

Salvation by Grace Alone, Not Works

| Introduction

Perhaps no criticism of Latter-day Saint theology is more passionately felt than the accusation that the LDS Church teaches a works-based salvation that denies or diminishes the grace of Christ. For Evangelical critics in particular, this strikes at the very heart of the gospel: the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. This document demonstrates that the LDS understanding of grace and works is not only biblically defensible but represents a more complete reading of the New Testament than the *sola fide* / *sola gratia* position that emerged during the Protestant Reformation.

| The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The critic's case is built on genuinely powerful scriptural texts and a coherent theological framework:

1. **Ephesians 2:8-9:** "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." This is perhaps the clearest single statement in scripture that salvation is a gift, not an achievement.
2. **Romans 3:28:** "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."
3. **Romans 4:4-5:** "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."
4. **Galatians 2:16:** "A man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ."
5. **Titus 3:5:** "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us."
6. **The theological argument:** If any human action is *required* for salvation — whether baptism, temple ordinances, tithing, or obedience to commandments — then Christ's sacrifice is rendered incomplete. Salvation becomes partly Christ's work and partly ours, which diminishes the glory of the Atonement and reintroduces the very legalism Paul fought against.
7. **The pastoral concern:** A works-based system produces anxiety rather than assurance. Believers can never know if they have done "enough." Grace, properly understood, produces peace, confidence, and gratitude — not endless striving.

This is a sincere theological position held by millions of devout Christians, and it captures genuine biblical truths. The LDS response must take it seriously.

| Biblical Response

The "Works" Paul Opposes Are Not the Works James Commands

The critical error in the *sola fide* position is the failure to distinguish between different types of "works" in the New Testament. Paul and James use the word in different senses, and harmonizing them requires recognizing this:

Paul's "works" = works of the Mosaic Law as a system of self-justification

When Paul writes against "works," his context is almost always the Mosaic Law and the question of whether Gentile converts must become Jews to be saved. Consider the context of his key statements:

- **Galatians** — Paul's entire letter opposes the Judaizers who demanded Gentile circumcision. "Works of the law" in Galatians means Torah observance (circumcision, dietary laws, festival observance) as a prerequisite for covenant membership.
- **Romans 3-4** — Paul argues that neither Jews (through Torah) nor Gentiles (through natural law) can achieve righteousness by law-keeping. "Works of the law" again refers to Torah observance as a justification system.
- **Ephesians 2:8-9** — Note verse 10, almost always omitted by critics: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto good works*, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Grace saves us *for* works, not *from* works.

James's "works" = obedient faith that produces fruit

- **James 2:14** — "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?" James answers his own question: no.
- **James 2:17** — "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."
- **James 2:20** — "Faith without works is dead."
- **James 2:21-24** — "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?... Ye see then that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."
- **James 2:26** — "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

James directly and unambiguously states that a person is "justified... not by faith only" (2:24). This cannot be harmonized with *sola fide* without either dismissing James (as Luther infamously wanted to do, calling it "an epistle of straw") or redefining "justified" to mean something other than what it plainly says.

Christ Himself Taught the Necessity of Works

Jesus did not teach *sola fide*. His own teachings consistently link salvation to obedience and action:

- **Matthew 7:21** — "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." Profession of faith alone

is explicitly declared insufficient.

- **Matthew 7:24-27** — The wise man *does* what Christ says; the foolish man hears but does not do. Both heard; only one is saved.
- **Matthew 25:31-46** — The sheep and goats are separated based on *works*: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Those who did not do these things are told to "depart."
- **John 14:15** — "If ye love me, keep my commandments."
- **John 15:10** — "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love."
- **Matthew 19:16-17** — When asked "what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Jesus answered: "Keep the commandments." He did not say "just believe."
- **Revelation 20:12-13** — The dead are "judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works."
- **Revelation 22:12** — "Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be."

Paul Himself Taught the Necessity of Obedience

Even Paul — the supposed champion of *sola fide* — repeatedly taught that behavior matters for salvation:

- **Romans 2:6-8** — God "will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life."
- **Romans 2:13** — "Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified."
- **Romans 6:1-2** — "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid."
- **Romans 6:16** — "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are?"
- **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** — Paul lists sins that will prevent people from inheriting the kingdom of God. If salvation were by faith alone regardless of behavior, this list would be meaningless.
- **Galatians 5:19-21** — Another list of sins that disqualify from the kingdom — "they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."
- **Galatians 6:7-9** — "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap... in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."
- **Philippians 2:12** — "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." This verse alone is devastating to the *sola fide* position as popularly understood.
- **2 Corinthians 5:10** — "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad."

