

## “Be Ye Therefore Perfect”

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We live in a media-rich world. Our foremothers just had to worry about keeping up with the Joneses, but we have the whole world at our fingertips. We are constantly seeing the stellar performers of our day. We have seen Olympic athletes receive a “perfect” 6. We are bombarded with magazine photos of “perfect” bodies. We know women who can create beautiful wreaths for their homes out of flowers they grew and dried themselves or from weeds they gathered beside the road. We see Nobel Prize winners, young people with perfect ACT and SAT scores, stars, statesmen, pundits, sisters in our own wards and on general boards. We may think they are perfect. No, we know they are not really perfect, but do we sometimes wonder, “Now if I just had Susan’s body, and Mary’s sense of style, and Bonnie’s homemaking skills, and Sheri’s good brain and articulate expression, I would be perfect.”

A lot of good can come from seeing and knowing about the gifts of so many. When it brings us to an appreciation of the gifts and achievements of others, when we ask how we can incorporate into our lives in appropriate ways the good things we see others doing, our horizons are expanded and our own lives can be blessed. That is good—it shows our understanding that every good gift cometh of Christ (Moroni 10:18).

But when we think, I need to do all of that, I need to be all of that, I need to at least have something in which I am spectacular, or I am a failure—I can never be perfect, that is not good. I have a friend, an immaculate housekeeper, who says, “Sometimes we think that if someone walks into our house and sees a dirty dish on the counter, we are not good homemakers. What does that come from—that we wouldn’t want anyone to think we ate meals at our house?”

For me, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s message at April general conference on the prodigal sons spoke to this point of comparing ourselves with others. “Who is it,” he said, “that whispers so subtly in our ear that a gift given to another somehow diminishes the blessings we have received? Who makes us feel that if God is smiling on another, then He surely must somehow be frowning on us? You and I both know who does this—it is the father of all lies.”<sup>1</sup> Measuring our attempts to reach “perfection” by comparing ourselves with others or with our own idealized standards is doomed to failure and alienates us from the Spirit of the Lord.

I have a friend who is a professional counselor. In her work with clients she deals with the negative consequences of perfectionism all the time. She observes that women have special

problems with this issue. Her research leads her to conclude that girls are socialized to compare themselves with others and to base their self-worth and feelings of acceptance on what others think of them. Her insight is that the adversary has polluted the concept of perfection into something that is punishing and immobilizing rather than empowering and liberating. She believes that too many of us are influenced by the earthly perspective and find ourselves comparing ourselves with other humans, rather than seeking the eternal perfection that God expects of us.

“We’re so irrational,” she says. “Some women are worried about their physical bodies. Do they stand outside Wal-Mart and compare themselves with the average of the first one hundred bodies to walk through the store? No, they look at Cindy Crawford or Britney Spears and think, ‘Oh, that’s the national average and certainly the goal I should aspire to.’ ”

Here are her helpful suggestions about dealing with this situation:

First, stop and clarify what’s going on—What is it I am really worried about? Is it that I don’t have as much money as I want, that I don’t dress my children as fashionably as others, that I don’t look like Barbie, that we don’t have regular family scripture study? Is that what’s getting me down, or is it that for some reason, I cannot feel the Lord’s love and need His acceptance?

Second, understand that the gospel teaching that each individual has divine worth is actually liberating. In the eternal perspective we each have enormous potential and worth. We really don’t all have to wear a big bow in our hair to be the cutest girl in the second grade—it’s even OK not to like big bows. We don’t need to compare ourselves on any level. We do need to have respect for others, and we do need to feel the Lord’s love.

Third, brainstorm ways that help you see that you are in the straight and narrow path provided by Heavenly Father—or if you are not in His path, how you can get there. This applies to our children as well. Ask yourself, “What is my son or daughter’s path with Heavenly Father? How can I help and not intrude as he or she finds that path?” For example, not every boy has to pitch for the Little League team or be an assistant to the mission president to be succeeding in life. Some are going to play defense for the soccer team; some are going to play chess; some are going to play the radio—and that’s OK. All of them can “come unto Christ,” and that’s the only perfection we ultimately want for them and for ourselves as well. Some of us will serve missions, some will be family history experts, some will be writers of hymns and singers of songs, and few of us will be all those good things at the same time—and that’s OK, too.

