

Striving or Keeping the Commandments? Answering Mormons

by *Bruce F. Levi*, ICARE Ministries

ICARE Ministries recommends and teaches Christians to witness to Mormons in the way that Jesus did in the New Testament (Matthew 5:48; Luke 10:25-37; 18:18-27; John 4:4-26). The goal of that way is to help the Mormon focus on the fact that God's standard for salvation is perfection now and that he or she is not meeting the standard, but is a helpless sinner. This prepares the way for the presentation of the gospel, the good news of God's grace.

The Escape to Relativism

After being presented with the fact of God's standard of perfection now for complete salvation, Mormons usually realize that they do not measure up to God's standard of perfection for salvation. Some Mormons become humble and ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ's remedy for sin. However, other Mormons will escape into relativism and state that God wants mere striving, or trying, to keep the commandments for salvation.

It is only natural for people to want to escape into moral relativism when confronted with God's standard of perfection. The first humans did this in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Mormons and other unsaved people, when confronted with their own guilt and the perfect holiness of God, and knowing only their own inconsistent works as a remedy, will do this same thing. Our task as Christians is to guide them into biblical teaching.

However, the idea that God demands only striving for salvation is not official Mormon doctrine. LDS scripture, Doctrine & Covenants, makes this very clear in its very first section, verse 31: "For God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance." Since the "least degree" of anything is some tiny amount just above zero, it is clear that even that tiniest measure of sin cannot be allowed by God.

And, of course, this lessening of God's standard is not biblical doctrine. Jesus, God the Son, stated in Matthew 5:48, "be perfect" just as God the Father is perfect. Note the present tense of the verb to be. The genuine Christian has been perfected (Hebrews 10:14) by Christ's grace through faith (Romans 4:1-13). The Christian knows that only Jesus Christ can do this, because all humankind is powerless to perfect and overcome sin himself. If one will keep the commandments for salvation the standard is perfection (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10).

Robinsonian Mormons

Some Mormons find the idea of only striving for salvation, rather than actually keeping commandments, in the popular teachings of Professor Stephen E. Robinson of Brigham Young University (the Mormon Church's own university in Provo, Utah). However, Robinson is not an official spokesperson for the LDS Church. He is not one of its General Authorities, those top leaders who are the only ones with the authority to proclaim doctrine. Robinson himself recognizes this and states clearly that he does not have "any authority to speak for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" and that his ideas are "strictly personal points of view" (Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ*, preface p. xii, 1992, Desert Book, Salt Lake City, UT). You may need to point this out to the Mormon.

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Why do some Mormons turn to Professor Robinson, rather than current, official LDS doctrine? Because Mormons are constantly taught to work hard for perfection, when they come face-to-face with the reality of their inability to actually keep the commandments, they seek a way to lessen and escape God's requirement. They hope to be graded "on the curve," as it were, and not according to the absolute standard of God's perfection.

Official LDS Doctrine

Where is current, official LDS doctrine written and can the Christian obtain it for use in witnessing to Mormons? Anyone can easily obtain the LDS Church's official publication, *Gospel Principles*, a 393-page book of its teachings, or doctrines. The most recent edition, 1997, is easily obtained at LDS bookstores, online from the LDS Church, other online sources, and can often be obtained directly from members of the LDS Church upon request. Anyone wanting to have an effective and thorough witness to Mormons should obtain and use this book.

Use the book tactfully and carefully with Mormons. Don't use it with a condescending chip on your shoulder or with haughtiness. Kindly show them from the inside cover that *Gospel Principles* is an official LDS Church publication. Ask them, "Because this is an official LDS publication, would it contain any doctrinal errors?" They will invariably answer, no. If they ask you where you obtained the book, tell them a returned Mormon missionary recommended it. This is true, because the author of this article is a returned Mormon missionary.

