Timothy A. Sisemore, and Amanda M. Blackburn, “Dimensions of Grace: Factor Analysis of Three Grace Scales,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9, no. 1 (2017): 56–69, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000064>.

20. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1996), s.v. “legalism.”

21. Albert I. Baumgarten, “Marcel Simon’s *Verus Israel* as a Contribution to Jewish History,” *Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 4 (1999): 467 n. 12. Note refers to personal comments by E. P. Sanders.

22. Jacob Zallel Lauterbach and Kaufmann Kohler, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “nomism,” accessed January 30, 2020, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11582-nomism>.

expectations related to mental-health issues is especially important for Latter-day Saints because of the cultural propensity to focus on obedience to God's commands and a developing but limited understanding of the doctrine of his grace. Elder M. Russell Ballard has explained: "No matter how hard we work, no matter how much we obey, no matter how many good things we do in this life, it would not be enough were it not for Jesus Christ and His loving grace. On our own we cannot earn the kingdom of God—no matter what we do. Unfortunately, there are some within the Church who have become so preoccupied with performing good works that they forget that those works—as good as they may be—are hollow unless they are accompanied by a complete dependence on Christ."²³

Pastoral and clinical interventions focused on helping people of faith understand the positive consequences of grace and the negative influences of legalism have been demonstrated to assist individuals with self-forgiveness²⁴ and married couples in resolving conflict.²⁵ Psychologists James Sells and Mark Yarhouse describe the developmental necessity of grace in interpersonal relationships (including relationships with God) as follows: "No one can achieve mature, contented, successful existence unless someone has extended to that person sacrificial, unmerited love or *grace*; furthermore . . . no one can achieve mature, contented, successful existence unless he or she returns that grace to others with a commitment of fairness, which we refer to as justice. Grace and justice, love and fairness—marriages cannot thrive without them."²⁶

The philosophical, doctrinal, and religious tensions between those who believe the grace of God to be primary to temporal happiness and eternal salvation and those who believe good works are fundamental have existed for millennia.²⁷ One of the authors reported that his

23. M. Russell Ballard. "Building Bridges of Understanding," *Ensign* 28, no. 6 (June 1998): 65.

24. Jeff A. Moody, "The Effects of a Grace Intervention in a Christian Congregation: A Study of Positive Psychology in the Church" (PsyD diss., George Fox University, 2015), accessed December 10, 2019, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/psyd/194>.

25. Terry D. Hargrave and Franz Pfitzer, *The New Contextual Therapy: Guiding the Power of Give and Take* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 139–48.

26. James N. Sells and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Counseling Couples in Conflict: A Relational Restoration Model* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 123.

27. Phillip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Daniel K Judd, "Clinical

experiences in coming to understand the doctrine of the grace of Christ has been a long journey. As a young missionary serving in Southern California, he was regularly confronted by evangelical Christians who asserted the preeminence of the doctrine of grace. Though some of these individuals may have been arguing for the distortion of grace that German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as “cheap grace,”²⁸ the author is confident that others understood, much better than he did at the time, the meaning and experience of genuine or “costly grace.”²⁹ The authentic grace Bonhoeffer described is the grace that is described in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. Bonhoeffer’s description of the distinction between “cheap grace” and “costly grace” is representative of the beliefs of many, if not most, Christian traditions:

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ. . . .

[Costly] grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son.³⁰

The mental health consequences and implications of believing in “cheap grace” are yet to be investigated.

While theological and religious tensions continue to exist between and among religious scholars, members of the clergy, and lay people alike concerning the relationships between grace and good works, most of the research that addresses these tensions is historical, philosophical,

and Pastoral Implications of the Ministry of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation,” *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 324–37.

28. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, ed. Mark Brocker and H. Gaylon Barker, 34 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 14:431–32.

29. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 45.

30. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 45.

pastoral, apologetic, or polemical, but not empirical or clinical.³¹ Some, however, have recently begun to examine the relationship between grace and good works from an empirical perspective,³² but the research is limited.

