



9-27-2017

# Grace as Psychotherapy: Suggestions for Therapists with Latter-day Saint Clients

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### Recommended Citation

Draper, Matthew R.; McGraw, James S.; Sturtevant, Daniel; and Draper, Richard D. (2017) "Grace as Psychotherapy: Suggestions for Therapists with Latter-day Saint Clients," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 38 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol38/iss1/11>

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

We'd like to thank Julie Nelson for her thorough editing and Dr. Draper's UVU research team for their thoughtful suggestions and comments. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their important suggestions.

# Grace as Psychotherapy: Suggestions for Therapists with Latter-day Saint Clients

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**ABSTRACT**

*There is a growing body of literature that shows how perfectionism has tremendous effects on a person's well-being. Specifically, maladaptive perfectionism continues to be a contributing factor to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation (for a review of maladaptive perfectionism, see Enns & Cox, 2002). Interestingly, for religious individuals, perfectionism is often colored by profound religious themes that further complicate treatment (Sorotzkin, 1998). This paper seeks to explore this issue by introducing the case of Vivi, a Mormon woman who suffered a great deal of depression and anxiety and eventually attempted suicide due to perfectionism entwined with her religious beliefs. In cooperation with Vivi's ecclesiastical leader, the therapist introduced the concept of God's divine grace as a therapeutic tool to help ameliorate her suffering due to perfectionism. In this article we detail how grace, bibliotherapy, mindfulness meditations, and a compassionate and understanding therapist helped this client and can help other clients who are experiencing religiously enmeshed maladaptive perfectionism.*

In the last several decades, scholars have produced compelling research relating to perfectionism and its impact on the mental health of individuals (for an extensive review, see Shafran & Mansell, 2001). Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature on the effects of *religiously* informed perfectionism on mental health (Bergin, Stinchfield, Gaskin, Masters, & Sullivan, 1988; Chang et al., 2015). While perfectionism is by no means unique to religious populations, there is evidence to suggest that it manifests in important and distinctive ways among the religious (Craddock, Church, Harrison, & Sands, 2010; Heise & Steitz, 1991; Sorotzkin, 1998). Importantly, Allen and Wang (2014) found that the majority of Mormons may be perfectionists, which has vital implications for therapy considering that perfectionism is often the cause of or related to many mental disorders (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2012; Erozkhan, Karakas, Ata, & Ayberk, 2011; Handley, Egan, Kane, & Rees, 2014; Reilly, Stey, & Lapsley, 2016). Some researchers and clinicians have already begun to discuss the unique ways perfectionism (especially *toxic* perfectionism) manifests among the Latter-day Saint (LDS, or Mormon) population (Allen, Wang, & Stokes, 2015; Richards, Owen, & Stein, 1993). In this article we seek to (a) further add to this discussion by offering a specific case study of a Mormon woman experiencing toxic perfectionism enmeshed with her religious beliefs, and (b) offer a

succinct examination of how the Christian concept of grace proved therapeutic to this particular client.

**PATHOLOGICAL PERFECTIONISM**

Scholars who study perfectionism specifically define it as a three-part construct (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). One manifestation of perfectionism is *self-oriented* perfectionism, which is described as holding very high standards for oneself and feeling ashamed or guilty when failing to meet those standards, which often manifests as self-recrimination (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Among LDS clients this can manifest in the form of daily experiences of guilt and shame over perceived sins of commission (e.g., self-recrimination for indulging in a caffeinated soft drink with lunch) but more often over sins of omission (e.g., not spending enough time reading scriptures, not doing enough with their kids or with their church calling). Another manifestation is *other-oriented* perfectionism, which entails having high standards for other people that are difficult or impossible to achieve, resulting in frustration and resentment. Among LDS and former LDS clients, this can manifest itself as anger and offense with other LDS people and their faults and failures (e.g., anger at a rude, judgmental, or clueless bishop). The third manifestation is *socially prescribed* perfectionism, or the belief that others have impossibly high standards for the individual that he or

she cannot meet, which manifests as shame (Enns & Cox, 2002). Among LDS clients, socially prescribed perfectionism can express itself in the form of ongoing self-consciousness and the experience that they are judged by others for every little fault or failing (sometimes to the point of social anxiety), even if in reality others are not judging them.