Proper Use of the Law

Remember, the purpose of law is to show the sinner that he is a helpless, hopeless sinner (Romans 3:20; Romans 7:7; 1 Timothy 1:8-11) in order to bring him to Jesus Christ for justification by grace alone through faith alone (Galatians 3:24). It is OK to use both the laws of Mormonism and the law of God in the Bible to show the Mormon his sinfulness, so that he will be humble and ready to accept the message of grace.

Mormonism's Atonement

In order to answer the Mormon's objection to actually keeping the commandments – his idea that he need only strive to keep the commandments - it helps to first understand a bit about Mormonism's salvation. *Gospel Principles'* chapter on the Atonement, page 71, states that all humankind "are fallen and lost, and must perish except it be through the atonement." Page 74 teaches that Jesus Christ's atonement overcame physical death and that he freely provides physical resurrection for "All people who have ever lived." As far as this goes, this matches biblical teaching.

However, in Mormonism, Christ's atonement guarantees only physical resurrection. This does not match biblical teaching. For the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ graciously, freely provides complete salvation beyond mere resurrection (Hebrews 7:25). Regarding spiritual salvation of the soul, the atonement of Mormonism only "makes it possible... to be saved from... sins" (page 74). The Jesus of Mormonism did not actually save anyone with his atonement, but only made salvation a possibility. Mormonism teaches that people are given resurrection as a gift, but they must work to earn salvation, a place in one of three heavens.

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Five Requirements

So, when the Mormon says that he needs to only strive, or try hard, to keep the commandments to have salvation, go to page 75. Point out: “Only those who accept the Atonement will be saved from spiritual death.” Show them that the official LDS way to accept the atonement of Christ is by meeting five requirements. First, is “placing our faith in him [Jesus Christ].” This faith is the way through which Mormons are to do the other four requirements: (2) “repent of...sins, (3) get “baptized,” (4) “receive the Holy Ghost,” and (5) “obey his [Christ] commandments” (page 75). Ask him if merely striving to get baptized or to get the Holy Ghost is enough. And, if not, then why is just partially keeping the commandments good enough?

“But Jesus Died for My Sins”

Sometimes, when Mormons realize that God’s standard is perfection, they will say, that is why Jesus made atonement for my sins. Taken at face value, this is biblical doctrine. Don’t be confused at this point in thinking the Mormon is actually a Christian. Ask the Mormon what he must do to accept the atonement. Go immediately to page 75 in Gospel Principles and review with him all five requirements. Because the list of five requirements is all about self-effort, your goal is to show the Mormon that he or she is not trusting in Jesus alone for salvation, but is trusting in himself. Even faith, for Mormons, is the way “through” which the other four works are accomplished. In Mormonism, faith is a power that enables the Mormon to earn salvation by doing works. This is not biblical doctrine. More on this below.

A Bit of Ambiguity

There is a bit of ambiguity on page 75 in the paragraph that follows the list of five requirements for accepting the atonement. Here it states, “To make his atonement fully effective in our lives, we must strive to obey him and repent of our sins.” If this comes up in your conversation, show him the very next paragraph, which clears things up: “... Christ’s atonement makes it possible to be saved from sin if [italics in the book] we do our part.” The use of “if” shows the conditional nature of LDS salvation, wherein Christ does some work and each person must do his own part to earn salvation. Your task is to show the Mormon the utter impossibility of this with the following.

Parable of the Creditor, the Debtor, and the Benefactor

Use the parable the Atonement chapter of Gospel Principles, pages 75-77, to show the role of works in Mormonism’s salvation. In the parable, all of humankind (debtors) owe a debt to God the Father (the Creditor), which they cannot pay. Christ (the Benefactor) steps in and pays the debt with his atonement. This sounds like the biblical doctrine of the atonement. However, then the Jesus Christ of Mormonism does something that the biblical Jesus Christ does not do. The Jesus of Mormonism sets his own terms for salvation that “will not be easy” (page 77). Show this to the Mormon and the chapter’s description of those terms on page 78: “if we will keep his [Christ] terms, which are to repent and keep his commandments, we may return to live with our Heavenly Father [salvation].” Show the Mormon that it plainly states here that Mormons are to “keep the commandments,” not merely strive to keep them.