CURRENT STUDY

Bernard Spilka observed that one of the deficiencies in religion and mental-health research is that “the movement of information and perspective has largely been from psychology to religion without a corresponding reciprocation in the reverse direction.”³³ It has been our experience that the study of theology and the practice of religion have much to offer both to the philosophy and practice of psychology and in adding spiritual and emotional strength to individuals, families, and nations. In our work, we attempt to embrace the contributions of both psychology and religion as they mutually inform and build upon one another.

To that end, we redirect our original article³⁴ (the first of its kind to study legalism, the experience of God’s grace, and the mental health of Latter-day Saints) to Latter-day Saints in general and examine how a distorted emphasis on good works (legalism) may relate to mental health by interfering with how individuals experience the grace of God. Before conducting the study, we postulated that those who have more legalistic beliefs would likely report that they experience less grace because they are prone to believe it is their compliance with God’s law that initiates God’s grace, rather than believing that grace is an unmerited gift or relationship.

The personal motivation for this study is grounded in our collective personal, pastoral, professorial, and clinical experiences. It has been our collective experience that many of those with whom we have worked who suffer from anxiety, depression, perfectionism, and scrupulosity

31. Mark R. McMinn and others, “Professional Psychology and the Doctrines of Sin and Grace: Christian Leaders’ Perspectives,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 37, no. 3 (2006): 295–302.

32. Kawika Allen, Kenneth T. Wang, and Hannah Stokes, “Examining Legalism, Scrupulosity, Family Perfectionism, and Psychological Adjustment among LDS Individuals,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 246–58.

33. Bernard Spilka, “‘The Compleat Person’: Some Theoretical Views and Research Findings for a Theological-Psychology of Religion,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 4, no. 1 (1976): 16.

34. Judd, Dyer, and Top, “Grace, Legalism, and Mental Health.”

are influenced, at least in part, by cognitive, cultural, and doctrinal distortions in the relationship between the grace of God and personal discipleship.

Our conceptual model is outlined in figure 1. Regarding mental health, we examined anxiety, depression, fear of God, fear of sin, shame, and perfectionism. We also report the results of how experiencing God's grace and having a legalistic understanding of our relationship with God are related to both functional and dysfunctional measures of perfectionism.

Specifically, our research study addressed the following questions: (1) Do individuals who indicate they experience God's grace report better mental health than those who do not? (2) Do individuals who are more legalistic in their attitudes toward good works and grace report poorer mental health than do those who more readily embrace the construct of grace? (3) Do those who have more legalistic attitudes toward obedience to law report experiencing less of God's grace? To test this, we created a "path model" based on figure 1 where we could statistically examine how legalism relates to experiencing God's grace and mental health. With this method, we could calculate the degree to which legalism connects with mental health *through* its connection to experiencing God's grace. To examine the degree to which gender might be influential, path models were conducted separately for male and female participants.

METHOD

A convenience sample of 635 university students attending Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah (USA), was recruited for the current study. As might be expected at an American university, 98.4 percent of the participants were between the ages of 17 and 25, with a mean age of 20.8 and a mode age of 18. The majority of participants (87.2 percent) reported being white/Caucasian, with another 3.5 percent Asian, 2.5 percent Latino, and 0.6 percent of African descent. In addition, 4.6 percent said they were of mixed race, and another 1.6 percent chose "other" on the survey. Most participants (99.1 percent) identified themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The other participants indicated their religious affiliation as Roman Catholic (0.3 percent), "none" (0.5 percent), and "other" (0.2 percent).³⁵

35. See Judd, Dyer, and Top, "Grace, Legalism, and Mental Health."

Participants took an online survey where they responded to a series of questions with Likert-type responses (that is, the survey asked them to respond to questions on a scale from, for example, “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” or from “very unlikely” to “very likely”). Survey items were taken from previously validated questionnaires and addressed such topics as grace, depression,³⁶ and anxiety.³⁷ Two aspects of grace were examined: (1) experiencing God’s grace and (2) legalism.³⁸ To assess these aspects of grace, participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with several statements (see table 1). Questions also assessed participants’ fear of sin and fear of God,³⁹ as well as three aspects of perfectionism: high standards, order, and discrepancy.⁴⁰ Both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists rate highly in standards (perfectionistic strivings, high personal performance expectations) and order (preference for organization), but maladaptive perfectionists also rate highly in discrepancy (perfectionistic concerns, the perceived gap between personal standards and one’s evaluation of having met those standards). Finally, the questionnaire also captured participants’ level of shame-withdraw (hiding or withdrawing from the public due to feelings of shame).⁴¹