Baptism as a Requirement

The New Testament explicitly links baptism to salvation:

- **Mark 16:16** — "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."
- **John 3:5** — "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."
- **Acts 2:38** — "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."
- **Acts 22:16** — "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins."
- **1 Peter 3:21** — "Baptism doth also now save us."
- **Galatians 3:27** — "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

If baptism is a "work," then the New Testament teaches salvation by "works." If baptism is not a "work" but an ordinance of grace, then the LDS position on ordinances is biblically sound.

| Early Christian Evidence

The earliest post-apostolic Christians did not teach *sola fide*. This doctrine was essentially unknown until the Protestant Reformation:

The Didache (late 1st / early 2nd century) — "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." It then describes specific behaviors required for the "way of life."

Clement of Rome (c. 96 AD, 1 Clement 30-32) — Clement affirms that we are justified by faith, not works, but then immediately describes the necessity of good works as inseparable from genuine faith. He does not articulate anything resembling *sola fide*.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD) — "Faith is the beginning, and love is the end... no man professing faith sins" (Ephesians 14). Faith and righteous conduct are inseparable.

The Shepherd of Hermas (mid-2nd century) — Extensively discusses the necessity of repentance, obedience, and righteous living for salvation. This was one of the most widely read texts in early Christianity.

Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD) — "Each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions" (First Apology 12).

Irenaeus (c. 180 AD) — Taught that human beings must cooperate with God's grace through obedience and righteous living.

No early Christian writer articulated *sola fide* as Luther understood it. The concept of salvation by faith alone, apart from any human response of obedience, is a 16th-century theological innovation. The early Christians universally understood faith and works as inseparable components of the life of discipleship.

| LDS Doctrinal Position

The Latter-day Saint understanding of grace and works can be summarized as follows:

Grace is Absolutely Central

- **2 Nephi 25:23** — "It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." This verse is often misread by both critics and members. It does not mean grace only kicks in after we have exhausted our own efforts. Read in context, "after all we can do" means "notwithstanding all we can do" or "in spite of all we can do" — acknowledging that even our best efforts are insufficient without grace.
- **2 Nephi 2:8** — "There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah."
- **Mosiah 3:17** — "There is no other name given... whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ."
- **Moroni 10:32-33** — "Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness... then is his grace sufficient for you."
- **D&C 20:30-31** — Justification and sanctification come "through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Grace is not merely one ingredient among many in LDS soteriology — it is the foundation. Without the Atonement of Christ, no amount of human effort, obedience, or ordinance observance could save anyone.

Works Are the Fruit of Faith, Not a Replacement for Grace

The LDS position is not "grace + works = salvation." It is closer to:

Grace → Faith → Repentance → Obedience → Ordinances → Endurance → Exaltation

Each step in this process is *enabled by grace*. We cannot even have faith without grace. We cannot repent without grace. We cannot obey without grace. The ordinances are themselves acts of grace — not hoops to jump through but covenants through which God channels His power into our lives.

This is precisely the relationship Paul describes in Ephesians 2:8-10. We are saved by grace, through faith, *unto good works*. The works do not earn salvation; they are the evidence and fruit of a living, saving faith.

The LDS View Harmonizes the Entire New Testament

The *sola fide* position must explain away James 2, Matthew 25, Philippians 2:12, Romans 2:6-8, and dozens of other passages. The LDS position harmonizes all of these texts with Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 3:28 without contradiction. Grace is the source; faith is the means; obedience is the evidence; ordinances are the covenants; endurance is the proof.

| Key Scriptures

Grace is Central (LDS Agrees)

Scripture	Key Text
Ephesians 2:8-10	Saved by grace through faith... created unto good works (note v. 10!)
Romans 3:23-24	All have sinned; justified freely by his grace
Titus 3:5	Not by works of righteousness but by his mercy
2 Nephi 25:23	By grace we are saved, after all we can do
2 Nephi 2:8	No flesh can dwell with God save through merits and grace of Christ

Works/Obedience Are Required (Critics Must Explain)

Scripture	Key Text
James 2:17, 20, 24, 26	Faith without works is dead; justified not by faith only
Matthew 7:21	Not every one that saith Lord, Lord — but he that doeth the will
Matthew 25:31-46	Judgment based on works of mercy
Philippians 2:12	Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling
Romans 2:6-8	God renders to every man according to his deeds
Revelation 20:12-13	Judged according to their works
Revelation 22:12	Reward according to his work

Baptism Saves

Scripture	Key Text
Mark 16:16	Believeth and is baptized shall be saved
John 3:5	Born of water and Spirit to enter the kingdom
Acts 2:38	Repent and be baptized for remission of sins
1 Peter 3:21	Baptism doth also now save us

| Responses to Common Objections

"Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly says not of works"

Response: Read verse 10. Paul's complete thought is a three-verse unit: saved by grace (v. 8), not by self-generated righteousness (v. 9), created in Christ Jesus *for good works* which God ordained for us to walk in (v. 10). The "works" Paul opposes in verse 9 are self-justifying works of the law — the attempt to earn salvation through human effort apart from Christ. He is not opposing the obedient life that flows from genuine faith. The LDS position affirms verse 9 and takes verse 10 seriously.