Researchers also make an important distinction between adaptive (healthy) and maladaptive (toxic) perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionism includes having high standards and desire for order or organization without experiencing intense amounts of anxiety, depression, guilt, or shame when one does not meet those standards (Allen & Wang, 2014; Craddock et al., 2010; Kim, Chen, MacCann, Karlov, & Kleitman, 2006). These standards may originate externally (as is the case for Mormons) but are often very internally motivating. By contrast, maladaptive perfectionism entails having unrealistically high standards, rigidly adhering to those standards, and measuring one's own self-worth (and often the self-worth of others) by how closely one does or does not meet those standards (Allen & Wang, 2014; Craddock et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2006). Allen and Wang (2014) described maladaptive perfectionism as "high standards and discrepancy" and adaptive perfectionism as "high standards and low discrepancy" (p. 258). Further, maladaptive perfectionism entails psychological inflexibility, anxiety or depression, and scrupulosity, wherein high standards are *determiners of worth*. In adaptive perfectionism, on the other hand, high standards are considered to be aspirational and are either less related or unrelated to self-worth. Allen and Wang (2014), for example, found that adaptive perfectionists feel confident about themselves in terms of identity and self-worth, and their high standards influence their religious belief positively; they view their high standards as qualities they aspire to live rather than punitive standards that prompt feelings of shame. Maladaptive perfectionists, on the other hand, tend to take up religious beliefs rigidly and absolutely as measures of self-worth, which negatively informs their religiosity. In Allen and Wang's sample of 267 Mormon college students, 77% were perfectionists. Of those individuals, 61% were adaptive perfectionists, while 39% were maladaptive perfectionists.

Some researchers have found these issues to exist quite broadly in the general population. Not only are the issues of perfectionism quite pervasive, but some researchers have found that perfectionism is a transdiagnostic process in that it contributes to many different anxiety-related, depressive, addictive, self-mutilating, and eating-disordered dynamics (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011). Because of perfectionism's transdiagnostic nature, it stands to reason that if therapists treat perfectionism, they simultaneously either treat or prevent multiple different mental illnesses at once. Some researchers have found that treating perfectionism reduced overall distress among teenagers in a treatment program (Cheng et al., 2015), while others found that having college students complete a web-based perfectionism treatment program helped with multiple issues (Arpin-Cribbie, Irvine, & Ritvo, 2012; Musiat et al., 2014).

Although perfectionism is neither endemic in nor unique to LDS culture, as shown above some Latter-day Saints do suffer from perfectionism, and it greatly affects the quality of their lives and the lives of those around them (Allen & Wang, 2014; Allen et al., 2015). Specifically among Latter-day Saints, maladaptive perfectionism is associated with an increase in depression and anxiety and a decrease in life satisfaction (Allen & Wang, 2014). In addition, this perfectionism intensified the relationship between scrupulosity (uncertainty and fear that one has committed a moral sin) and the experience of shame (Allen et al., 2015). The themes of moral inflexibility and rigidity arise repeatedly in research on perfectionism, in both LDS and non-LDS populations (Allen & Wang, 2014; Shafran & Mansell, 2001). Craddock et al. (2010), for example, found that strong family rigidity was a predictor of religiously dysfunctional perfectionism. Additionally, Crosby, Bates, and Twohig (2011) similarly observed that psychological inflexibility mediated the relationship between harmful religious behavior and maladaptive perfectionism among Mormons. This inflexibility, especially with personal standards, may also explain the differences between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism.

As we will demonstrate in the case of Vivi, rigidity in her expectations for herself and others also applied to her inflexible interpretations of religious teachings.

However, for many, this exacting process works most of the time. As Samuelson (2002) noted, "Those suffering from perfectionism tend to be wonderful, contributing, and effective people, and yet may feel that no matter what they do, it is never enough. These good people suffer from exaggerating their minor mistakes, weaknesses, or shortcomings to the point that they may become dysfunctional." Dysfunction, in this case, often takes the form of disturbance to love and work. Freud (1962), arguably the founder of talk therapy, observed that work and love are foundational to what it means to be human. Individuals who suffer with perfectionism have a lessened ability to experience compassion for self and others. Due to the three-part nature of perfectionism, suffering clients hold their standards higher than the fundamental worth of self or others, which prevents them from forming deeper and more compassionate connections. This perpetuates both the intrapersonal suffering, through harsh judgement of one's self, and interpersonal suffering, through private or public condemnation of other's actions and worth as well as private (or at times public) descriptions of how others think of the perfectionist.

### THE CONCEPT OF GOD'S GRACE

Given that maladaptive perfectionism proves to create a difficult style of life, examining the cause of perfectionism seems important. One contributor to this suffering seems to be a misunderstanding of the New Testament scripture Matthew 5:48, which reads, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Typically, Latter-day Saints interpret this verse as a need to be *flawless*, especially in keeping LDS commandments. However, as we will discuss later, this is not a correct exegetical interpretation.

Another contributor to this suffering for Mormons may be a misunderstanding of Christ's Atonement, specifically the doctrine of grace (Allen et al., 2015; Richards et al., 1993). President Dieter F. Uchtdorf (2015) of the LDS Church's First Presidency stated, "It is a most wondrous thing, this grace of God. Yet it is often misunderstood. Even so, we should know about God's grace if we intend to inherit what has been prepared for us in His eternal kingdom." Similarly to

Uchtdorf, the LDS theologian Robert Millet (2014) refers to grace as the "linchpin" of Mormonism, meaning that without grace none of Mormon doctrine holds together. Grace is the divine love and power that God gives his children to help them grow and transform into divine beings. Many LDS individuals struggling with perfectionism feel they are not worthy of this divine grace and thus cannot receive help from God to overcome their shortcomings. This perspective perpetuates their feelings of hopelessness, alienation, and scrupulosity. The experience of grace can ease, if not dispel, these negative feelings.

