

Let's Be Honest: The Ladder of Modern Prophets

SERIES	Let's Be Honest — Worldview Series (Overview)
MESSAGE	Week 4 — Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)
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PASSAGES	Matthew 17:1-8; Ephesians 2:8-9
SPEAKER	Matt Summers, Pastor of Spiritual Formation
KEY PRINCIPLE	The ladder wasn't made for climbing up but for coming down.

I. Introduction: Living With Unstable Ladders

A Good morning Menlo Church; whether you're watching online or joining us at our Saratoga, San Mateo, Mountain View, or Menlo Park campus, I want to say welcome and thank you for being here. My name is Matt, and I serve as our Pastor of Spiritual Formation. Today, we are continuing our series called Let's Be Honest, where we are looking at some of the world's largest and most influential religious movements.

B Throughout this series, we have tried to hold onto a particular posture. We want to be intellectually honest about what other people believe. We want to be respectful toward the people who hold those beliefs. And we want to be thoughtful individuals who know how to listen before we speak. We are not doing this so that people can

leave church each week feeling a little more confident that everyone else is wrong. We are doing it because we live in one of the most religiously diverse regions in the country.

C These are the beliefs of our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers, and in some cases, members of our own families. At Menlo, we talk about being For the Bay, and part of that means we demonstrate a genuine love for others. But we cannot meaningfully love others if we are uninterested in what the people around us believe, what they value, and what gives their lives meaning.

D We want to take the differences between religions seriously. Saying that every religion is basically the same may sound respectful, but it is not. Different faiths make different claims about God, humanity, salvation, suffering, and what happens after we die. Those claims sometimes overlap, but they also regularly contradict one another. Showing respect does not mean we pretend those differences are insignificant; it invites us to understand them well enough to describe them truthfully.

E So before we go any further, I want to pray, because conversations like this require more than information, they require humility. It is possible to know a great deal about someone else's faith and still fail to love them. It is possible to advocate for belief in a way that does not reflect the character of Christ. So I want to ask God to help us listen carefully, think clearly, and speak with both conviction and grace.

[Congregational prayer.]

F How comfortable are you with uncertainty? Most of us would probably say, "It depends." A little uncertainty can be interesting. It can make life feel open, creative, even adventurous. But when the stakes get high, when we are talking about our health, our loved ones, our identity, or our faith, uncertainty starts to feel very different. We want to know what is true. We want to know who can be trusted. We want to know what is expected of us and whether we are doing it correctly.

G This is especially true when it comes to religion. Who speaks for God? What happens after we die? What is expected of me? How can I know that I am on the right path? Those are not abstract theological questions. They affect how people build

their lives. The Bible gives us a rich collection of narratives, history, poetry, wisdom literature, and letters that help us understand who God is and who we are. But the Bible does not answer every question with the degree of detail we might prefer.

H There are places where Scripture leaves us with mystery. There are tensions it does not resolve into a neat diagram. There is no biblical chart that explains every detail of the afterlife, every spiritual relationship, or every disagreement people of faith will ever have. And human beings are not always comfortable living with that kind of uncertainty. We tend to favor a framework, or structure, that can bear the weight of our worries and tell us what step comes next.

I This past weekend, I was doing some work in my house, and I have this habit when I use a ladder. If I know I need to climb up high, I stand on the first rung and give the whole thing a good shake. I want to know that it is stable before I trust it with my full weight. This time, I forgot. I made it to the third rung, and the ladder shifted a few inches. That was all it took for me to see my entire life flash before my eyes, and I was only about three feet off the ground. Nothing happened. I was fine. But the movement exposed something important.

J I had assumed the ladder was secure because the next step was obvious. Once it moved underneath me, I started questioning the whole thing. Was it on level ground? Were the hinges locked? Was it the right ladder for the job? Had I trusted it too quickly? That moment of instability elevated my uncertainty. And if we're honest, I think we live with a lot of unstable ladders in our lives.

K There is the corporate ladder, where each promotion promises greater influence or security. We create financial ladders, academic ladders, and ladders for our health and relationships. We picture a better version of ourselves somewhere above us and try to work our way toward that. There is nothing wrong with growth, there is nothing wrong with progress. But a ladder can become more than a tool, it can become a test for our value.

