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MOVING MORMONS TOWARD A PERSONAL AWARENESS OF SIN

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The woman on the phone was unhappy, and she made me aware of her displeasure in very clear terms. She had just read an article that critiqued Mormonism. Being a sincere and committed Latter-day Saint, the article offended her. She told me that the LDS Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons) was the true church and that she was confident of her belief. This prompted me to ask her how much she struggled with sin. Her reply was quick and decisive: "I'm doing fine; I hardly ever sin at all." Realizing I might never speak to her again, I asked, "When you pray during this next week, would you be willing to ask the heavenly Father to show you any sin you might have? After all, if there is any sin, it would be good to know about it so it can be confessed, and if there is no unknown sin, you really have nothing to worry about." She replied without hesitating, "Why would I want to pray a thing like that? There'd be nothing to see anyway."

Her reply saddened me and highlighted a superficial view of sin that I find common among many Mormons. This view significantly affects how Mormons understand forgiveness, guilt, and grace, and it is an obstacle to conviction and true repentance.

The following is a nonconfrontational method that can help move a Mormon toward an awareness of his or her own sinfulness without directly attacking the history or doctrines of the LDS Church.

The Problem. The LDS religious system focuses on avoiding external manifestations of sin, especially sins such as murder, immorality, and apostasy. There is an accompanying emphasis on the many things that have to be done to prove one's worthiness. The LDS teaching manual, *Gospel Principles*, lists 11 things to do to keep the Sabbath holy and provides 21 specific requirements for "exaltation" (the LDS term for eternal life), along with the admonition that "the time to fulfill the requirements for exaltation is now." ([Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997], 162, 303-4.) When the concept of sin is associated only with the "serious" sins while a checklist of required good works is constantly emphasized or focused on, the result is often self-righteousness and a tendency to minimize or become unaware of the sinfulness that exists at a deeper level. This, in turn, diminishes a person's felt need for forgiveness.

The Solution. Your sincere, hard-working Mormon friend needs to realize that sinfulness starts in the heart and that a focus on externals can cause a person to miss serious areas of sin in his or her life. This, in turn, can keep that person from a right relationship with God.

The Goal. The goal is to help your Mormon friend, neighbor, family member, or even the Mormon missionaries who come to your door discover these things from the Bible for themselves. They then can pray and ask God to show them their own true spiritual need in light of His holiness. You aren't teaching or lecturing; rather, with key questions you are directing them to where they will discover the truth about who they really are before God.

The Opener. There is no single right way to engage this issue, but a straightforward approach, for example, is to ask your Mormon friend if he or she thinks it is important to keep the commandments. Commandment keeping is an integral part of the LDS system and is believed to be essential for eternal life. This question, therefore, is familiar and non-threatening for a Mormon to answer, and most likely it will evoke an emphatic *yes*. Then ask if he or she is familiar with the account of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking about how to obtain eternal life and with Jesus' response.

The Progression. Go to Matthew 19:16–22, and together read the account of the rich young ruler. Point out that he came to Jesus asking about eternal life. Then ask, “Did the young man think he was doing well? Upon what did he base his confidence?” Wait for a response — and *listen!*

Ask, “What are the Ten Commandments?” It is a good idea to go to Exodus 20:1–17 and have the person read these verses.

Ask, “What did Jesus teach about keeping these commandments?” Key passages are Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28. Then ask, “What was Jesus trying to teach the people about commandment keeping?” Jesus taught that it needs to be in the heart. You may also want to look at Matthew 12:34: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (KJV).

Ask, “What does God want from his people?” “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts,” the psalmist said (Ps. 51:6 KJV).

Go back to the rich young man in Matthew 19. Ask, “Does it appear his was an inward or outward righteousness? Had he truly kept all the commandments?” Stay here for as long as necessary to identify the real problem of the rich young man — he had substituted external commandment keeping for true purity of heart. Ask, “Was it likely that God was impressed with the rich young man?”

Getting Personal. Up to this point the discussion has been primarily academic; hopefully, however, you’ve established common ground and a mutually agreed on understanding of these Scriptures. With this in place, become more personal with the following questions:

“Do you think you have ever been like the rich young man?” You may want to share a time from your own life when this had been true.

“Do you think that being unrepentant for sin can hinder our relationship with God? Can it keep us from a closeness to God?”

“If you sincerely ask God to show you the sin that might be hindering your relationship with the heavenly Father, do you think He would show it to you so you could confess it?”

“Have you ever asked God to show you your own sinfulness and then waited quietly for an answer?” If you have done this and experienced the bittersweet searchlight of the Spirit and the Word on your own soul, you may want to briefly share what that was like. The joy of a restored relationship with God on confession and repentance can have a profound effect on your listener.

“Is praying like this something you would seriously consider doing?” If his or her answer is *yes*, encourage your friend to do it that night and to come back in a week and share with you what God has shown him or her. You could even volunteer to do the same.

For More Dialogue. This discussion has the potential for several other related branches of dialogue:

“Could we ever do enough to have God owe us anything?”

“Do any of us on any day ever do ‘the very best we can?’ If we don’t, what are the implications in light of God’s holiness and demand for perfection?” (See Matt. 5:48.)

“How wide do you perceive the gulf to be between yourself and the heavenly Father created by your sinful heart?”

“Have you ever thought that verses about sinfulness — such as Isaiah 53:6; 64:6; and Romans 3:10–12 — apply to you? What does 2 Corinthians 5:21 mean in this light?”

As your friend becomes aware of the pervasiveness of his or her own sin and the affront it is to a holy God, he or she may wonder about an appropriate response. Jesus spoke directly to this point in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the Temple to pray (see Luke 18:9–14). Jesus concluded that it was the tax collector who cried, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” who went home justified (a term meaning “declared righteous”).

Forgiveness, justification, and eternal life are gifts that can be obtained only *as* gifts — freely given by God and freely received by us in faith. Our faith is in the character of the Giver (God), trusting He will do what He said. It is important at some point to help your Mormon friend realize that to attempt to use commandment keeping as a way to *earn* God's acceptance and forgiveness is an act of *unbelief*. In fact, it is an affront to God the Father, who has already paid for the gift with the blood of His Son Jesus.

I sometimes use the following example to illustrate how offensive it is to try to earn or pay for a gift. Suppose my rich aunt gives me a new car for my birthday. I'm very grateful, so I tell her that while I could never hope to pay her back, I'll do her yard work every Saturday for the next ten years and pay her ten dollars a week. The car, after all, is such an expensive gift, how could I possibly hope to just take it for free? I then ask the person, "How would my aunt view my acts of 'gratitude'?"

The key in any discussion with a Mormon is that it be Spirit-led and done in an atmosphere of discovering truth together; that way you are the Mormon's friend and ally in a common quest, rather than an adversary who just criticizes his or her beliefs and church.

-- Joel B. Groat