

# Forgiveness of sins : Justice or Mercy ?

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Evangelical Christians and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons, or Latter-day Saints, agree that we cannot live with the Heavenly Father for time and all eternity unless all our sins are forgiven. God is holy and sin is incompatible with his holiness (Habakkuk 1:13, Isaiah 59: 1). Moses 6:57 in the Book of Mormon says, "Wherefore teach it unto your children, that all men, everywhere, must repent, or they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God, for No unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence." So repentance is the action we must take (Matthew 3: 2, 4:17, Mark 6:12). The Mormon Church and the Bible teach that repentance includes, if possible, restitution. An item stolen must be returned or paid for, right? Yet, the Bible disagrees with what the Mormon Church teaches about **how** and **when** we are forgiven. In Mormonism the atonement of Christ does not bring about full and complete salvation and forgiveness of sins outside the works of man.

Let us carefully compare the official teachings about forgiveness of the LDS Church with forgiveness in Bible. This paper proceeds in three parts: 1. what is sin? 2. How and when are we forgiven? 3. Justice or Mercy? We use the King James Version, the Bible version preferred by the Mormon Church. We also use the LDS scriptures: *The Book of Mormon and The Doctrine & Covenants*, *The Article of Faith* of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, official teaching manuals: *Gospel Principles* (2009) and *The Life and Teachings of Jesus & His Apostles* (1979) and a non official LDS book: *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1999) by the 12th President of the LDS Church Spencer W Kimball.

## 1. What is sin?

**The LDS Church teaches that sin consists of specific acts, not man's basic nature** (*Gospel Principles*, p107, the Second [Article of Faith](#)<sup>1</sup>) and "one must have a conscience before he can violate it." (*The Life and Teachings of Jesus & His Apostles*, p.410)

**By contrast, the Bible teaches that sin is basically rebellion against God** (Genesis 3, Romans 1:21-23) **and human beings were born into the world in a state of sin** (Psalm 51:5), **are dead in trespasses and sin** (Ephesians 2:5) **and by nature objects of wrath** (Ephesians 2:1-3). The Bible teaches that sin is sin regardless of a person's awareness (Psalm 19:12, 51:5) and sin is not just what we do, but a sinful act begins with sinful thought and desire (Mark 7:21-23). "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*" (Jeremiah 17:9)

## 2. How and when are we forgiven?

**a) The LDS Church teaches that forgiveness is granted by proper repentance and not ever repeating those individual sins, then keeping the commandments perfectly.**

To obtain forgiveness, there are steps of repentance to be taken:

- (1). Recognition of our sins
- (2). Sincere sorrow for our sins
- (3). Abandonment of sin
- (4). Confession of sin - Serious sins must be confessed to the proper priesthood authority.
- (5). Restitution for sin
- (6). Forgiving others
- (7). Obedience to the commandments of God (*Gospel Principles*, pp.110-111)

President Boyd K. Packer of the Council of the Twelve of the LDS Church, explains the LDS teachings of atonement and forgiveness in a parable of a man in huge debt and unable to pay it. The creditor demanded justice: that the creditor should take the debtor's possession and the debtor should go to prison. The debtor asks the creditor to extend the time or to forgive the debt. The creditor insists on justice, saying, "Mercy cannot rob justice." Then a mediator (Christ) intervened and offered to pay the debt.

The mediator turned then to the debtor. "If I pay your debt, will you accept me as your creditor?"

"Oh yes, yes," cried the debtor. "You save me from prison and show mercy to me."

"Then," said the benefactor, "you will pay the debt to me and I will set the terms. It will not be easy, but it will be possible. I will provide a way. You need not go to prison."

"And so it was that the creditor was paid in full. He had been justly dealt with. No contract had been broken.

"The debtor, in turn, had been extended mercy. Both laws stood fulfilled. Because there was a mediator, justice had claimed its full share, and mercy was fully satisfied" (in Conference Report, Apr.1977, 79-80; or *Ensign*, May 1977, 54-55). (*Gospel Principles*, pp.63-65):

**The Bible teaches that repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ** (Ezra 6:8-10, Acts 20:21, 2 Corinthians 7:9-10)<sup>2</sup>. Repentance means to change our mind about Christ and is a complete change of the basic motivation and direction of our lives. Paul preached about "*repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Acts 20:21). Paul declared, "*they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.*"(Acts 26:20) (See Matthew 3:8)

**However, the Bible teaches that complete forgiveness and eternal life with God are given on the basis of God's grace, not one's performance** (Luke 7: 47-48, Acts 3:19, Ephesians 2:7-8) **and they are granted the moment we turn to Christ** (Mark 2:5, Colossians 2:13-14, John 3:16, Acts 3:19). Jesus' death on the cross brings about complete forgiveness of sins. "*In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*" (Ephesians 1:7)

**Mormons often say, "If forgiveness is free, one will freely sin." The Bible flatly refutes this claim.**

**Acts 26:20:** *They should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.*

**Romans 6: 1-2:** *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*

**Ephesians 2:8-10:** *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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.* (Emphasis added)

**Titus 2:12:** *Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.*

**b) The LDS Church teaches that forgiveness is granted at the end of the process of complete repentance of sin by keeping the commandments<sup>3</sup>, but if one repeats the sins, then he/she will lose the forgiveness he/she obtained as a result of repentance.** *Doctrine & Covenants* 82:7 says, "Go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God."