L Our worth begins to feel as though it is located on the next rung. And religion can easily take the same shape. We begin to imagine God somewhere above us while we slowly work our way toward Him. Each rung represents something we need to learn, accomplish, overcome, or receive before we can move higher. The structure can feel reassuring because it answers the question, "What do I do next?" But eventually another question emerges: how high do I have to climb? And let me ask you this: when you're high up on a ladder do you have more anxiety or less anxiety? In my experience, the higher you climb, the more you realize how far you can fall.

M Today, we are talking about the Mormon faith, formally known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the LDS Church. That is "latter," meaning belonging to a later period of history — not "ladder," although you can probably see why the ladder is going to be a useful image today. One reason the Mormon faith has been so compelling is that it offers a remarkably comprehensive account of spiritual life and progression.

N It gives a detailed explanation of where human beings came from, why we are here, and where we may ultimately go. It provides additional scriptures, beyond the Bible, living prophets, authority, expectations for family life, and a carefully defined vision of eternity. Compared with many Christian traditions, it fills in a remarkable number of the blanks people often wonder about.

O For people living in a confusing world, or trying to make sense of competing churches and contradictory religious voices, that kind of clarity can feel like a gift. There is a path. There is an authority. There is a next rung. But every ladder rests on certain claims. Who built it? Where is it resting? Can it carry the weight we place on it? And where does it actually lead?

P For a few of you, this conversation is already personal. You grew up in the LDS Church. You have people you love who are still active in it. Maybe you served a mission, participated in temple ordinances, or built much of your family life around the church. Others of you may have left that community, and your relationship with it is complicated. There may have been real beauty, belonging, and love alongside questions, disappointment, or pain.

Q Many of us, though, know very little about the Mormon faith beyond a few things we have seen on TV, heard in a musical, or picked up through jokes. Those are not especially reliable forms of theological education. Latter-day Saints have often been caricatured and ridiculed for their beliefs, and early members of the movement experienced displacement, hostility, and violence. None of that is defensible. Coercion does not create genuine faith; it creates fear, resentment, and often greater resolve. God is not honored when people made in His image are publicly humiliated.

R So today, I want us to tell the truth about belief with clarity and without cruelty. We also need to remember the disclaimer we have offered every week: learning the official teachings of a religious tradition does not mean we fully understand the beliefs of every person within it. There is diversity among Latter-day Saints. Some are deeply committed to every aspect of the church's teaching and practice. Some are more culturally connected than doctrinally convinced. Some remain active while privately wrestling with significant questions. Others have left the church but still feel a deep connection to its people, traditions, or family life.

S Your LDS neighbor is not a spokesperson for the entire religion. So when you have conversations, lead with curiosity. Ask what their faith means to them and how they actually practice it. Our goal today is not to flatten millions of people into one experience. It is to understand the central claims of the faith fairly and then ask where those claims lead. The ladder may provide stability, but it can also create anxiety.

T How high do I have to climb, and what happens if my best effort is never enough to reach God? To understand how the Mormon faith answers those questions, and why its answer differs so significantly from historic Christianity, we need to go back to the story of the Church itself.

II. Two Histories: The Christian Tree and Joseph Smith's Restoration

Christianity begins with Jesus. He lived, died, was raised to life, and appeared to His followers before ascending to the Father. His followers, the apostles, then carried the news of His resurrection throughout the Roman world. They formed communities, appointed leaders, taught what they had received from Jesus, and wrote letters to help these new churches understand what it meant to follow Him.

A The church did not begin with a book or an org chart. It began with witnesses who knew Jesus and were convinced that He had risen from the dead. As the church expanded, important questions emerged. Who exactly is Jesus? Is He truly God, truly human, or somehow both? How is the Son related to the Father? What beliefs are essential?

B Over time, competing interpretations required the church to become more precise about what it believed. This is where the early creeds became important. A creed is a concise statement of belief; it summarizes what Christians believe is essential. The Apostles' Creed grew from the early church's teaching, and later, the Nicene Creed addressed controversy over whether Jesus was eternal God or a created being. It says Jesus is: "True God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

C That language may sound technical, but the church was trying to define something essential. When Christians call Jesus the Son of God, we do not mean that God created Him, promoted Him, or eventually helped Him become divine. We mean that the Son has eternally shared the identity and being of God. He entered human history as Jesus without ceasing to be who He eternally is. The creeds are still widely shared statements of faith across all Christian faith traditions.

