

On Being a Christian Perfectly

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I want to think with you today about what it means to be a Christian. And, since, ultimately, what it means to be a Christian is to “be perfect even as [Jesus], or [our] Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48; see Matthew 5:48), I want to think with you about being a Christian perfectly, rather than doing Christianity perfectly. Perfection, we tell ourselves, is a process, but I want to take the Lord at His word, and His word when He issued this command is that we “be perfect” with no additional words of comforting qualification. The word *be* is an important word in this statement. To be perfect is to be complete, whole—though we mean to lose the self in the service of others so we can find it again. Our modern lives have a way of scattering us into the many sectors of our responsibilities, each with its own list of tasks to be performed, superiors to be satisfied, substances or situations to be avoided, and people to be loved. Something tells me that the wholeness the Lord is talking about is not the sum of the items on these lists, especially because the lists contain so many “to don’ts” as well as “to dos.”

One of the striking things about sin is that it is not an opposite form of completing the self but rather a way of dividing and dislocating a bit of oneself from the whole. We often refer to this phenomenon as compartmentalizing our

lives and ourselves. I think that what we might call “Internet sin” is particularly effective in exploiting this vulnerability in us as well as in the world that we usually try to distinguish ourselves from. Certainly pornography, plagiarism, and gambling on the Internet are the problems they are for us because the chance to indulge the powerful temptations that have always been with us is now just a few clicks away. And it doesn’t help us that these temptations often find us, rather than our having to go out and look for them at a store, theater, or party.

But the basic challenge the Internet poses is that it’s more than just an easily accessible storehouse of images and information. The Web, with its many entrances into labyrinths of virtual experience and relationships, makes it easy for a part of oneself to wander off and slip into another room unnoticed by others and barely noticed by the rest of oneself. The appeal of restaging one’s life on another stage where it can enter in and exit from some contained adventure and stimulation is very

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strong, especially when one constitutes one's world as a place of denials, deferrals, and dangers, and when envy of others' worlds of popularity and possessions is inverted into configuring a good world as one that *deprives* its inhabitants of such things. Is that what we think righteousness is—a life of privation we endure on the promise that we'll get more and better versions of the stuff and the station we've always wanted? If so, is it any wonder that when technology gives us the chance to privately make our envious fantasies more real, we seize the opportunity to reinvent ourselves as someone more daring and sophisticated on a personal-space site?

I don't mean to preach a Luddite sermon on the evils of modern technology. In fact, if anything, this technology has revealed some problems and weaknesses in us that we need to address; it didn't exactly cause them. And, dear friends, it is urgent that we all address them now. Far, far too many of us of all ages are depositing small portions of our soul in scattered electronic closets. The answer is ultimately not to try to search out and lock the door to every closet. It is in affirmation—not merely in avoidance—in doing good, not just resisting evil, that one takes up Christianity as a way of being in the world. If mortal life for us is simply a time of doing without, then we're probably spending most of our time thinking about what we're doing without—like me on a diet, constantly thinking about the food I wish I could have. Being a Christian in this world means living in our own and others' inabilities, disabilities, and fallibilities. Our limitations don't keep us from who we really are; they are the conditions in which we are who we are.

I am so very grateful that the Lord Jesus Christ lived in this world as well as atoned for it. I don't know what limitations He actually had as part of His mortal way of being. Did He have bad days, perfect recall, and hormonal spikes? Were there foods He turned up His nose at? Was He neat and orderly?

Could He have been both a computer and a poetry nerd or gone out for any sport He wanted to and been the best at everything? Consequently, I don't know what it means that the Lord Himself, in Paul's words, "suffered being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). But I do know there is no temptation, no form of suffering, loneliness, or injustice we experience that the Lord through His life and Atonement did not Himself experience or comprehend. Whatever existential pluses and minuses were His mortal lot, the Redeemer implicitly chose in His thoughts, actions, and words to be for others and for His Father. Whether or not He felt like it, He did not withdraw—as we often do—into being for self through indulging the kind of longings and passions that spring from insecurity, impatience, and fear of failure.