Some members of the LDS faith develop a misunderstanding of grace because of its seemingly paradoxical nature. In addition, Latter-day Saints may receive contradictory messages about grace from their church leaders and theologians. Some LDS church leaders and theologians, when teaching about Christ's grace, emphasize the necessity of good works and a person's best effort in order to receive divine grace (referred to in this paper as the *total effort* interpretation). In contrast, some church leaders and theologians emphasize the unconditional nature of grace; they teach that God's children never earn grace because he always already gives grace to all (referred to in this paper as the *grace as free/unconditional* interpretation). Ironically, both sides use similar scriptures from the Book of Mormon and Bible, but certain church leaders emphasize one interpretation, while other leaders emphasize another. For instance, one scripture that we hear often from our perfectionistic clients is 2 Nephi 25:23 from the Book of Mormon. This verse highlights the two predominant interpretations. Part of the verse reads, "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." Those who teach that God requires our complete and best effort in order to receive his grace emphasize the phrase "after all we can do." Those emphasizing the unconditional nature of grace highlight that "it is by grace that we are saved." Our clinical experience has shown that for Latter-day Saints struggling with perfectionism, the most common interpretation is an emphasis on the phrase "after all [they] can do."

According to the *total effort* interpretation, without a person's full and complete effort in obedience, that person is unable to receive any amount of grace or divine assistance. Some clients experience this model



of grace as requiring flawlessness (or very close to it) from the Lord's children. This interpretation creates a great deal of anxiety and depression for these saints, exacerbated by the grandiosity and perfectionism that is endemic in our age. Clients with a neurotic sense of grandiosity need to have their worth affirmed, and they experience fragility when anything detracts from it. Individuals experiencing perfectionism may believe that they have to live perfectly so they may feel worthy to be, to love, and to relate (Robb, 2002). Even very secular psychologists and theorists such as Albert Ellis (1986) have described in detail the problematic and neuroses-promoting effects of these dynamics. Ellis described how inflexibility and absolute dogmatism promote grandiosity and perfectionism, and hence emotional disturbance (like shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression). For many of our clients, this total effort or flawless accomplishment interpretation is a source of their stress and anxiety.

Contrary to the interpretation of grace that requires a sense of perfection, an alternative interpretation offers that God *unconditionally* distributes his grace because of his love for his children. The LDS theologian Robert Millet explains, "From a doctrinal perspective, God's grace is his mercy, his love, his condescension toward the children of men. Grace is unmerited favor, unearned divine assistance, goodwill, heavenly benefit, loving-kindness, tender mercy" (2011, p. 289). According to this interpretation, God's love for an individual is the only prerequisite to receiving his grace (a prerequisite that scripture describes as having already been met; see Romans 8:32–33). A person's total effort is not a condition for the divine distribution of God's grace. Millet (2011) continues by pointing out that salvation, exaltation, and eternal life are all unearned; an individual cannot trade money or good works to receive them. Instead, they are gifts that may only be inherited. Uchtdorf (2015) further explained, "Salvation cannot be bought with the currency of obedience, it is purchased by the blood of the Son of God." Uchtdorf also observed that there is a common misinterpretation of the phrase "after all we can do." He argues that we should not interpret the phrase "after all we can do" as equating "because of all we do." For Uchtdorf, no one really is capable of doing or has ever done all they can do. Instead, we are to

believe in Christ and repent of our wrongdoings. Thus, this interpretation requires letting go of legalistic requirements to receive God's loving grace and accepting that God already loves and cares for the individual. God then, according to his own will, showers blessings of grace unconditionally.

LDS members who subscribe to the total effort interpretation may feel uncomfortable with the perspective that divine grace is unconditional. They may wonder where obedience to God's commandments comes into play with grace. Elder Jeffery R. Holland (2008) helped explain this seemingly paradoxical aspect of grace. He indicated that there are unconditional and conditional aspects of the Atonement. The conditional aspects require obedience to God's commandments in order to receive specific blessings; however, even these conditional blessings "are not fully merited either" (p. 36). Even these conditional blessings are made available only through Christ's grace. It appears through Holland's perspective that God always offers the Atonement unconditionally; the conditional aspect is whether we accept what is so freely given. C. S. Lewis (1952) helped us understand this relationship between grace and obedience through works. For him, asking which was more important, "faith or works" (or in our case grace or obedience), was like asking "which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary" (Lewis, 1952, p. 148). Both are necessary components of the Christian life. We do not just feel grace, we live it, and it transforms us into more loving, more patient, and more people-oriented individuals. Grace is what inspires us to strive to obey God and sustains us in our daily efforts to follow him. Grace can come *first* as what inspires us to do good. Obedience to commandments is thus seen as a demonstration of already-present faith and grace. Grace can also come *after* we have chosen to follow God's will. Grace is thus the result of graceful living. It can also be present *throughout* the process. It can be the light that inspires the act, strengthens the individual through the act, and is given as a result of the entire transforming process. Ecclesiastical leaders often facilitate these transforming processes. As counselors, we also have the opportunity to facilitate the experience of grace and consequent graceful living as we work with our LDS clients who are suffering from toxic perfectionism. One example of the facilitation of grace through therapy is the case of Vivi.