D During these early centuries, Christians also recognized the collection of writings we now call the New Testament canon. The church received writings connected to the apostles, consistent with their teaching, and already being used throughout the

churches. And again, historic Christian traditions differ somewhat with regard to the biblical canon, but they share the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

E For roughly the first thousand years, the church was not free from arguments, controversies, or divisions, but it still broadly understood itself as one worldwide communion. Over time, tensions grew between the Greek-speaking churches of the East and the Latin-speaking church of the West. Some were theological. Others involved language, culture, politics, and authority; especially the expanding claims of the bishop of Rome, whom we know as the pope.

F Those tensions eventually hardened into what is commonly called the Great Schism of 1054, separating what became the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church. The separation was more of a long divorce than a single bad meeting, and it was a profound rupture, yet both continued to affirm the ancient creeds, the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the Scriptures, and the historic continuity of the church.

G Next week, Phil will help us understand Roman Catholicism more carefully; for now, the important point is that Catholicism understands itself as continuous with the ancient church. About five hundred years later, another major fracture occurred within Western Christianity. Reformers such as Martin Luther challenged teachings and practices within the Roman Catholic Church. Their disagreements involved Scripture, authority, salvation, sacraments, and the life of the church.

H The Protestant Reformation produced several new traditions, which eventually produced more movements and denominations than anyone in this room could name. The Reformers believed the Western church needed serious correction. But it's important to note they were attempting to reform the church they had inherited, not reboot Christianity from the beginning. From here, Christians continued to divide over theology, church leadership, worship, culture, and occasionally carpet color. We are exceptionally gifted at branching.

I One way to picture this history is as a tree. The church is rooted in Jesus and the apostolic witness. Over time, it developed major branches: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, and then many smaller branches and bifurcations. They do not all look alike. Their worship, leadership, sacraments, and theological emphases can differ significantly. But historic Christian traditions remain connected to a shared trunk. They confess one eternal God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They affirm Jesus as truly divine and truly human, they receive the apostolic Scriptures, and they affirm the central beliefs expressed through the early creeds.

J That is the historical landscape into which the Mormon faith eventually enters. But Latter-day Saints do not understand their church as one more Protestant denomination growing from one of these branches. Their story begins with the belief that something much more serious had happened to the tree.

K Joseph Smith was born in 1805 and grew up in the religiously energized world of early nineteenth-century America. Churches were holding revival meetings, competing for converts, and reaching different conclusions while reading the same Bible. According to Smith's account, this left him asking a deeply understandable question: which church is actually right?

L In the account now known as the First Vision, Joseph said that as a teenager he prayed to know which church he should join. He reported seeing God the Father and Jesus Christ and being told to join none of the existing churches; that they had all been corrupted or co-opted and that they were all wrong. Within LDS teaching, this moment begins the restoration because the existing churches were believed to lack the fullness and divine authority of Christ's original church.

M Joseph later reported that an angel directed him to buried metal plates containing an ancient religious record. Smith said he translated the plates, and the Book of Mormon was published in 1830. The church was formally organized that same year.

N Over time, the restoration expanded into a comprehensive religious framework. It included newer laws, living prophets and apostles, and a detailed account of humanity's existence before birth and eternal destiny. Official LDS sources describe these revelations as introducing teachings such as saving work for the dead and differing degrees of heavenly glory. None of these views are shared with historic Christianity.

O The early movement grew, but it also faced intense opposition. Latter-day Saints were driven from several communities and experienced hostility, state action, and mob violence. At times, members of the movement were also involved in serious political and social conflict with surrounding communities. In 1844, Joseph Smith and his brother were killed by a mob while imprisoned in Carthage, Illinois.

P Joseph's death created a leadership crisis because he had not left behind a succession plan. Different leaders and groups made claims about who should carry the movement forward. A man named Brigham Young and a group of fellow leaders known as the Quorum of the Twelve eventually led the largest body of followers west, while other splinter groups followed different leaders and developed into separate traditions.

Q Today, when most people refer to the Mormon faith, they are talking about the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its members see the president of the church as a living prophet through whom God can provide guidance and revelation. Other movements descending from Joseph Smith's original church still exist, but they do not all share the same beliefs or practices. The essential claim, though, is that Joseph Smith did not simply start another denomination. Mormonism teaches that after the apostles died, divine authority was removed from the earth, and Christ's church needed to be restored through a modern prophet.