RESULTS

Correlations

Table 2 contains correlations with means and standard deviations for all variables. Experiencing God’s grace correlated with all other variables of interest in the expected direction; it was negatively correlated

36. Kurt Kroenke, Robert L. Spitzer, and Janet B. W. Williams, “The PHQ-9,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 16, no. 9 (2001): 606–13.

37. Robert L. Spitzer and others, “A Brief Measure for Assessing Generalized Anxiety Disorder: The GAD-7,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 166, no. 10 (2006): 1092–97.

38. Rodger K. Bufford, Timothy A. Sisemore, and Amanda M. Blackburn, “Dimensions of Grace: Factor Analysis of Three Grace Scales,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9, no. 1 (2017): 56–69.

39. Jonathan S. Abramowitz and others, “Religious Obsessions and Compulsions in a Non-clinical Sample: The Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity (PIOS),” *Behavior Research and Therapy* 40, no. 7 (2002): 825–38.

40. Robert B. Slaney and others, “The Revised Almost Perfect Scale,” *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 34, no. 3 (2001): 130–45.

41. Taya R. Cohen and others, “Introducing the GASP Scale: A New Measure of Guilt and Shame Proneness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 5 (2011): 947–66.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

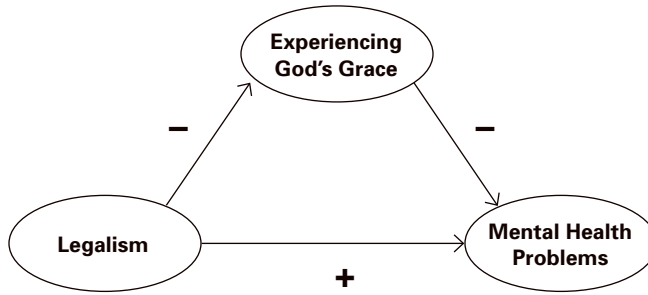


Table 1. Statements Used to Measure Grace and Legalism

Experiencing God's Grace (8 Items)

1. Because of God's work in my life, I feel I have more self-control. My actions are more likely to be appropriate.
2. Because of God's work in my life, I feel I have more self-control. My emotions are more likely to be appropriate.
3. My beliefs about grace encourage me to be forgiving of others.
4. God is in the process of making me more like Jesus.
5. Because of grace bestowed on me, I am able to forgive others.
6. Sometimes when I pray for something I really want, I find that I end up with something even better.
7. I strive to do good because of God's acceptance of me—not in order to earn his love.
8. I am able to forgive others when they hurt me.

Legalism (7 Items)^a

1. My behavior does not matter since I've been forgiven.
2. If I work harder, I need less grace.
3. Those who sin less than others require less grace.
4. God cares more about what I do than who I am.
5. The harder I work, the more I earn God's favor.
6. The more obedient I am, the more God loves me.
7. I must work hard to experience God's grace and forgiveness.

a. Bufford and others' original formulation was to reverse code these items to create a "Costly Grace" scale. However, these items are conceptually consistent with "Legalism" when not reverse coded. We do not reverse code the items, and we use this scale to measure legalism.