Gospel Principles quotes the book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, by President Spencer Kimball (p.231).

But, in the book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, President Spencer Kimball warned: "Even though forgiveness is so abundantly promised there is no promise nor indication of forgiveness to any soul who does not totally repent... We can hardly be forceful in reminding people that they cannot sin and be forgiven and then sin again and again and expect repeated forgiveness" (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 353, 360). Those who receive forgiveness and then repeat the sin are held accountable for their former sins (see D&C82:7, Ether 2:15).

**By Contrast, in the Bible God has promised to forgive our sins when we turn to him** (1 John 1:9). He forgives all our sins at the cross.

**1 John 1:9:** *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

**Colossians 2:13-14 :** *And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;*

**Secondly, The Bible teaches that God puts no limit to number of times you can repent** (Nehemiah 9:28-31). Our Lord Jesus gave his disciples the model prayer, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12) Both faith and repentance continue throughout life. We are to come daily and confess our sins, asking for forgiveness, as "the prayer for forgiveness of sin each day is a prayer that God's fatherly relationship with us, which has been disrupted by sin that displeased him, be restored, and that he relate to us once again as a Father who delights in his children whom he loves," says, Wayne Grudem.<sup>4</sup>

**C). Spencer Kimball stated that trying is not sufficient.** "Nor is repentance complete when one merely tries to abandon sin...To try is weak....We must always do better than we can." (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p.165)

**By contrast, the Bible teaches that when God forgives our sin, he separates it from us and does not even remember it.**

**Psalms 103:11-12:** *For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.*

**Micah 7:19:** *He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*

**Isaiah 43:25:** *I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.*

**Hebrews 10:17-18:** *And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.* (See Jeremiah 31:34)

### 3. Justice or Mercy ?

Latter-day Saints remember the promise they made when they were baptized. They promised to keep all the laws and commandments of God. The more serious you are about fulfilling requirements of forgiveness, the more impossible the requirements become. In Mormonism total repentance (stopping all sin) is required **before** one can be worthy of forgiveness. Evangelical Christians think that the LDS Church places an impossible task on its members' shoulders. While reading "*The Miracle of Forgiveness*", I kept wondering where the miracle can be found in the Mormon concept of forgiveness. But, if a Mormon sustains the general authorities of the LDS Church, he/she must face their teachings and live by them. Let me ask Latter-day Saints a few questions.

- \* Have you permanently forsaken sins, including sins of omission (James 4:17)? If not, how do you know that you have fully repented?
- \* Have you found it difficult not to commit the same sins again?
- \* If you wish to live with the Heavenly Father, are you sure that you have kept all the commandments? If not, how do you know that you are forgiven?

**The Bible offers a better solution to sin problems. God has promised to always forgive those who admit that they are sinners and lay their sins before God and seek forgiveness** (Psalm 32:5, 1 John 1:9)<sup>5</sup>.

**For Evangelical Christians the cross is absolutely central to living eternally with God. At the cross God's justice and His mercy meet. Jesus effected the propitiation that turns away the wrath of God (Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2), and reconciled us (His enemies) to Himself** (Eph2:16). Forgiveness of all sins for *all time and for eternity* is by grace through faith alone. This is a gift from God. This is the true miracle of forgiveness. Only those who know the depth/ magnitude of our sin can appreciate the complete forgiveness God offers them. **Luke 7:36-50** tells us the story of a sinful woman whose sins are forgiven. How? Jesus declared that simply through her faith the woman was forgiven of her many sins. Jesus said, "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little" (7:47). In the New Testament we are assured, no matter how many and how great the sins, God graciously forgives us. Jesus said, "She loved much." Jesus was not saying that either her action or her love merited forgiveness.<sup>6</sup> Her love demonstrated that she had already been forgiven. Jesus said, "Thy faith hath saved you" (7:50).

**Conclusion:** James 2:10 says "Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all". You know your heart. You know yourselves better than anyone else. You cannot talk about forgiveness and debts in the same breath! Either a debt needs to be paid or it is forgiven. "Trying is not sufficient!" said, Mr. Kimball. *Those who try to appease God by following the law are guilty before God* (Romans 3:19). God said that the death of Christ on the cross makes complete forgiveness of sins and legal pardon a reality (not a possibility). God promised that he would not remember our sins (Isaiah 43:5, Jeremiah 31:34, Hebrews 10:17-18). It is too good to be true! Do you doubt God's promise? If so, you are saying that God is a liar.

1. The second [Article of Faith](#) states: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression.

2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, IVP, 1994) p.713

3. *Gospel Principles* says, "To make our repentance complete we must keep the commandments of the Lord (see D&C 1:32). We are not fully repentant if we do not pay tithes or keep the Sabbath day holy or obey the Word of Wisdom. We are not repentant if we do not sustain the authorities of the Church and do not love the Lord and our fellowmen. If we do not pray and are unkind to others, we are surely not repentant. When we repent, our life changes."(P.111)

4. Wayne Grudem, p.741

5. Howard Marshall, *The Epistle of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978) p.113

6. Leon Morris, "Luke" in "The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, IVP, 1992) p.163.