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The Work of Faith in Mormonism

There is more. Recall from above that faith in Christ is what enables Mormons to do the other four requirements for accepting the atonement of Christ. Gospel Principles' 18th chapter is "Faith in Jesus Christ." From page 117, point out that "faith is a principle of power that motivates our day to day activities." In other words, faith is the power to work. Point out that page 118 states, "To have faith in Jesus Christ means to have such trust in him that we obey whatever he commands. There is no faith where there is no obedience." This plain statement to "obey whatever he [Jesus] commands" is no statement of mere striving. Furthermore, Page 118 also states, "men must have perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel [Jesus Christ], or they cannot be saved in the Kingdom of God." Point out that because faith is the way through which repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, and obeying the commandments are accomplished, incomplete faith will result in incompleteness in achieving the other four requirements.

Page 120 states, "Faith involves all we can do to bring about the things we hope and pray for." Again, point out that this doing of "all we can do" is no mere striving. "Can" means "able" in English. Thus, even the faith of Mormonism is a work of human effort.

The Covenant of Mormonism

Chapter 15 of Gospel Principles, "The Lord's Covenant People," teaches that people enter into a covenant or sacred agreement (page 95) when they join the Mormon Church. Show the Mormon from page 96: "We promise to remember him [Jesus Christ] and to obey his commandments." Page 98 states: "As the Lord's covenant people, we must keep his commandments." Page 99 states that Mormons are to "follow and obey Christ to the end of their lives." There is not a hint here at mere striving, for they "must keep" the commandments.

Page 133 also speaks about the covenant of Mormonism. It states, "We must stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places." Ask the Mormon if he is a witness for God at all times, in all things, and in all places.

Page 155 also speaks to the covenant of Mormonism. It states, "We promise to keep his commandments." These commandments are "obligations." There is no mere striving here.

Page 303 speaks to the covenant of Mormonism. To earn complete salvation, known in Mormonism as "exaltation," the Mormon must "accept the gospel and all its covenants: and take upon us the obligations which the Lord has offered; and... live by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God." Also, "Our faith in him [Jesus Christ] must be such that we repent of our sins and obey his commandments." There is no hint of mere striving here. Ask the Mormon, after showing him these facts, if he has accepted "all" the covenants, which are "obligations," and if he lives by "every word that proceedeth" from God.

Repentance: The Way to Forgiveness

There is more. Recall from above that repentance is requirement number two of Mormonism's list of the five requirements for accepting the atonement (page 75). The chapter on the atonement ends with the requirement of repentance (page 78). Even the chapter on faith lists repentance as needed for salvation: "Through faith in the Savior and through repentance, we make his atonement

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fully effective in our lives” (page 118). Chapter 19 of Gospel Principles is “Repentance.” It clearly states on page 123, “Repentance is the way provided for us to become free from sins and receive forgiveness for them” Point out that repentance is “the way” to forgiveness.

Show the Mormon the severity of his official doctrine by this quote near the bottom of page 123: “There is no royal road to repentance [*italics in original*], no privileged path to forgiveness. Every man must follow the same course whether he be rich or poor, educated or untrained, tall or short, prince or pauper, king of commoner... There is only one way. It is a long road spiked with thorns and briars and pitfalls and problems.”(This is a quote from *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, a book written by LDS prophet Spencer W. Kimball. That book is also a wonderful resource in witnessing to Mormons on the subject of repentance, for it shows the utter impossibility of meeting the LDS Church’s standards for earning forgiveness. This book can be used with the stubborn or skeptical Mormons who seem unable to move away from the idea that mere striving is enough.)