Table 2. Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Legalism	1												
2. Experiencing Grace	-.44***	1											
3. Anxiety	.08	-.21***	1										
4. Depression	.10*	-.22***	.77***	1									
5. Shame	.32***	-.35***	.25***	.25***	1								
6. Standards	-.30***	.47***	-.05	-.13**	-.18	1							
7. Order	-.17***	.30***	-.11*	-.23***	-.09*	.52***	1						
8. Fear God	.22***	-.31***	.44***	.45***	.22***	-.17***	-.18***	1					
9. Fear Sin	.11*	-.10*	.37***	.37***	.15***	-.04	-.13**	.82***	1				
10. Pref. Discrepancy	.20***	-.27***	.48***	.49***	.33***	.02	-.07	.48***	.41***	1			
11. White	-.11*	.09*	-.06	-.05	.04	.02	.04	-.15***	-.12**	-.08	1		
12. Age	-.03	.09*	-.14***	-.17***	-.06	-.02	.04	-.09*	-.03	-.08	.02	1	
13. Income	.03	.02	-.02	-.05	.02	.02	-.01	-.06	-.03	.01	.09*	.01	1
Mean(sd)	0(.80)	0(.90)	12.0(4.7)	15.3(5.2)	12.40(4.4)	42.2(5.5)	22.0(4.1)	17.5(5.8)	33.7(9.3)	49.4(14.6)	.88(.33)	20.5(2.0)	5.0(1.4)

Note.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Legalism and experiencing grace have means of zero, given they were specified as latent variables.

with anxiety, depression, scrupulosity, and perfectionism. Experiencing God's grace was positively correlated with healthy forms of perfectionism—having high standards and being organized. Legalism was positively correlated with depression, scrupulosity, and perfectionism, but not anxiety; higher scores on legalism were correlated with lower scores on the measures of mental health.

Path Analysis

In all models, there was a direct, relatively strong negative relationship between legalism and experiencing God's grace (results are contained in table 3). That is, the higher the legalism, the less the participants reported experiencing God's grace.

A consistent pattern emerged in the results. Regarding anxiety and depression, for female subjects legalism had an indirect effect with both anxiety and depression through experiencing God's grace. In other words, for female participants, results suggest a series of related responses where legalistic thinking decreased the ability to experience grace, which then increased anxiety and depression. Results were similar when examining shame and fear of God: more legalistic thinking was related to experiencing less grace, and this, in turn, was related to more shame and fear of God. For perfectionism, in every instance except one (order—preference for order for male respondents), evidence for these related responses was found. That is, the more legalism was reported, the less God's grace was experienced and, subsequently, the less positive perfectionism and the more negative perfectionism was found. However, no relationship was found between fear of sin and either legalism or experiencing God's grace.

DISCUSSION

Throughout these analyses, higher scores on experiencing grace were consistently linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety, negative perfectionism, scrupulosity, and shame. These results confirm previous research on depression⁴² and add information on three additional aspects of mental health previously reported in the literature in relation to grace: anxiety, shame, and perfectionism. Subjects' scores on legalism were consistently linked with mental health, but this link was often

42. Bassett and Roberts Wesleyan College Psychology Research Group, "Grace and Legalism," 43–69.

Table 3. Path Analysis Results. Standardized Results.

	Anxiety		Depression		Shame		Standards	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Legalism	.03(.10)	-.09(.07)	.16(.10)	-.11(.07)	.20(.09)*	.19(.07)**	.04(.10)	-.17(.07)*
Experiencing Grace	-.19(.10)	-.34(.05)***	-.16(.11)	-.34(-.07)***	-.34(.09)***	-.23(.07)***	.73(.09)***	.30(.06)***
Race	-.08(.07)	-.01(.05)	-.09(.08)	.01(.05)	-.03(.07)	.08(.05)	-.00(.06)	-.03(.05)
Age	-.08(.07)	-.08(.05)	-.16(.07)*	-.05(.05)	-.02(.07)	.07(.05)	-.05(.06)	-.01(.05)
Income	-.07(.07)	.03(.05)	-.13(.07)	.00(.05)	-.02(.07)	.04(.05)	.02(.06)	.03(.05)
Legalism → Exp. Grace	-.58(.06)***	-.47(.06)***	-.59(.06)***	-.46(.06)***	-.59(.06)***	-.46(.06)***	-.61(.01)***	-.46(.06)***
Indirect Effects	.11(.08)	.16(.04)***	.10(.08)	.16(.04)***	.20(.09)*	.11(.04)**	-.44(.16)**	-.14(.04)***
R ² Mental Health Variable	.07	.10	.15	.10	.23	.13	.50	.16
R ² Experiencing Grace	.35	.23	.36	.23	.36	.23	.38	.23
CFI\ RMSEA	.925 / .063		.928 / .062		.917 / .069		.913 / .073	
	Order		Perf. Discrepancy		Fear God		Fear Sin	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Legalism	-.14(.10)	.06(.07)	.17(.10)	.01(.07)	.07(.10)	.12(.07)	.00(.10)	.12(.07)
Experiencing Grace	.35(.10)***	.28(.07)***	-.29(.10)**	-.28(.08)***	-.27(.10)**	-.28(.06)***	-.09(.10)	-.07(.07)
Race	-.04(.07)	.06(.05)	-.11(.07)	-.03(.05)	-.14(.07)	-.10(.05)*	-.16(.07)*	-.08(.05)
Age	-.01(.07)	.05(.05)	-.04(.07)	.01(.05)	-.13(.07)	-.14(.05)**	-.17(.07)*	-.13(.05)*
Income	.12(.07)	-.06(.05)	.07(.07)	-.01(.05)	-.07(.07)	-.04(.05)	-.02(.07)	-.03(.05)
Legalism → Exp. Grace	-.59(.06)***	-.45(.06)***	-.59(.06)***	-.46(.06)***	-.58(.06)***	-.47(.06)***	-.58(.06)***	-.46(.06)***
Indirect Effects	-.21(.11)	-.13(.04)**	.17(.08)*	.13(.04)**	.16(.07)*	.13(.04)***	.05(.07)	.03(.04)
R ² Mental Health Variable	.23	.08	.18	.08	.15	.16		
R ² Experiencing Grace	.36	.23	.35	.23	.35	.23	.35	.23
CFI\ RMSEA	.925 / .065		.928 / .064		.908 / .073		.905 / .073	