Let’s look at the scriptural injunctions regarding perfection and the promise of God’s grace. Does earthly perfectionism as urged by the adversary have anything to do with what the Savior was talking about when He said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”? (Matthew 5:48). I don’t think so.

What did perfection mean to the people in the Bible? In the Book of Mormon? In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word *tamim* means “upright, without blemish,” as in this

passage: “Noah was a just man and perfect (tamîm) in his generations, and Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). It can also mean “whole, entire, sound,” and most of the times it is used in the Old Testament it is referring to a sacrifice that is without blemish. The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible also states that “wherever the word is used of men or their conduct, “upright” or “blameless” is a better rendering than “perfect.”<sup>2</sup>

The Greek word translated “perfection” in the New Testament is teleios, which means “full-grown, mature, having reached the . . . end of its development.”<sup>3</sup> And listen to this definition: “Teleios—Perfect, said of those after baptism . . . said of those who have shown repentance, who have paid the penalty (or repented) to the deepest degree, and afterwards are admitted to participation in the ordinances.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, I would like to look at perfection from the perspective of the Book of Mormon—starting with Moroni. For it is Moroni who invites all to “come unto Christ and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32). I would like to look at what Moroni meant when he said, “Be perfected.”

Don’t you just love Moroni, this great, lonely fighting man? He was named after his father’s hero, Captain Moroni, of whom his father Mormon wrote, “Yea, verily, verily I say unto you, if all men had been and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever” (Alma 48:17). Talk about a “perfect” ideal to live up to! Young Moroni certainly had one.

And it is Moroni who is the source of many of our comforting and strengthening scriptures about overcoming weaknesses. You remember that it was Moroni who was given the task of completing the record of his father, and he knew that the plan was that he would hide up the record until the day it should come forth unto the Gentiles. He said to the Lord: “Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; . . . thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands . . . when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words” (Ether 12:23–25).

Do you think Moroni considered himself a great writer or a perfect writer? Or a clever artisan working with his hands or even a perfect soldier? Obviously not. He probably spent much of his early life learning about weapons, military strategy, and leading armed forces. But his experience in battle was that he lost and lost and lost again, and then he saw all of his companions defeated and dead. For the last years of his life he was on the run and just plain trying to survive—how good could he feel about his competence as a soldier? How many opportunities did he have for stimulating conversation or for discussing his ideas with anyone in the last twenty years of his life? Do you think there was a reason he might have been concerned about his writing? And yet here it was—a call to write a message to the nations of the Lamanites that could enable them to achieve their eternal salvation—hundreds of thousands of them. He was responsible to preserve the record so it could come forth to the whole world in the proper time. He was the last man on earth who could accomplish the

task, and he was pretty certain he couldn't do it perfectly.

Moroni was finally and completely willing to do what he had to do because he had faith in the Lord. "I know that thou workest unto the children of men according to their faith," he said (Ether 12:29). The Lord gave him the promise that "my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them" (Ether 12:27). And the Lord surely did make "weak things become strong" for Moroni. Whether or not the Gentiles would mock, Moroni was comforted, and he acted because he knew the Lord understood his situation and accepted his efforts, despite their imperfections.

I assume that Moroni wrote the title page of the Book of Mormon last of all his writing. And here once again he points out, "And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless [could that be blameless, perfect?] at the judgment-seat of Christ."