R Mormonism may have started with a seedling from the Christian tree. It still bears a similar appearance — mentioning Jesus, Scripture, baptism, salvation, eternal life — but the soil, roots, trunk, and fruit developed differently. It is not simply another branch of historic Christianity; it is a different species of tree entirely.

S So this is, at a high level, a brief overview of both Church history and Mormon church history. Are you still awake? This is the kind of stuff they teach you in seminary class and then you're graded on how much you remember it; every time I make a student loan payment I keep thinking the school should be paying me to remember this.

III. Termites in the Walls: Reform vs. Restoration

When Rachelle and I bought our first home back in New York we were so excited to make that place our own. We spent hours researching layout, paint colors, flooring, and furniture, and started making updates right away. About two months into renovation, I was cutting into a wall and noticed that one of the studs looked odd. I hit it with a hammer and it exploded into a cloud of dust and bugs. The entire front of our house was buzzing with an aggressive termite infestation.

A So we began to talk options, and Rachelle offered what she believed at the time to be an entirely measured and rational response to bugs living in the walls: "Maybe we should burn the entire house down and build a new one."

B We did not do that. We opened the walls, treated the infestation, removed what had been damaged, strengthened the structure, and preserved the house that was already there. That is broadly how the Reformers understood what they were doing. They believed parts of the Church had become deeply damaged and needed serious repair, but they did not believe the church needed a full demolition. They wanted to reform the church they had inherited, not destroy it and begin again.

C The Mormon claim goes much further. It teaches that the original church has lost its divine authority and the fullness of its teaching, so God restored what had disappeared through Joseph Smith. And what emerged retained a great deal of familiar Christian language at face value, but familiar words do not necessarily mean we are saying the same thing. So now that you know about the history, let's move

quickly to highlight the foundational differences. I want to begin each comparison with what historic Christianity teaches, and then explain how the Mormon faith understands it differently.

D Who is God? Historic Christianity teaches that there has always been one God. Christians describe God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; not three gods, but one God known in three persons. God is the Creator, and everything else exists because of Him. Human beings can know God, reflect His character, and share life with Him, but we never become God in the same sense that He is God.

E LDS teaching describes God as an embodied divine being who represents a Father but that He was once like us and attained His godhood. Mormon prophets have also taught that faithful humans may eventually become as God is. Lorenzo Snow, the fifth president and prophet of the LDS Church, summarized it this way: "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."

F These are not simply two descriptions of the same God. Historic Christianity says God has always been the eternal Creator and that humanity will always remain His creation. Mormon teaching places both God and humanity within a pattern of progression toward godhood.

G Who is Jesus? Historic Christianity teaches that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who fully shares the identity of the one God. This is what the Nicene Creed means when it calls Him "begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." Christians believe everything that exists was created through Him. Jesus is not simply the clearest messenger from God, but God has made Himself known to humanity in Jesus.

H Latter-day Saints sincerely worship and follow Jesus, but LDS teaching describes Him as the firstborn spirit child of Heavenly Father within a premortal family that includes the rest of humanity. He is understood as unique and a savior, but separate from God.

I Historic Christianity understands Jesus as eternally sharing the identity of the Creator. Latter-day Saint teaching understands Him as the firstborn and most notable of the Heavenly Father's spirit children. The distinction is not over whether Jesus matters, but over who He actually is.

J Who speaks for God? Historic Christianity teaches that God guides people through the Holy Spirit and has revealed Himself decisively in Jesus. The writings of the apostles provide the authoritative witness to who Jesus is and what He accomplished. Later teachings and spiritual claims are tested against that witness.

K LDS teaching believes the Bible to be mistranslated, so it offers the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. Together, these are known as the church's standard works. The LDS church is led by living prophets and apostles and believes that God continues to provide revelation for the whole church through them.

L The real disagreement is not whether God can guide people today. It is whether the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures are sufficient to define the Christian faith, or whether these later prophets can add new authoritative teachings.

M What is required? Historic Christianity teaches that people are restored to God because of what Jesus has done, received through trust in Him. Christians call this grace: God gives what we could never earn. Obedience, generosity, repentance, and good works still matter, but they flow from a relationship with God that has already been given to us.