Note.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

due to legalism's connection to experiencing grace. That is, the higher the legalistic beliefs, the less individuals reported experiencing God's grace and, in turn, the poorer the mental-health outcomes. Thus, while we acknowledge that it is unclear whether this is correlational or causal, results are consistent with the theory that a legalistic view of God leads to poorer mental health because it interrupts the ability to experience grace. Legalistic beliefs and practices may erode a sense in these individuals that God is aware of their concerns, attends to their needs, and provides for them through divine grace.

In addition to being statistically significant, these findings are also clinically and pastorally meaningful. Helping clients and parishioners understand, experience, and embrace grace and avoid legalistic beliefs and practices may be helpful in assisting with a variety of mental and emotional problems. Our research confirms the postulate by Kahoe that "there are surely . . . psychological consequences of whether one rests on God's grace or one's own good deeds for relationship with the divine."⁴³

The experiences of sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther suggest that the negative mental-health consequences of legalism are not new. Luther came to attribute his feelings of despair, anxiety, and compulsivity to his legalistic views of peace and salvation, and this attribution appears to be consistent with the results reported in this study. The associations between legalism and decreased mental health may be especially relevant for individuals and families whose religious beliefs are more legalistic than grace-based and whose lives personify this relationship.

Because beliefs about grace and legalism may be strongly tied to religious and cultural beliefs that vary among different groups and religious denominations, understanding an individual's perspectives on these principles is vital to meaningful clinical and pastoral applications. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the religious affiliation of most subjects described in this study, provide an important example of the tension between grace and good works. Latter-day Saint belief and practice acknowledge the necessity of God's grace to both temporal well-being and eternal salvation and include an emphasis on the importance of living a righteous life (good works). Although personal righteousness has a doctrinal basis in Latter-day Saint and traditional

43. R. D. Kahoe, "Toward a Radical Psychotheology," *Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues Newsletter: Division 36—American Psychological Association* 12, no. 3 (1987): 4.

Christian theology, the including of such rectitude in the process of temporal and eternal salvation invites the possibility of legalism and the negative mental-health consequences described in this study.

Within the framework of Latter-day Saint teachings and culture are diverse individual interpretations and applications of doctrines related to legalism and grace that may impact mental health. Educators, therapists, parents, leaders, and others may find great benefit in helping those for whom they have responsibility explore their personal beliefs about these issues and how they may be related to their mental and spiritual well-being. Latter-day Saint teachings and the belief systems of many other Christian and non-Christian religions include fundamental teachings about the importance of obedience as well as the central role of the grace of God. How individuals interpret and apply those teachings in their own lives may influence their mental health. Underlying maladaptive legalistic beliefs may be contributing to feelings of depression, anxiety, perfectionism, and shame. For many religious people, their relationship with God is a key factor in their feelings of self-worth. Because beliefs about grace and legalism can play an important role in defining one's relationship with God, professionals, parents, and clergy may find great benefit in exploring those beliefs and their implications with those whom they are attempting to assist.

