

Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually

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If we persevere, then somewhere in eternity our refinement will be finished and complete.

The scriptures were written to bless and encourage us, and surely they do that. We thank heaven for every chapter and verse we have ever been given. But have you noticed that every now and then a passage will appear that reminds us we *are* falling a little short? For example, the Sermon on the Mount begins with soothing, gentle beatitudes, but in the verses that follow, we are told—among other things—not only not to kill but also not even to be angry. We are told not only not to commit adultery but also not even to have impure thoughts. To those who ask for it, we are to give our coat and then give our cloak also. We are to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and do good to them who hate us.¹

If that is your morning scripture study, and after reading just that far you are pretty certain you are not going to get good marks on your gospel report card, then the final commandment in the chain is sure to finish the job: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father ... in heaven is perfect.”² With that concluding imperative, we want to go back to bed and pull the covers over our head. Such celestial goals seem beyond our reach. Yet surely the Lord would never give us a commandment He knew we could not keep. Let’s see where this quandary takes us.

Around the Church I hear many who struggle with this issue: “I am just not good enough.” “I fall so far short.” “I will never measure up.” I hear this from teenagers. I hear it from missionaries. I hear it from new converts. I hear it from lifelong members. One insightful Latter-day Saint, Sister Darla Isackson, has observed that Satan has somehow managed to make covenants and commandments seem like curses and condemnations. For some he has turned the ideals and inspiration of the gospel into self-loathing and misery-making.³

What I now say in no way denies or diminishes any commandment God has ever given us. I believe in His perfection, and I know we are His spiritual sons and daughters with divine potential to become as He is. I also know that, as children of God, we should not demean or vilify ourselves, as if beating up on ourselves is somehow going to make us the person God wants us to become. No! With a willingness to repent and a desire for increased righteousness always in our hearts, I would hope we could pursue personal improvement in a way that doesn’t include getting ulcers or anorexia, feeling

depressed or demolishing our self-esteem. That is *not* what the Lord wants for Primary children or anyone else who honestly sings, “I’m trying to be like Jesus.”⁴

To put this issue in context, may I remind all of us that we live in a fallen world and for now we are a fallen people. We are in the *telestial* kingdom; that is spelled with a *t*, not a *c*. As President Russell M. Nelson has taught, here in mortality perfection is still “pending.”⁵

So I believe that Jesus did not intend His sermon on this subject to be a verbal hammer for battering us about our shortcomings. No, I believe He intended it to be a tribute to who and what God the Eternal Father is and what we can achieve with Him in eternity. In any case, I am grateful to know that in spite of *my* imperfections, at least God is perfect—that at least He is, for example, able to love His enemies, because too often, due to the “natural man”⁶ and woman in us, you and I are sometimes that enemy. How grateful I am that at least God can bless those who despitefully use Him because, without wanting or intending to do so, we *all* despitefully use Him sometimes. I am grateful that God is merciful and a peacemaker because I need mercy and the world needs peace. Of course, all we say of the Father’s virtues we also say of His Only Begotten Son, who lived and died unto the same perfection.

I hasten to say that focusing on the Father’s and the Son’s achievements rather than our failures does not give us one ounce of justification for undisciplined lives or dumbing down our standards. No, from the beginning the gospel has been “for the perfecting of the saints, ... till we ... come ... unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”⁷ I am simply suggesting that at least one purpose of a scripture or a commandment can be to remind us just how magnificent “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ”⁸ really is, inspiring in us greater love and admiration for Him and a greater desire to be like Him.

“Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him ...,” Moroni pleads. “Love God with all your might, mind and strength, then ... *by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ.*”⁹ Our only hope for true perfection is in receiving it as a gift from heaven—we can’t “earn” it. Thus, the grace of Christ offers us not only salvation from sorrow and sin and death but also salvation from our own persistent self-criticism.