### THE CASE OF VIVI

Bandages around her arms and legs covered the weeping cuts she had inflicted upon herself the previous week, and she sobbed wracking tears. She described how desperately she wished to die, to fully embrace the damnation consequent to her imperfection. "Be ye therefore perfect," she whispered hopelessly, and she recounted her years of failing to live this simple commandment. Despite her ongoing and focused effort to obey every rule of her religion taught to her by her teachers and leaders, she failed to keep all of them all of the time.

Naively meaning well, Vivi's therapist asked her about her understanding of the Atonement, or the Christian belief that the Son of God propitiated for the sins of all with his own blood. The sobs seemed to break her ribs; they came so hard and so fast. After pausing for a few minutes to breathe, Vivi informed her therapist that she believed that the Atonement was beautiful and true but that it did not apply to her at all. Her therapist sat in puzzled silence while she tried to compose herself through deep breaths. Vivi's seminary teachers had informed her that the Atonement applies only after a given soul does all that he or she can do. In essence, the Atonement applies only to those who have done everything they possibly could in every scenario without exception.

Because it was conceptually possible for her to keep all of the commandments and she did not, she had not done everything she could do. She shared several examples of when she had sat down to watch some television, exhausted after a long day of running after her children. During those moments, she was not reading her scriptures, or praying, or baking bread for her neighbor, or journaling, or reading her *Ensign*, or doing any of the other activities she was commanded to do. Because of this, the Atonement simply did not apply to her. At any moment, she confessed tearfully, including during the "selfish" time she spent with her therapist, there was always more she could be doing.

Vivi explained that she sought solace by thinking of which kingdom of heaven might remain open to her. Because she tried daily to be an obedient person and failed, she thought that the terrestrial kingdom might

be a possibility.<sup>1</sup> She shared that at church she had learned from an ill-informed fellow member that as a terrestrial soul peering up into the celestial degree of glory, she would "feel she were in hell" because she could see clearly the degree of glory she had deprived herself of.

Vivi found no reason to live, given that no heaven would serve as a heaven for her, and only darkness remained. She would be severed from her eternal family for failing to be perfect enough that the Atonement could apply to her. Losing all hope, she abandoned life, and her eldest child found her bleeding severely in the bathtub from self-inflicted injuries. Showing perspicacity beyond her years, this little girl called 9-1-1, effectively saving her mother's life.

Vivi looked at her therapist empty of hope. The challenge for her therapist was to help bring to bear the healing power of the doctrine of the Atonement to transform Vivi's experience from damnable to divine.

### WORKING WITH VIVI

Therapy with Vivi entailed four simultaneous endeavors. The first was the therapist's feeling and expression of grace. The second was the ongoing gentle leaning against perfectionism and the therapist encouraging Vivi to reinterpret her perfectionistic thoughts in more graceful ways. The third was ongoing bibliotherapy through books and *Ensign* articles (the LDS Church's official magazine) on the subjects of grace, love, compassion, and acceptance. The fourth was mindful experience of the gratitude and compassion Vivi has for others as an example of how others (and Christ) feel for her. Therapy with Vivi, given that it centered around religious and doctrinal issues, entailed the therapist working closely with Vivi's bishop in case Vivi felt that what the therapist introduced was not doctrine. Thankfully, through a mutual re-

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1 It is a common understanding in Mormon theology (rooted in the revelations of Joseph Smith) that heaven is divided into three parts: the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms. Each kingdom varies in glory as well as who is allowed to reside in them, the celestial kingdom being saved for the most righteous, while the telestial is saved for the least. For LDS references to this see the Doctrine and Covenants section 76.



lease of information, the therapist had the pleasure of working closely with a very supportive bishop who earnestly wished to learn more about mental health issues and perfectionism. The therapist and the bishop collaborated on several occasions in person and over the phone in their mutual support of Vivi.