Thus, current, official repentance in Mormonism is “the way” to gain forgiveness for sins. It is a very difficult “long road” of “pitfalls and problems.” This is not describing mere striving.

The Christian can readily see that Mormonism’s repentance is a far cry from the biblical definition of repentance. The New Testament Greek word that is translated into English as repentance means simply “to turn.” In context, we know that this means to turn from self and self-effort to God (Acts 20:18-21). In addition, biblical repentance is granted by God and is not a process of self-effort (Acts 11:18). More on this below.

The Seven-Step Process of Repentance

Take the Mormon to pages 124-125, which plainly spell out Mormonism’s seven-step process of repentance. Point out that each and every step is a “must.” Ask the Mormon if he can leave something undone if it is a must: “Can you leave the spark plugs out of your car’s engine if they are necessary (must be done) to make the car go?” The dictionary defines must as “to be compelled by physical necessity; be required by immediate or future need or purpose; be required by law, custom, or moral conscience; be compelled by natural law” (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 1973).

As follows, thoroughly review Mormonism’s repentance process of seven must-do steps. Remember, the purpose of using law is to show someone that he/she is a hopeless sinner in need of the Savior. Grace has no meaning without a context of its undeservedness. Going through the following requirements with a Mormon may be a bit unpleasant. However, it is necessary. Be as nice as possible, while remaining firm. The Mormon must come face to face with the fact that each step is a “must” to show him his inability to comply.

1. “We must recognize our sin.” Show the Mormon that he/she is to not to “excuse [himself] in the least point.” Ask the Mormon what the least commandment (point) is. Ask, “If the “least point” cannot be excused, then merely striving to keep major commandments cannot be enough, can it?” Point out that the teaching that one cannot hide any act of sin from the Lord is proof that only striving to keep the commandments is not enough. Ask him if has repented of “the least point.”

2. “We must feel sorrow for our sins.” Show the Mormon that he is to “feel that [his/her] sins are terrible” and that he “must want to...abandon them.” Show him that he is to humble himself and have a broken heart and a contrite spirit in order to truly repent of “all” his sins. Notice that “all”

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sins must be repented of. Point out that if he is only striving to keep the commandments, he has already failed to keep of them, and has therefore sinned “in the least point.” Ask the Mormon if he has felt terrible and is truly humble about “the least point.” Ask him what it means to have a “broken heart” and a “contrite spirit.” If he cannot define these terms readily and accurately, how can he have met this requirement? (Where these words are used in the Bible (Psalm 34:18, etc.), contrite is an English word for “crushed.” Broken is English for “destroyed.”)

3. “We must forsake our sins.” Show the Mormon that this means: “If we have stolen something, we will steal no more. If we have lied, we will lie no more.” The use of “no” and “will” mean just that. It is plain that mere striving to keep the commandment is not enough, for he “will” to do “no” sin if he has truly repented. He “will” not do that sin again, if he has truly forsaken it. Ask him, “What sins have you not yet forsaken?”

4. “We must confess our sins.” Point out that the Mormon is “commanded” to confess “all” his sins to the Lord. Ask him, “If only striving is necessary, why are you commanded to confess all your sins? For mere striving will always leave some commandments undone. Have you confessed those sins of incompleteness?”

Mormons must confess certain sins to their Church authority. Ask him if he has done this. Show him that sins against other persons are to be confessed to that person. Ask him if he has always done this.

5. “We must make restitution.” Point out that he is commanded “as much as possible... make right any wrong” and that the word “any” means all. He is to make restitution for “any sin” including “the least point” in requirement one. Ask him if he has failed to restore any sin, even the least one. Point out that the use of “any sin” does not allow for mere striving.

6. “We must forgive others.” Point out that “The Lord will not forgive us unless our hearts are fully cleansed of all hate, bitterness, and bad feelings against other people.” Notice the words “fully” and “all.” Ask him, “If mere striving to keep the commandments is all that is needed, why the use of “fully” and “all?” Ask the Mormon if he/she is honestly “fully cleansed” of “all hate, bitterness, and bad feelings.”