Let me use one of the Savior’s parables to say this in a little different way. A servant was in debt to his king for the amount of 10,000 talents. Hearing the servant’s plea for patience and mercy, “the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and ... forgave ... the debt.” But then that same servant would not forgive a fellow servant who owed him 100 pence. On hearing this, the king lamented to the one he had forgiven, “Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?”¹⁰

There is some difference of opinion among scholars regarding the monetary values mentioned here—and forgive the U.S. monetary reference—but to make the math

easy, if the smaller, unforgiven 100-pence debt were, say, \$100 in current times, then the 10,000-talent debt so freely forgiven would have approached \$1 billion—or more!

As a personal debt, that is an astronomical number—totally beyond our comprehension. (Nobody can shop that much!) Well, for the purposes of this parable, it is *supposed* to be incomprehensible; it is *supposed* to be beyond our ability to grasp, to say nothing of beyond our ability to repay. That is because this isn't a story about two servants arguing in the New Testament. It is a story about us, the fallen human family—mortal debtors, transgressors, and prisoners all. Every one of us is a debtor, and the verdict was imprisonment for every one of us. And there we would all have remained were it not for the grace of a King who sets us free because He loves us and is “moved with compassion toward us.”¹¹

Jesus uses an unfathomable measurement here because His Atonement is an unfathomable gift given at an incomprehensible cost. That, it seems to me, is at least part of the meaning behind Jesus's charge to be perfect. We may not be able to demonstrate yet the 10,000-talent perfection the Father and the Son have achieved, but it is *not* too much for Them to ask us to be a little more godlike in little things, that we speak and act, love and forgive, repent and improve at least at the 100-pence level of perfection, which it is clearly within our ability to do.

My brothers and sisters, except for Jesus, there have been no flawless performances on this earthly journey we are pursuing, so while in mortality let's strive for steady improvement without obsessing over what behavioral scientists call “toxic perfectionism.”¹² We should avoid that latter excessive expectation of ourselves and of others and, I might add, of those who are called to serve in the Church—which for Latter-day Saints means *everyone*, for we are all called to serve somewhere.

In that regard, Leo Tolstoy wrote once of a priest who was criticized by one of his congregants for not living as resolutely as he should, the critic concluding that the principles the erring preacher taught must therefore also be erroneous.

In response to that criticism, the priest says: “Look at my life now and compare it to my former life. You will see that I am trying to live out the truth I proclaim.” Unable to live up to the high ideals he taught, the priest admits he has failed. But he cries:

“Attack me, [if you wish,] I do this myself, but [don't] attack ... the path I follow. ... If I know the way home [but] am walking along it drunkenly, is it any less the right way simply because I am staggering from side to side?

“... Do not gleefully shout, ‘Look at him! ... There he is crawling into a bog!’ No, do not gloat, but give ... your help [to anyone trying to walk the road back to God.]”¹³

Brothers and sisters, every one of us aspires to a more Christlike life than we often succeed in living. If we admit that honestly and are trying to improve, we are not hypocrites; we are human. May we refuse to let our own mortal follies, and the inevitable shortcomings of even the best men and women around us, make us cynical

about the truths of the gospel, the truthfulness of the Church, our hope for our future, or the possibility of godliness. If we persevere, then somewhere in eternity our refinement will be finished and complete—which is the New Testament meaning of *perfection*.¹⁴

I testify of that grand destiny, made available to us by the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself continued “from grace to grace”¹⁵ until in His immortality¹⁶ He received a perfect fulness of celestial glory.¹⁷ I testify that in this and every hour He is, with nail-scarred hands, extending to us that same grace, holding on to us and encouraging us, refusing to let us go until we are safely home in the embrace of Heavenly Parents. For such a perfect moment, I continue to strive, however clumsily. For such a perfect gift, I continue to give thanks, however inadequately. I do so in the very name of Perfection itself, of Him who has never been clumsy or inadequate but who loves all of us who are, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

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