N LDS teaching also says that no one could overcome sin or death without Jesus Christ. But the highest eternal destiny, called exaltation, requires following the covenant path through prescribed practices and continued faithfulness. This includes baptism, confirmation, temple ordinances, keeping covenants, and being sealed in eternal marriage.

O Both traditions believe faith should shape the way a person lives. The difference is what that faithfulness accomplishes. Historic Christianity says your adherence and obedience are because you belong to God; Latter-day Saint teaching says you belong

because of your adherence and obedience on your way to becoming God.

P These differences matter because Mormonism does more than add a few beliefs to historic Christianity. It changes the larger story and understanding of what they're rooted in. And in many ways, the Mormon faith responds directly to the uncertainty we named earlier. It offers answers where many people feel ambiguity. There are living prophets who can speak to the present moment. There are additional scriptures that fill in parts of the story.

Q But clarity and security are not always the same thing. More answers can also mean more requirements, more authorities to understand, more covenants to keep, and more opportunities to wonder whether you have done everything expected of you.

R And to be clear, Mormons are not uniquely anxious people; many experience deep community, purpose, generosity, and joy within their faith. But the framework itself places enormous weight on a person's continued participation and faithfulness. The promise is expansive, but so is the path required to reach it.

S That is where the Christian gospel offers a very different kind of assurance. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes this reminder:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." — Ephesians 2:8-9

T Paul does not answer uncertainty by giving us a more detailed list of accomplishments. He directs our confidence away from our performance and toward God's gift. That does not mean Christian faith has no expectations or that obedience is unimportant. Paul will go on to say that we were created for good works. But those works are not the basis of our acceptance. They are what grows from a life that has already received grace.

U The deepest Christian assurance is not that we have perfectly understood every detail or completed every spiritual requirement. It is that our relationship with God rests on what Jesus has done rather than on whether we have managed to do enough.

IV. Listen to Him: The Transfiguration

When we discovered termites in our first home, burning the house down would have given us a clean slate. It also would have destroyed everything that was still good. Instead, we did the slower work of treating the problem, and strengthening what remained. That work was difficult.

A It cost more than we expected, took longer than we wanted, and exposed problems we could not see when we first walked through the house. But it was worth doing because the house was worth preserving. That is what the church is called to do.

B Christians should never assume that every inherited practice is healthy or that every institution bearing the name of Jesus reflects Him faithfully. The church must be willing to repent, repair what it has damaged, remove what has become corrupt, and reform what no longer reflects the character of Christ. But reform is different from starting over with a new foundation.

C The church does its work by returning to Jesus, not by redefining Him; by returning to the Scriptures, not by replacing them; and by strengthening what has been handed down rather than rebuilding the faith around the claims of a later prophet. The question is not whether the Church needs repair. It always does. The question is whether Jesus left us a damaged house that requires faithful restoration, or whether the entire structure disappeared and had to be rebuilt through Joseph Smith.

D Historic Christianity maintains that Jesus has not abandoned His church, even when His church has failed to reflect Him well. The house may need repair, but the foundation remains Christ. And that brings us to the question beneath the Mormon faith's restoration claim. If a modern prophet says the church lost its authority, its Scriptures became unreliable, and its understanding of God needed to be corrected, what place should any prophet or leader occupy in relation to God?

E The Bible takes prophets seriously. They confronted kings, challenged injustice, called people back to faithfulness, and helped God's people understand what God was doing. But prophets were never intended to become the center of the story. Their role was to point beyond themselves.

F The Bible actually addresses this, and it happens in one of the most epic and mysterious moments in the New Testament, where the physical appearance of Jesus changes in the presence of others. This is Matthew chapter 17:

"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him." — Matthew 17:1-3

G [Reads on.]

"And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'" — Matthew 17:4-5

"When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only." — Matthew 17:6-8

H So while on this mountain Jesus is transfigured before them; the only way they could describe it later is that his face shines like the sun, his clothing becomes like light, and for a moment the disciples see something of the divinity and glory that had always belonged to him.

I Then Moses and Elijah appear and begin speaking with Jesus. For the disciples, these are not random visitors. Moses is the central figure associated with the Law, the foundational teaching that shaped Israel's life with God. Elijah is one of Israel's greatest prophets. Together, they represent the Law and the Prophets; the story, teaching, and spiritual authority that had guided God's people for generations.