7. “We must keep the commandments of God.” Point out that the word strive is not included in this must-do step. It simply says “keep the commandments.” Show him that seven commandments are specifically listed under this must-do step. They are: paying tithes, keeping the Sabbath Day, sustaining LDS Church authorities, loving the Lord, loving our fellowman, praying, and being kind to others. Explain that leaving those seven things undone means that this must-do step number seven is incomplete. Ask the Mormon how it can possibly be that he has completed the seven steps.

Repentance is a Twice Daily Process

A discussion on the seven-step LDS repentance process is not complete without showing the Mormon when he is to repent. From page 127 show him, “this life is the time” to repent.” This is important, for some Mormons will claim that they can put off full repentance until the next life. Ask him if he is planning to put off some repentance to the afterlife. (Of course, the Bible teaches that this life is the only time to repent (Hebrews 9:27).

Point out the real significant teaching on page 127: he is to repent - which by definition is the seven-

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step process – twice every day! He is to repent every morning when he gets up and every night before he goes to bed! Ask him why repentance is to be done every morning when he has slept all night, if mere striving is all that is needed. Ask the Mormon if he has truly complied with the seven-step process every day in the past week, month and year. If he says that he did not do this, ask him if when he will repent of not repenting.

Obedience

If the above discussion is not enough, go to Gospel Principles' chapter, "Obedience." Show him that page 224 states, "By keeping God's commandments, we prepare for eternal life and exaltation." (Eternal life and exaltation are Mormon words for complete salvation.) Show the Mormon that there is no mention here of mere striving.

Show him the quote from the Book of Mormon on page 225: "...the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them (1 Nephi 3:7). When we find it difficult to obey a commandment of the Lord, we should remember Nephi's words." Ask him, "Since the Lord made a way possible to do all the commandments, how could merely striving be the real doctrine?"

Point out, on page 227: "He [God] doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you..." And, "If you keep my [God] commandments and endure to the end..." There is no hint here of mere striving.

Page 252 quotes former Mormon Prophet, Spencer Kimball, from his book, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*: "there is no indication of forgiveness to any soul who does not totally repent." Point out that the use of "no indication" and "totally repent" leaves no room for mere striving. Ask him, "Would not 'fully repent' mean just that – to do the seven steps twice a day as is taught by Church leaders in the official Church manual?"

Mission Impossible

The book, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1969, Bookcraft, Inc.), by LDS Church Prophet Spencer W. Kimball is another good tool to use when witnessing to Mormons. Because it is quoted in *Gospel Principles* and listed in its bibliography (page 383), it can be used with authority. *Miracle's* first chapter, "This Life is the Time," explains the command for Mormons to repent in this present life. It warns, for example, on page 7, "One of the most serious human defects in all ages is procrastination." Page 9 states, "But for those Latter-day Saints who are valiant, who fulfill the requirements faithfully and fully, the promises are beyond description." Page 11 describes a second chance for salvation for non-Mormons, "but for Latter-day Saints the time is now (*italics in original*)."*This is plain-* a mere striving to keep the commandments is not an option for serious Mormons. The book has dozens of passages that teach the necessity of keeping all the commandments now in this life only. However, if your aim is to use it to bash the Mormon or just argue with him, do not proceed.

Telling the Good News

At any time during your conversation on repentance and humankind's inability to keep the commandments, the Mormon indicates genuine personal humility; the good news of what Jesus Christ has done to actually save the sinner can be given. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Be clear about his

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need to trust Jesus alone for complete salvation. Do not lead him in an empty “prayer for salvation.” He needs to show a desire to be reconciled to God.