The kind of perfection Moroni was talking about when he invites us to come unto Christ has nothing to do with flawless accomplishment. It does not even have anything to do with exceptional competence or skill in a given area, but it has everything to do with having faith in the Lord, repenting of sin, and keeping the Lord's commandments. It is only possible because of the atonement of Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, Moroni knew that if we are willing to deny ourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all our might, mind, and strength (Moroni 10:32), then His grace is sufficient for us and we may be made perfect in Christ. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it, "The Church is 'for the perfecting of the Saints' (Eph. 4:12); it is not a well-provisioned rest home for the already perfected."<sup>5</sup>

What, then, are the requirements for denying ourselves of all ungodliness? How do we show that we love God with all our might, mind, and strength? Does that mean that we have to be perfect soldiers, perfect writers, perfect speakers, perfect parents? Obviously not for Moroni. I think that for Moroni it meant we must repent of anything we are doing which would alienate us from the Spirit of the Lord and we must show our love for God by keeping His commandments and loving His children.

Where did Moroni get his ideas? He got them from the scriptures that he guarded and pored over and added to and from the Lord himself. Let's look at what the Lord taught the Nephites in those scriptures and especially in 3 Nephi 11 and 12 before He invited them to "be perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48).

As Christ descended to the Nephites at the temple in the land Bountiful, He announced, "I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and . . . I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning" (3 Nephi 11:10–11). He invited the whole multitude to come unto Him. One by one, they felt the prints of the nails in his hands and feet. One by one they came forward that they might know for themselves who He was. They knew and they witnessed that He was the God of the whole earth, the promised Messiah, who had

been slain for the sins of the world—and now lived again.

Then came a wonderful opportunity for them to be taught personally by the Lord. He taught them about baptism, and He declared unto them His doctrine. “This is my doctrine,” He begins in 3 Nephi 11:32. He declares that the Father bears record and the Holy Ghost likewise and that the commandment is “to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 33). “Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, . . . and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (v. 35) .

Then he repeats the doctrine: “And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (vv. 37–38). Are you struck as I am with the significance of that repetition?

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them (v. 39). And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same is not built upon my rock” (v. 40). After explaining again the need for the baptism of water, Christ promises that He will “baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:1).

What follows next is some practical teaching and examples of what people will do who have repented, been baptized, and received the Holy Ghost and a remission of their sins. This version of the Sermon on the Mount, or, as we sometimes call it, the Sermon at the Temple goes on to say that these people will be filled with the Spirit: they will be blessed, or “happy”; they will be the salt of the earth; they will know that they are the children of a Father who is in heaven (3 Nephi 12:45) and will find that “old things are done away, and all things have become new. Therefore, [says the Savior] I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:47–48).

Follow this train of logic with me. **A:** We are the children of God. Listen to your children sing it—it’s not coincidence that the song “I Am a Child of God” is the first song in the Children’s Songbook. **B:** We have a divine nature. Listen to your daughters repeat it in the Young Women theme. **C:** “We are beloved spirit daughters of God and our lives have meaning, purpose and direction” (Relief Society Declaration). **D:** We have a Savior, who paid the price for any sin, mistake, or imperfection we may have for which we are willing to repent.

Therefore, as God created us and we have within us a divine spirit, all we need to do is turn ourselves, to repent, so that we are headed in the right direction. He has sent His Son to show us the direction, the way. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). There is no perfection necessary outside of His invitation, and no perfection possible without His perfect Atonement.

The Lord—and the Lord alone—has the power to make us perfect. He would teach us, as He taught the Nephites, that He came into the world to do the will of the Father and be lifted up on the cross that He might draw all men to Him. We must have faith in Him, repent of sins and ungodliness, be baptized and receive the Holy Ghost. Doesn't that have a familiar ring? And aren't we all engaged in that endeavor? The scriptures promise us that after we have received the Holy Ghost, the Spirit will show us "all things what [we] should do" (2 Nephi 32:5). With the direction of the Holy Ghost, with the Comforter beside us, we can endure to the end. That is the doctrine of Christ, as Nephi says. That is the gospel, as Jesus says in 3 Nephi 27. That is the good news.