J I can't even give you a modern-day equivalent for how significant this would have been for the disciples. Imagine you're a little kid and you just found out all your favorite superheroes are real and right in front of you.

K Peter sees this and responds in a very Peter-like way: he begins talking before he fully understands what is happening. He says: let's make tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. And by tents he means monuments, to mark this moment in history, something to tell the world that Jesus is just as important as Moses and Elijah. Peter encounters something beyond his comprehension and immediately tries to build a structure around it. He wants to preserve the experience, organize it, and give everyone a clearly defined role.

L Honestly, I understand him. When we experience uncertainty, most of us reach for a framework to try and make sense of it. We want to know who carries authority, where everyone belongs, and what we are supposed to do next.

M But then a bright cloud overshadows them, and the voice of the Father says: this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus.

N Moses mattered. Elijah mattered. The Law and the Prophets mattered. But they did not remain beside Jesus as equal authorities. The Father did not direct the disciples toward a collection of important spiritual voices. He directed them to the Son.

O Historic Christianity has always believed prophets have an important role, but their authority is not independent of Jesus. A true prophet points toward Him and is measured by Him. Prophets do not complete Jesus, correct Jesus, or reveal a different identity of God after Jesus. This is why the Mormon claim of modern prophets matters so much. The LDS Church teaches that later prophets were necessary to restore divine authority, provide additional scripture, and recover teachings that had disappeared after the apostles.

P Historic Christianity makes a different claim: God has already made Himself decisively known in Jesus. Modern prophets and religious systems offer us ladders to get to, or become, God; Jesus reminds us that God came down the ladder to meet us where we are.

Q The Christian claim is not that Jesus gives us the best instructions for reaching God. It is that in Jesus, God has come near to us. That does not mean Christians possess an answer to every question. Peter certainly did not. In fact, his momentary brush with divinity left him overwhelmed and afraid. But the Father did not answer Peter's uncertainty by giving him a more detailed framework. He gave him a person to trust. "Listen to him."

R When the voices compete, listen to him. When religious systems offer promises, listen to him. When others claim special knowledge or authority to redefine faith, listen to him. The Law points to Jesus. The prophets point to Jesus. And when the cloud clears, Jesus remains, because Jesus is enough.

S That is where Christian confidence finally rests; not in our ability to climb high enough, understand everything, or complete every spiritual requirement, but in the Son who came down to meet us where we are.

V. Coming Down the Ladder

So what does this mean for us? For our Latter-day Saint friends and neighbors, it means we treat them as people to love, not arguments to win. We ask honest questions. We listen to their story. We refuse to reduce millions of people to the strangest belief we found online, and we do not confuse ridicule with courage.

A We can hold deep conviction about who Jesus is while still treating people who disagree with us with dignity. If your defense of Jesus makes you look less like Jesus, something has gone wrong. And if you claim to believe in grace but you live your life trying to prove that you deserve it, or that others don't, something has gone wrong. There is also something here for you if you do not consider yourself a person of faith; this is for anyone who has ever turned your own beliefs into a ladder.

B You may not believe you can become a god, but you may still live as though approval is waiting for you on the next rung. Maybe your ladder is success, moral behavior, knowledge, or productivity. The invitation of Jesus is not to stop growing or doing good. It is to stop asking those things to carry the weight of your worth. Your conduct is not the price you pay to belong to God; it is the life that grows because you already belong to Him.

C Some of us have been climbing for so long that stepping down feels irresponsible. We assume that if we stop proving ourselves, everything will collapse. But the gospel does not ask you to trust the strength of your grip, but in the goodness and grace of a God who meets us where we are. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

D Christianity does not claim that Jesus gives us the best spiritual ladder or the clearest instructions for climbing. It claims that the eternal Son entered human history, shared our suffering, carried our sin, passed through death, and rose again so that we could share life with God. And if you desire a more clearly defined set of rules and regulations beyond that, I understand. And I invite you to leave room for wonder, mystery, holiness, and hope on this side of eternity.

E Because when the clouds clear, the voices fade, and the framework falters, Jesus still remains. Will you pray with me? *[Closing prayer.]*

Books and Articles

So What's the Difference?

Kingdom of the Cults

[NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible](#)

[NIV First-Century Study Bible](#)

[HarperCollins Bible Commentary](#)