#### FEELING AND EXPRESSION OF GRACE BY THE THERAPIST

The therapeutic work with Vivi often proved challenging and required the therapist to exercise patience and compassion due to his own desire to help with her attachment to the rigid black-and-white rules she held to be so sacred. Early in the relationship, for example, Vivi repeatedly informed her therapist that he was “judging her” as she spoke, especially if they were discussing religious topics. She would attempt to hide her face behind her hands, inhibiting a warm rapport between the two of them (she did this with others as well, further isolating herself from the shame because of her belief that they looked down on her for her imperfections). To assist in the therapy work and to help with his own anxiety, the therapist prayed for grace for Vivi before each session, focusing in his prayer on his compassion for her suffering and the reasons behind it and the gratitude he felt for the honor of working with such a cherished daughter of God.

As the therapist continued to pray for and focus on an experience of grace with Vivi, the sessions became less stressful for him. During these prayers, the therapist would ask God for ways and means to feel God’s love for her and her characteristics that God values. This changed the therapist’s approach to sessions. Once he discovered more and more of Vivi’s characteristics that God loves (her intensity, her passion, her compassion), he no longer felt the need to walk on metaphorical eggshells around her. Instead, he found himself better able relate in a warm and authentic manner. Vivi, in turn, began to relate more openly as well. This is not to say that Vivi’s behavior changed quickly (the sessions remained very challenging), yet through the experience of grace the therapist found more patience and acceptance that was helpful not only to him but also to the client.

#### LEANING INTO PERFECTIONISM

Vivi seemed to espouse the total effort interpretation of grace presented earlier. As shown above, Vivi

discussed with her therapist that the Atonement did not apply to her because she was unable to give perfect effort. At any moment during the day, she *could* have been keeping a necessary commandment (e.g., reading her scriptures, praying, baking bread for neighbors, journaling, etc.) but did not. Because she was not doing those things, the Atonement did not apply to her. Grace did not apply. This total effort interpretation of grace seemed to be killing her, burning the candle of her soul on both ends and in the middle. She rigidly and perfectionistically adhered to this total effort interpretation as if accepting grace meant accepting sin. Such black-and-white thinking proved to be a significant stumbling block and required continual disputation and reinterpretation. Leaning into this rigid, anxiety-ridden form of perfectionism entailed the therapist offering gentle reminders that there are other ways of interpreting grace while simultaneously validating her anxiety and confusion.

When Vivi’s therapist offered the unconditional interpretation of grace, she expressed some fear and confusion. “This goes against everything I’ve been taught,” she tearfully reported during one of her early sessions. She expressed her strong doubts about what her therapist said and claimed that “the Brethren would not agree” (referencing LDS church leaders). The therapist, unsurprised, continued to offer this perspective to Vivi. He worked under the assumption that those who fearfully hold to a doctrine that promotes absolute certainty do so because it assuages their fear of not measuring up or their fear of uncertainty about their predicaments. Minch (2014) touched on this point when he explained that this fear is what keeps Christians from living a life of grace. The religious use rigid interpretations of commandments in order to measure where they are in God’s economy. Obedience to commandments allows Christians to be confident that they are “righteous.” When they do not keep the commandments or do not have the commandments to compare their behavior to, they experience a level of anxiety because their supposed standing with God is now unknown.

This reminds us of Ellis’s (1986) observation that “people who adhere to the teachings of absolutistic and perfectionistic groups will tend to be more frequently and intensely disturbed than those who follow more flexible, less dogmatic religions” (p.

101). Because the dogmatism fuels the fear that then perpetuates the dogmatism, the therapist worked on both fronts with Vivi. On the dogmatism front, he encouraged exploration of interpretations of scripture different from her familiar interpretations; as for the fear of uncertainty, he worked to build and perpetuate warm rapport, practiced accurate listening and reflecting, and validated her fear as she worked to interpret her cherished religion in a new way. In addition, the therapist collaborated with Vivi's very warm and patient bishop who also validated her feelings and encouraged her continued exploration. Because LDS clients do not view therapists as endowed with ecclesiastical authority, the input from the bishop helped comfort and convince Vivi of the *goodness* and *rightness* of her uncertainty, even though "good" and "right" proved only approximate and still uncertain. When the bishop would ask her to read scripture, she would read a singular verse out of context (as is the habit among many) and would report on her increased feelings of unworthiness to the therapist. The therapist, in turn, would help her read the same verse in context of the whole story and would prompt her to read exegetical resources to apprehend other valid interpretations of the scripture story.

#### USE OF BIBLIOTHERAPY

Progress with Vivi proved very challenging, often proceeding in a "two steps forward, one step back" fashion. As she tried to grow in flexibility of her understanding of perfection and grace, Vivi began to learn that principles of the Atonement touch upon one another in a fluid and perpetual fashion, none absolute or rigid, all approximate and contextual. Her therapist, in cooperation with her bishop, asked her to carefully read and explore (in and out of session) the excursus on grace in the BYU New Testament commentary (Draper & Rhodes, 2017) as well as other texts that offered a warmer, more loving, and gentler understanding of grace, perfection, and the Atonement. She learned that an *exegesis* entailed an authentic interpretation of scripture, one that situates understanding within the culture, language, and time in which the Savior (or prophets) first spoke the words. Only after she did her exegetical research should she perform an *eisegesis*, or apply those understandings to herself in her current modern context. She struggled

valiantly, and she learned that scriptural meaning can change subtly through the processes of interpretation and reinterpretation as scriptures are laid down and studied over time. She also learned that the interpretations more authentic to the period in which they were written proved more comforting.