"Adding any requirement to faith nullifies grace"

Response: Does the critic require repentance for salvation? Almost all Evangelicals do. But repentance is something *you do* — it is an act of the will, a turning from sin. If repentance does not nullify grace, then neither do baptism and other ordinances. Does the critic require confession? Romans 10:9-10 states that confession with the mouth is necessary — another human action. The question is not whether *any* human response is required (virtually all Christians agree it is) but which responses are biblically specified. The LDS position includes the responses that the New Testament actually specifies: faith, repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, and enduring faithfully.

"Romans 4 says Abraham was justified by faith, not works"

Response: Paul's argument in Romans 4 is that Abraham was justified *before* circumcision (Romans 4:10), proving that Gentiles need not be circumcised to be in covenant with God. Paul is arguing against circumcision as a salvific requirement, not against obedience generally. Note that James uses the *same example* of Abraham to make the opposite point: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac?" (James 2:21). The resolution is that Paul and James are addressing different questions. Paul asks: can Torah observance justify you before God? No. James asks: can profession of faith without corresponding action save you? Also no.

"The thief on the cross was saved without works or baptism"

Response: The thief on the cross was saved by Christ's personal, direct declaration during His mortal ministry, before the church was even established and before the command to baptize was given (Matthew 28:19). Christ, as the Author of salvation, can extend salvation to anyone He chooses by His own authority. This is an exceptional case, not a normative pattern. After the Resurrection, when the church was organized and baptism was commanded, the standard pattern was faith, repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38). We should build doctrine on the rule, not the exception. Moreover, Latter-day Saints believe in baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29), providing the ordinance to all who did not have the opportunity in this life — including the thief.

"LDS teaching produces anxiety, not assurance"

Response: Any faithful disciple of Christ should experience both confidence in God's grace and a healthy awareness of their need to grow. Paul himself described this tension: "I press toward the mark" (Philippians 3:14); "I am not already perfect" (Philippians 3:12); "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Biblical assurance is not the certainty that nothing you do matters; it is the confidence that God's grace is sufficient for the repentant and faithful. The LDS view produces not anxiety but purpose — we have meaningful work to do in partnership with a gracious God.

"2 Nephi 25:23 proves Mormons believe they must earn salvation"

Response: This verse is often misunderstood. In context, Nephi is emphasizing grace, not diminishing it. The phrase "after all we can do" can mean "notwithstanding all we can do" or "even after our best efforts, we still need grace." This is confirmed by the surrounding verses and by other Book of Mormon passages that are among the most grace-centered texts in all scripture (e.g., 2 Nephi 2:8; Mosiah 3:17; Moroni 10:32-33). Elder Bruce C. Hafen explained: "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."

| Conclusion

The Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation does not add works to grace. It recognizes that grace and works are not competing categories but complementary aspects of the same divine plan. Grace is the power source; faith is the connection; obedience is the current flowing through. The Bible teaches the centrality of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), the necessity of obedience (James 2:24; Matthew 7:21), the requirement of baptism (Mark 16:16; John 3:5), and the reality of judgment according to works (Revelation 20:12). The LDS position is the one that takes *all* of these scriptures seriously without explaining any of them away. Far from diminishing grace, the LDS understanding magnifies it — because it shows grace working not just to declare us righteous but to *make* us righteous, through a lifelong process of covenant discipleship empowered by the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

| Resources

- FAIR: [Grace and Works](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [Grace](#)
- FAIR: [2 Nephi 25:23 — "After All We Can Do"](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [The Atonement of Jesus Christ](#)
- Brad Wilcox, "His Grace Is Sufficient" (BYU Devotional, 2011)
- Robert L. Millet, *Grace Works* (2003)

| Addresses

- [\[\[_obsidian_research/arguments/Salvation-by-Grace-Alone-Not-Works|Argument: Salvation by Grace Alone, Not Works\]\]](#)

| Related Defenses

- [\[\[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-full|Not Real Christians Defense \(Full\)\]\]](#)
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