Perfecting Our Lives

If all the above is not clear enough that mere striving is not Mormonism’s current, official way of salvation, Gospel Principles has an entire section (“Unit 7”) of twelve chapters titled, “Perfecting Our Lives.” Starting on page 159. this section contains 70 pages of detailed instructions on what the Mormon is to do in twelve areas of his covenant of obedience to the Mormon Church. Each chapter’s use of imperative words, listed below by chapter, indicate that mere striving to keep the commandments is not enough for him to earn salvation.

Chapter 24, The Sabbath Day: to be, should, direct command, no, not do any, only, turn away.

Chapter 25, Fasting: should, neither nor.

Chapter 26, Sacrifice: whatever he requires, shall, should, are to be, willing to sacrifice everything, willing to do anything.

Chapter 27, Work and Personal Responsibility: should never, should, Lord is not pleased, should accept, we are commanded.

Chapter 28, Service: must, should never fail, should.

Chapter 29, The Lord’s Law of Health: must obey, Lord commands us, counsels us against, should avoid, should not, should.

Chapter 30, Charity: commanded, should, should not, unless we, are not, we do not, we do, keeping his commandments, we must be obedient to the principles of the gospel, must repent, must forgive, will not, we too can do so.

Chapter 31, Honesty: “Complete honesty is necessary for our salvation;” no one can be saved without honesty, must be honest in all things, To the Lord there are not acceptable reasons, must look carefully at our lives, If there are ways in which we are being even the least bit dishonest, we should repent of them immediately. (Because this chapter clearly states “complete honesty,” you may wish to turn to it, page 203, to show the Mormon the absoluteness of this requirement.)

Chapter 32, Tithes and Offerings: We have been given commandments; (the language is clear that Mormons are simply expected to give tithing, fast each month, contribute money attend the fast and testimony meeting, contribute missionary funds, and offer their time, etc. – not merely try to do so.)

Chapter 33, Missionary Work: we must, need to use, Lord has commanded, every member is to be a missionary. Pages 214-215 has a list of nine items that the Mormon “can do.” Can means, “has the ability to,” not just the ability to strive to do. Ask him if he has done these.

Chapter 34, Developing Our Talents: we must, we should not, all these thing are necessary.

Chapter 35, Obedience: better to obey because of fear than not at all, by keeping God’s commandments, it is a hard thing you require of us, God gives no commandment unless he prepares a way to obey; the kingdom is governed by law and it is by obedience that blessings come. (Mormons are to keep the commandments and endure to the end.)

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Biblical Repentance

It is necessary at some point to explain biblical repentance to the Mormon. This, so he can see how different it is from Mormonism's repentance and so that the Holy Spirit may use it for his salvation. It is unlikely you will get to this in the same conversation that covers Mormonism's definition of repentance and salvation. You will most likely need to schedule additional conversations with the Mormon.

The Old Testament contains many incidences of God's command to repent. For example, Ezekiel 14:6 states, "Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abomination." The Old Testament Hebrew word that is translated into English as repentance mean simply "turning" (Harper's Bible Dictionary, 1973).

In this same passage, Ezekiel 14:6, we also see that the translators used the English word "turn." In fact, "turn" is the more common translation than is "repent" in English translations of the Old Testament. For example, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). The English word "return" is also used in the Bible in the sense of repentance (Malachi 3:7).

Because "to repent" is "to turn," from what, and to what, are we to turn? The Bible is clear that God wants us to turn away from evil; from sin. Ezekiel 33:11 states, "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways." See also Deuteronomy 30:10; 1 Kings 8:33; Proverbs 1:23; Jeremiah 3:14; Jeremiah 4:4; Hosea 6:1-3; Amos 5:4-6, Amos 21-24.

However, God does not want us to only turn from evil. He wants us to also turn to Him. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Ezekiel 33:12, 13 states that the Lord commands people to not trust in their own righteousness. That people are to turn to the Lord for His righteousness is plain from the context of the entire Old Testament. When God called Abraham to begin the nation of Israel, He said that He "will be their God." The first of the Ten Commandments tells us to worship only the one true God (Exodus 20:3). The Old Testament prophets were continually calling the Israelites to return to the worship of God (Joel 2:12, 13).