For example, two scriptures had haunted Vivi in the days leading up to her suicide attempt. Those were "Endure to the end" (Matthew 10:22; 3 Nephi 27:6; 2 Nephi 31:19–20; Doctrine & Covenants 10:69) and "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48). She took the exhortation to "endure to the end" to mean "suffer under great strain until you die," and she took the commandment to "be ye therefore perfect" to mean "be ye therefore *flawless*." She felt surprised to learn that her interpretations, although very common, proved quite inaccurate and, further, that authentic interpretations of these scriptures intertwined, supported, and validated each other.

Through reading the works of LDS theologians, Vivi learned that the word "endure" (or *hypomeno* in Greek) means "to wait or be patient" and that "the end" (or *teleios* in Greek) means "complete," "mature," or "blameless" (Silva, 2014, p. 471). Likewise, the word "perfect" derives from the same Greek word, *teleios*. So she worked with her therapist to put together these two different forms of *teleios*, "the end" and "perfect." Both entail completion, and both imply that growing complete is simultaneously a personal and relational process. For the person, it "signifies the undivided wholeness of a person in his or her behavior . . . the wholeness that a person is given and promised" (Silva, 2014, p. 479). Relationally, this completion entails "the need to be compassionate and loving to friend and foe" (p. 474).

Vivi came in for a session after her studies and retranslated "endure to the end" with the help of these theologians. "Endure to the end" did not mean suffer until death but instead meant "patiently wait for the completeness brought about by the Atonement" (Ash, 2013, p. 124). She still struggled with the exhortation to "be ye therefore perfect" and wondered how she could endeavor the process of completion. The work of lexicologists Luow and Nida (1988) helped clarify her understanding. They described Christ's command to "be perfect" during the Sermon on the Mount and noted that he spoke as a Jew to other Jews. His

audience knew history and scripture and understood that Christ referred to the *Shema* of the Old Testament found in Deuteronomy 6:4–5, which reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This scripture, to the people at the time, indicated that the Lord God is *teleios*, that he is complete. He is who he is. By understanding that God is perfectly who he is, the children of Israel knew that “God is one Lord” (Danker, 2000). Because he is the one Lord, they could trust him and love him because he will forever be who he is: completely their Father, completely their God. When giving the Sermon on the Mount, Christ commands the listeners to be like God, wholly and completely themselves, which will allow others to trust and love them as Israel could trust and love God. “Be ye therefore perfect” (taken in context of the time) implied “Be ye therefore trustworthy to love.”

At first, Vivi fought these alternative interpretations and would make statements like, “The Brethren have never said this before,” and “If this is true, why was I not taught this before?” (Both fair questions.) The hardest thing for her, however, proved to be her reconsidering of the thousand commandments that she believed would make her perfect if she obeyed them (perfect in the *flawless* sense, not the *complete* sense). Vivi argued that Christ could not, on the one hand, say “Obey my commandments,” then turn around and say “Be ye therefore trustworthy to love” when many of the commandments she fought to obey every day had nothing to do with loving. Her therapist asked her to think about how, perhaps, the commandments Christ personally gave could be seen as loving, and to start there. After a few weeks of struggle, Vivi shared that for years her focus on obeying the commandments had prevented her from growing whole because her focus was on the rules, not on the loving purpose of the rules (she focused on the letter of the law, not the spirit). Likewise, she learned that wantonly breaking commandments also kept her from growing whole because of the damage her actions caused in her life. Changing her focus still proved difficult, so her therapist continued to offer the unconditional interpretation of grace in hopes that it would help her understand the relationship between obedience and completeness. Unfortunately, the idea that grace is always already freely

given to all, that it cannot be earned or deserved, created some anxiety in Vivi. As mentioned earlier, people feel bereft of security and certainty of their own righteousness, their standing with God, if God has already and unconditionally offered his love in this way. In addition, if God already always loves, the nature of suffering becomes confusing.