To be like Jesus—and we must be like Him if we want to be with Him and the Father—we must strive for a deeper knowledge of who the Son of God is, since it is by Him we come to know the Father (see John 14:6ff.). To that end the Lord talked a great deal about what it means to be like Him. In fact, the way He talked about Himself during His mortal ministry constantly reminded His audience that the Jewish concept of God was about being.

You and I know that the Lord Jesus Christ, who walked and talked with the remnant of Israel left in Palestine, was also the great Jehovah, who had brought the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of Egypt and into the promised land with a mighty hand. To His disciples and His detractors, the Lord often declared who He was by referring to the meaning embedded in the name Jehovah, or "I am." You easily remember many of these that John, in particular, recorded: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11); and "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). Now, I'll spare you the complexities associated with the meaning and usage of the word *Jehovah*, or *Yahweh*, except to acknowledge that many scholars think a

better translation of this word is “I will be” or “I cause to be.” But the concept expressed in the name of the Lord talking about Himself as, for instance, the “bread of life” (John 6:48) or “the light of the world” (John 8:12) was a direct way of reintroducing Himself to His people as their God and of teaching them and us that keeping the law meant taking upon us His name. As the Lord told the Nephites after His resurrection, “I am the law” (3 Nephi 15:9).

One of the most powerful of the Lord’s “I am” self-declarations gives us a special insight into what it means to be a Christian. On a few rather ominous occasions—when the Lord first spoke to the Nephites embalmed in darkness after the great destruction that marked His death on this continent (see 3 Nephi 9:18); at the beginning and the end of the Revelation of St. John (see Revelation 1:8; 22:13); and twice in Joseph Smith’s initial revelations to Martin Harris (see D&C 19:1) and Sidney Rigdon (see D&C 35:1)—the Lord declared: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” (3 Nephi 9:18; Revelation 22:13). There is a world of meaning in this name. It declares that the Lord is the Lord absolutely. Whatever it means to be a joint heir with Christ of all the Father hath—a startling and, at first glance, an even brash idea—this name indicates that, in an eternity that is without beginning or end, He is nevertheless for us the beginning and the end of our immortality and eternal life.

I don’t know what our relationship to the Son of God will be in the eternities. But the fact that the Son still bears in His resurrected body—“restored to [its] proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:23)—the scars of the Atonement suggests to me that He will always be our Redeemer, that He didn’t live a mortal life just to get it over with but rather to be able to live it with us over and over again. That’s what it means, by the way, to be an eternal parent.

In any event, what is clear to me in this life is that as the Beginning and, especially, the End,

the Lord is not a means to another end. With His Father and our Father He *is* the end, the target, the audience, the culmination of all we try to do and be individually and collectively, just as He is the source of all we are able to do or be. But don’t you find yourself, as I find myself, treating the Lord and His gospel as a means to another end—that is, yourself as the end? Don’t you, like I, slip in prayer into seeing God as the giver of gifts in which, truth be told, we have really invested our thoughts and hearts—good grades, jobs, marriage, protection—thus making the gifts rather than the Gift-giver the object of our desires?

Don’t we spend most of our time working out *our* eternal salvation, *our* happiness, when Jesus Himself spends all of His time worrying about our eternal salvation and happiness? Is God an instrument and His gospel a program we use for our personal development? Are His commandments a set of strategies for us to avoid misfortune, bad health, and punishment?

Keeping commandments like paying tithing does yield tangible, substantial temporal blessings, but do we treat the idea of giving “our” material substance to the Being whose substance it really is in the first place as an investment for a bigger heavenly mansion? Do we give simply to get? Do we perform service to others as a way of obligating God to bless us and in the meantime to give us good, warm feelings about ourselves? Do we treat obedience like a kind of reality TV show, a race, a series of ordeals or obstacle courses, a form of public humiliation we’re willing to endure in this life for the celestial fame and fortune it brings the winners in the next?

When we take the sacrament or confess something to the bishop, does the Atonement serve as a software application that scans and cleans our hard drives that we need to insert into ourselves once a week or so and then put back in its case to be used again next time?