The study also includes important differences and nuances regarding gender. In each instance where the link between legalism and mental health was present for male subjects (shame, standards, perfectionist discrepancy, and fear of God), the link was also present for female participants. However, there were three additional instances in which the link was present for female subjects but not for male participants (anxiety, depression, and order). In other words, the mental health of women may be more susceptible to legalistic beliefs than that of men, although, clearly, there are significant connections between legalism and mental health for male respondents. Gender differences may not be surprising since research has consistently found that male and female participants differ in their experiences with and sources of mental-health problems.⁴⁴ This conclusion indicates that there may be differences between men and women in the way they understand grace and legalism and in how these ideas are linked to mental health. More research needs to be conducted to better understand these differences.

44. S. Rosenfield and D. Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health* (New York: Springer, 2013), 277–96.

The data from this study also indicate that even after accounting for the experience of God's grace, beliefs about legalism are still associated with shame for both men and women. It may be that legalistic beliefs have a connection with shame since both deal with the individual's self-worth. That is, from a legalistic belief system, people tie their worthiness and worth to God to their own performance—which is represented by the item on the Legalism Scale “God cares more about what I do than who I am.” Individuals endorsing this view may feel they have no intrinsic worth as a person and that worth comes from “worthy” behaviors. Because shame also relates to beliefs about one's worthiness and value as a person, it is likely legalism and shame are linked even beyond legalism's effect on a person's sense of experiencing God's grace.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. Because the study is cross-sectional by design, we cannot determine whether experiencing mental-health problems results in feeling less of God's grace and having more legalistic attitudes or vice versa. Indeed, there is likely a mutually reinforcing relationship between mental health and legalism. It will be important to track individuals over time in order to examine this. Another limitation is that our sample was overwhelmingly Latter-day Saint. Although we were desirous to examine individuals from this group, it is likely that other religions would have differing views of legalism and experiencing God's grace; therefore, our findings here may not generalize to other religions.⁴⁵ Furthermore, our sample was limited to university students. It may be that older individuals or individuals with more religious experience will have differing views on grace, good works, and legalism, which may influence their mental health.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study are both significant and meaningful concerning the relationship between experiencing the grace of God and the mental health of individuals. We also learn that both grace and mental

45. Neal Krause, “Trust in God and Psychological Distress: Exploring Variations by Religious Affiliation,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 235–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1021311>; see also Coval B. MacDonald and Jeffrey B. Luckett, “Religious Affiliation and Psychiatric Diagnoses,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (1983): 15–37.

health connect to legalistic understandings of obedience to religious law. Legalistic beliefs and practices likely impede individuals from experiencing God's grace. The experiences of some Latter-day Saint students in this study appear to be similar to those experienced by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. The more intensely Luther believed in and practiced a legalistic relationship with God, the more mentally and spiritually unstable he appears to have become. Conversely, Luther's experience with understanding and experiencing the grace of God also has a commonality with the subjects in our sample—the better both Luther and the Latter-day Saint subjects understood and experienced the grace of God, the greater their freedom from shame and the associated depression, anxiety, and perfectionism.

This study highlights important relationships among grace, legalism, and various mental-health concerns that religious clients may face and raises many possibilities for future research. More research is needed to identify how views on legalism/good works and grace/cheap grace contribute to positive mental-health outcomes as well as how to apply this information in clinical, pastoral, and educational settings to address depression, anxiety, shame (self-loathing), and other mental illnesses, along with marital and familial conflict and affliction. In addition, research on how grace and legalism influence the mental health of individuals of varying faith backgrounds—including those who have disaffiliated from or changed their faith tradition and those who are without religious or spiritual belief—is necessary. We invite people of all faiths and perspectives to join us in this important endeavor.

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