This confusion persisted for Vivi in part because of a common misunderstanding of the nature of suffering relative to obedience. Alma 41:10 reads, “Do not suppose, because it has been spoken concerning restoration, that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness.” In this verse we learn that living contrary to God’s will does not lead to eternal happiness. Unfortunately, a common misinterpretation is, “If wickedness never was happiness, and if I’m unhappy, I must be wicked” (Draper, 2002, pp. 8–9). This is a misunderstanding on several fronts. First, it denies the obvious fact that (at least in the short term) wickedness is often associated with pleasure or fun (see Malachi 3:14–15, 3 Nephi 24:14–15, and 3 Nephi 27:11). Ergo, wickedness *can* be happiness, at least for a while. Second, it makes suffering itself immoral, implying that anyone who has experienced unhappiness, especially for an extended period of time, must have experienced their misery as a consequence of their own unrighteousness. Third, it denies the redemptive power of suffering both eternally and temporally. Eternally speaking, Christ suffered repeatedly during his ministry, enduring starvation in the desert, the temptations of Satan, the persecutions from the very people he came to save, and the ultimate agony in Gethsemane and on the Cross, all to redeem humankind. Temporally speaking, suffering redeems us from our personal mistakes because we learn (sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly) not to engage in the sorts of behaviors that lead to suffering. Our suffering can also redeem others because it teaches us compassion and gives us opportunities to instruct others about the pitfalls in life (see D&C sections 121 and 122 for examples). Fourth, such a belief denies the inherent difficulties of the mortal and immortal condition. We learn repeatedly from scripture that life entails suffering (see 2 Nephi 2, Alma 1, Alma 4, Alma 7, and Mosiah 26 for examples). Without opposition and difficulty, the “refiner’s fire” of mortality could not serve its purpose

(this is not to claim that all suffering serves this purpose, only that some suffering can. See 1 Peter 1 and 2 Corinthians 1 for examples). We also learn that suffering is a condition of being, even for God, who wept over the loss of a third part of his children and the wickedness of those living in Enoch's day (Moses 7:28) and who grieves with those who remain as they suffer mortality (Givens & Givens, 2012).

Vivi engaged in dialogue with her therapist about each of these points. First, the therapist addressed the issue of wickedness and happiness, uncoupling wickedness (hopefully a temporary behavior) from happiness (a temporary and fleeting feeling) while simultaneously asking Vivi about the long-term effects of destructive behavior for herself and others. Second, the therapist helped Vivi make sense of the suffering of the righteous in scripture (including the Son of God). "Were they a pack of sinners?" Vivi would ask herself. She would also explore the role of her suffering and the suffering of others. She noted that since her suicide attempt, others would approach her and confide in her about their own experiences of depression, trauma, and anxiety. In these conversations, she realized that people confided in her not to minimize her suffering but because they assumed she had learned compassion from it, which made her a safe person in whom to confide. Vivi and her therapist spoke deeply of compassion, which was an easy topic for Vivi because she tuned into others quickly, easily, and well, especially those who suffered as she suffered. With her therapist's encouragement, Vivi began to read stories in the scriptures with a different interpretive lens. Rather than assuming in scripture that every one of whom she read lived flawless lives, she attempted to see them as people trying their best in the face of adversity—both self-created and relationally created. She especially connected to the writings in the Doctrine and Covenants. She found for the first time that Joseph Smith was regularly called to "repent" (see D&C section 3 for an example). Rather than seeing him as flawless, she saw him as a man who suffered great toil and sorrow—a man who at times created problems for himself and at other times suffered in the face of opposition and trials in relationships (Bushman, 2007). Likewise, as she was able to understand these figures as enduring these trials, so too was she able to stop judging her trials. She began

to understand that trials were given to even the mighty and righteous.

With the encouragement of her therapist, Vivi began to rethink the role of commandments, policies, and rules in her life. She had believed that perfection meant flawlessness, exacting obedience to every commandment, rule, and policy offered by church leaders of what it means to be a "good Mormon." Because of the power of modern revelation, she had believed that it was God who had put up a wall of impassable rules of obedience, and only those who could obey all of them could scale the wall and reach him. For example, Vivi believed that every commandment from every prophet had come directly from God; thus, every commandment, policy, and procedure was divine. And because these prophets also encouraged obedience to societal norms and rules, every societal norm and rule was to be perfectly obeyed as well. As mentioned above, Vivi believed that only flawless obedience to all of these, all of the time, would allow her to scale the wall and get close to God. Through reading talks by Dieter F. Uchtdorf (2015) and Henry B. Eyring (2011), as well as books like *The Crucible of Doubt* (Givens & Givens, 2014), Vivi learned that the definition of sin is that which distances us from God. Paradoxically, if God builds unassailable walls of perfection, God then keeps his children from him, and in essence that either makes God a sinner or forces his children away from him, making them sin. She wrestled with this idea and revisited the fear of grace and the complicity of sin but slowly realized that those who come to God are transformed in relation to him and that the more they accept grace the more they live like Christ.

#### MINDFUL EXPERIENCE OF GRATITUDE AND COMPASSION

An important principle that Vivi learned was the co-constitution of suffering and well-being, of pain and serenity. She learned that these were not oppositional experiences but could be simultaneous (see Hebrews 12:2 as an example). By focusing on compassion and gratitude, it became easier for Vivi to find deeper meaning in the face of the shame and sadness that surrounded her perfectionism. Her therapist encouraged her to continue to look for things about herself, her relationships, and her world with compassion and gratitude. At first, she fought against finding anything about herself for which to feel gratitude because



it smacked of vanity (to be “puffed up,” as found in Alma 5:37). Her therapist encouraged her to look at the gifts and talents she embodied as being divinely granted by a loving God, which then encouraged gratitude for him.