The last phrase in the gospel formula is "endure to the end." And even though we all know that in this life there are bound to be times and things that we will just plain have to endure, for many of us that "endure to the end" phrase is a bit of a downer. When we talk to the children about it in Primary, we don't say, "Endure to the end." We say, "Choose the right." And for myself, I like the phraseology from 2 Nephi, which means the same but sounds a little happier and stronger. "Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men" (2 Nephi 31:20). Pressing forward with a brightness of hope sounds like something we can do, especially with the Lord's assurance that His "yoke is easy and [His] burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

Second Nephi sounds a lot like Third Nephi, doesn't it? The message of the Book of Mormon about what we have to do—the gospel message—is consistent throughout. We are on the right path! It is faith in the Lord, repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, and pressing forward in faith with love and a brightness of hope. How are we going to know that what we are doing is the right thing for us to be doing? How are we going to know we are in the straight and narrow path? I think the scriptures and the prophets tell us that the way we will know is by listening to the Spirit. It will help us know the truth of all things (Moroni 10:5). The Holy Ghost will never make us feel better about our "awful situation" (Mosiah 2:40), if that is what we are in, but it will comfort us and help us realize that we don't have to be famous, or rich, or ultratalented, or "perfect" in the ways of the world to be acceptable to God. It will tell us all things what we should do.

Is there a litmus test for recognizing the Spirit? Here are some answers I've received as I've asked friends how they feel when the Spirit of the Lord is active in their life. "It's easy to accept callings even when I know it will be a challenge." "I feel happy and blessed." "I feel grateful." "I don't feel critical of others." "I feel a quiet spirit of love and peace." In my experience, the Spirit bears witness of Jesus Christ and His love. If you're getting another message, it is not from the Holy Ghost.

In the past seven years, as I have served on the Primary General Board and in the Primary General Presidency, it has been my opportunity to visit many Primaries around the world. I have seen Primaries with 180 children, five wards in the building, and sixty more children in the nursery. I've seen Primaries with five children in the whole Primary. I've seen Primaries with resources galore and Primaries where they used leftover political flyers for paper and broke five crayons into enough pieces so twelve children could each have something to draw with. I've seen Primaries where the Spirit was invited and testimony was borne and the

children sang from their hearts and were blessed and taught and edified. But one Primary I will never forget was one that was struggling. Two women were running the Sharing Time, the music, and the classes. I could see a connection between their Sharing Time activity and the gospel principle they hoped they were teaching, but I would guess that none of the children could see it. It was far from “perfect,” but I received from the Spirit an unmistakable impression of the Lord’s love for those leaders and for those children and for all of us whom He allows to do His work. He loves us, He knows us, He gives us opportunities to work and to grow and to experience what we need to experience to bring us again to His presence. He wants us to succeed, and He has provided the way that we can. When we love Him and follow Him, He makes up the difference.

Sisters, we prove to the Lord the desires of our hearts when we let Him know that we are willing to do whatever He wants us to do. With the father of King Lamoni we must be willing to “give away all [our] sins to know [Him]” (Alma 22:18)—even if our sin is accepting from the adversary a destructive view of ourselves which keeps us from feeling the Lord’s love. If our submission to the Lord is qualified, then how can we expect Him to lead us? Would we say to Him who has given everything, “I’m willing to do whatever you would have me do, but don’t let it be in the nursery and please don’t let it be in the geriatric wing?” There is, indeed, something sublimely perfect about “Thy will be done.”

What a wonderful opportunity it is to join together to “remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that [we] must build [our] foundation . . . whereon if men [and women] build they cannot fall” (Helaman 5:12). Let us make sure that we are building on that foundation. Let us love the Lord with all our might and strength, and then let us rely on Him who is mighty to save. Moroni had it right—His grace really is sufficient for us. I bear my witness that He loves us and provides a way, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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## Notes

- 1 Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 63.
- 2 *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:730.
- 3 *Interpreter’s Dictionary*, 3:730.
- 4 Henri Stephanus, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, 9 vols. (reprint, Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1954), 8:1961.
- 5 Neal A. Maxwell, “Brother Offended,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 38.
- 6 “I Am a Child of God,” *Children’s Songbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 2–3.
- 7 Young Women Theme, in Kathleen Lubeck, “Young Women of Value,” *Ensign*, April 1989, 45.
- 8 “Relief Society Declaration,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 92–93.

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