The Israelites often seemed to think that God was interested only in the outward appearance; that mere changing of their outward behavior constituted repentance. Often the Israelites seemed to go through the motions of ceremonial repentance with their sacrifice in the temple and the following of the Law of Moses. Today, people think and do much the same thing by going to their church service to receive the Lord's Supper, go forward to pray, or do confession, as if those outward acts constitute real repentance. However, God wanted such a turning to Him that He held the people accountable for the sins that they did not even realize they had committed (Leviticus 5:15-19).

In addition, God was clear in the Old Testament that turning to Him included a turning of one's entire being to Him (Deuteronomy 4:29; 1 Kings 8:39, 1 Kings 8:48; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Job 11:13; Joel 2:12, 13; Micah 6:6-8.) God was not interesting in mere outward appearance of repentance; He wants the hearts, minds, and, souls of men to be in full fellowship with Him. That is why He created mankind. That is the kind of relationship Adam had with God in the Garden of Eden. What God wanted was what we often call "conversion."

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In the New Testament, Jesus and His apostles further elucidated the idea of repentance as not just outward acts and ceremonies, but the need for all people to also turn from self, false religion, evil thoughts, evil ideas, evil motives, and indeed from all evil (Matthew 5:21-48). They also taught the need to turn to God, as Paul explained near the end of his life's ministry (Acts 20:21). Conversion is also a theme of the New Testament.

In his ministry of forerunner to our Lord and Savior Jesus, John the Baptist, called the people to repentance. He baptized repentant people in the Jordan River as a symbol of their repentance – their turning from sin and turning toward the coming Messiah, or Christ (Matthew 3:1-6; Luke 3:8).

When Jesus Christ began His ministry, he began it with a proclamation to repent (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). He told an audience twice in one conversation, “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13: 3, 5). Later, Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the message of repentance (Mark 6:12). Repentance must be important.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is an illustration of repentance. The son, who was deep in sin, “came to himself” (He turned, or changed, his thinking). He realized, “I have sinned” (His emotions or heart turned/changed). He made the decision to “go to my father” (He turned back to his father; He literally changed direction).

Peter preached repentance on the day of Pentacost and 3,000 people received salvation (Acts 2:38). He wrote later that God's will is for all men to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

The Apostle Paul taught that God commands all men to repent (Acts 17:30). Paul told how he had, throughout his entire ministry, faithfully proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles, “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

It can be concluded from the above Bible references, and many others not listed here, that repentance is not only a turning away from teachings, thoughts, and behaviors that are contrary to God's will and God's character, but is, at the same time, a turning toward God for His salvation.

Biblical repentance is a turning both away from self and sin and a turning to Jesus alone for salvation. For “godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10). In fact: “...now God commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). In order for salvation to take place, one must turn [repent] from his own ideas, actions, religion, self-righteousness, etc, which he mistakenly believes can save him.

Repentance unto salvation is a gift from God (Acts 5:31; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). It is not a work of mankind that comes from within man. And like repentance, salvation is received by the believer as a gift from God (Romans 6:23; Romans 11:5-6). Any gift, by definition, has its origin with the giver, not the receiver. Salvation cannot be earned by works: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5).

God's true salvation is found only in the Son of God, Jesus Christ: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). See also John 10:7-9; Matthew 7:13; Luke 13:24-27; Acts 4:12.

Striving or Keeping the Commandments? Answering Mormons

by Bruce F. Levi, ICARE Ministries

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The simplicity of John 3:16 says: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Salvation is given by God: “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” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation is initiated and completed by God: “...[God] hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world... Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will” (Ephesians 1:4-5). Just as people adopt children, Jesus adopts us; we do not adopt Him.