Vivi felt each manifestation of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed) but particularly the self-oriented and socially prescribed manifestations. The therapist believed that each of these could be ameliorated by the experience of self-compassion and compassion for others. Checking with Vivi’s bishop about the possibility of introducing a non-LDS book into therapy, the therapist felt pleasantly surprised that the bishop readily agreed to a book on Buddhism, Christianity, and mindfulness. With some trepidation, the therapist introduced the text to Vivi to see if she would be willing to read it, not as scripture but as a helpful point of view. To the therapist’s surprise and delight, Vivi readily agreed to read Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (2007), in which the author demonstrates comparisons between the Buddhist ideas of compassionate mindfulness and Christlike charity. Together, Vivi and her therapist began practicing two different meditations together (as outlined and described in the book) toward the end of their sessions, one focused on gratitude and the other focused on compassion. These meditations entailed deep breathing and visualization exercises, with different foci. The meditation on gratitude entailed focusing on personal characteristics and loving relationships that the person feels grateful for and silently expressing gratitude to God for those characteristics and relationships. The compassion meditation—or loving-kindness meditation—is a guided meditation, the method and effectiveness of which is well-established in the literature (e.g., Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Chandler, Miner-Holden, & Kolander, 1992). As Vivi practiced gratitude and compassion for herself, she continued the work she began with the bibliotherapy, that of uncoupling her high standards from her self-worth. Especially on days when she would normally feel extremely ashamed because of her inability to accomplish all she wanted to do that day, she instead would endeavor to remain mindful of what she had accomplished that day with gratitude. This helped her experience compassion for herself in her trials through

acceptance of them. Her tendency to feel judged and shamed by others also lessened. Whenever she felt judged by others, she would reflect on how, in her readings (Matthew 5:44), she learned that judgment hurts the person doing the judging, and she even experienced some success as she endeavored to remain compassionate toward the person she believed would judge her.

Vivi endeavored to make gratitude and compassion a habit. Her efforts to learn to tune into gratitude—gratitude for her children, her patient spouse, and a God who never gave up on her—helped her to endure her cross as she strived to be aware of blessings in her life. Counterintuitively, this did not make the suffering vanish; rather, it gave meaning and context to the suffering. On one occasion, her therapist shared a story from ancient history where a king asked his wise men for something that would bring comfort to him in times of suffering and help him not take for granted times of ease or happiness. The wise man gave him a gift of a simple ring with a clear inscription: “This too shall pass” (Taylor, 1968). As Vivi endeavored to take her suffering as temporary, she slowly ceased to push deeper into her suffering, and her suicidal ideation gradually ebbed.

## CONCLUSION

Vivi and her therapist worked together rather intensively (weekly) for approximately a year and a half with the regular consultation of her bishop. Having progressed from a severe suicide attempt fueled by perfectionism to a more grateful and compassionate life, Vivi felt greatly helped by the course of therapy and the spiritual transformation that it provided. As of today, Vivi still stops by and consults with her therapist occasionally to touch base and spend 20 minutes or so in guided meditation on the topics of gratitude and compassion.

Vivi’s experience offers a helpful example of how perfectionism can greatly affect and be affected by a person’s religious beliefs. As shown, her rigid interpretation of specific scriptures and statements by LDS church leaders appeared to be a significant influence on her experience of toxic perfectionism. As previously mentioned, Vivi was often troubled by the scripture “Be ye therefore perfect,” which she interpreted as



meaning “Be ye therefore *flawless*.” Therefore, her desire to be perfect (flawless) existed because she felt God demanded it. Because Vivi’s perfectionism stemmed, at least in part, from her understanding of various religious concepts, the therapist was tasked with separating her toxic perfectionism from her religious beliefs. The therapist attempted to do this by introducing alternative interpretations of those scriptures, such as pointing out that the Greek word for perfect is *teleios*, which does not mean flawless but rather whole or complete. With the use of bibliotherapy and the support of her bishop, the therapist exposed Vivi to alternative interpretations that still fit within her Mormon context. These interpretations, at least in part, helped to mitigate her suffering.

Perhaps most importantly, grace was used as a therapeutic tool to help both the therapist and Vivi. In praying for grace, the therapist experienced greater compassion for Vivi and a greater capacity to help her through her suffering. Through deeper religious study (bibliotherapy) and mindfulness meditations, Vivi was able to see God’s grace working in her life, even when she struggled to meet her expectations. It is our opinion that it was these experiences with God’s grace that helped Vivi transform from damnable to divine.

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