The things we talk about doing, dear brothers and sisters, like prayer and repentance,

should become our way of being and bearing ourselves in this world—not something we do just to get through the world. Scripture study and church service should be a chosen lifestyle, not just an accepted assignment. Faith, hope, and charity must become the thoughts we think and the language we speak. Mormon promised his son Moroni and us that if we are “filled with [charity]; . . . when [the Lord] shall appear we shall *be* like him, for we shall see him as he *is*” (Moroni 7:48; emphasis added). Look at the list Mormon gave just before he issued this promise: charity is long-suffering, not self-serving, not easily provoked, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things (see Moroni 7:45; 1 Corinthians 13:4–7).

None of these characteristics by itself represents charity. One must endure all things, but one also hopes and believes them as well. In fact, I wonder what the difference is between “bearing” all things and “enduring” all things. The words don’t function like synonyms here, although they can in common usage. It sounds to me like bearing things means to take up the burden of living as an affirmative choice rather than weathering a storm, hunkered down for however long it rages. In any event, this particular list is not an itemized menu of techniques for success that can be taught in a class or at a convention but is instead an articulation of a fundamental orientation toward being in this world that will continue into the next.

Now, I’m not saying we don’t need particular techniques or therapies, especially those revealed by prophets and apostles, as well as those discovered by good, smart people who have studied their fellow human beings to help them. It’s just that when I hear the Lord giving instruction—especially in the full expression of the law and the gospel that the Lord delivered in that most elegant and profound Sermon on the Mount—I hear Him saying things in such a way as to make us think past technique in order to rethink our conception of both sin and

righteousness. In this amazing document the Lord breathed life back into the laws He wrote on tables of stone with His own finger by offering to write the law in the “fleshy tables” of our hearts (see 2 Corinthians 3:3; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10, 10:16). Indeed, He reminded us throughout the Sermon on the Mount that the purpose of a law of ordinances and performances that directed the very motions of our bodies to enact the Atonement in practice and ritual was not just to train but to transform our hearts so that the Atonement would be the spark that ignites that heart’s each and every beat. This is why Jesus could say in the sermon that He came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it, because He came to resuscitate, to restore, to resurrect the law.

Take, for example, the passages that lead up to the Lord’s astonishing command to us to be perfect. As you remember, the actual statement the Lord made is: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The *therefore* seems to me to refer to what has just preceded this statement, and what immediately comes before it is a list of six revisions to the law of Moses, the six “Ye have heard it said . . . but I say unto you” statements. Look, for instance, at the famous “adultery” passage. After the Lord talked about anger and made us already nervous about, say, something as harmless as calling another driver on the road an idiot, He said this:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. [Matthew 5:27–28]

The Lord began by quoting the very statement He Himself gave in the Ten Commandments, then He rephrased and broadened it on His own authority to make adultery a sin not only as a committed act but also as a contemplated one. Did He revise

Himself to show us that we all need to do this? This is where the Lord starts to pound the chisel into our hearts, because that is where the seat of sin really is. In fact, the *already* seems to suggest that the kind of looking He was talking about is a symptom, not a cause. But, thus far, we are still talking about what we should not do. So the Lord's next move was to tell us what we should do:

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. [Matthew 5:29–30]

Surely the crowd must have gasped at this point. I have this mental image of Peter hearing the Lord utter verse 29, looking confusedly over at John and whispering, "Did He just say . . . ?" while John holds a hand up, listens to verse 30, then turns to Peter, nodding his head slowly, his eyes wide with amazement and a touch of fear. It's a good thing Matthew or somebody else was taking notes that day, because I imagine that many in the crowd did what many of us do when we hear this same passage: we rush in and start interpreting what He "really" meant to say.

Interpretation is called for here, but it ought to stay connected to the way He said it. Why did He say it the way He did, and could He really have meant exactly what He said? Now, before you start writing yourself a note like "Having trouble with lust in swimming class; leave right eye in locker," let's think about a way of keeping our limbs but still taking up the Lord's amputate-to-repent program. (And you thought being stoned was bad.)

The Lord made a conditional if/then statement, and maybe the "if" part doesn't

happen very much: for the most part, if my right hand does something bad, I bear at least some responsibility for what it does. So then what could the statement mean? Let's not leave the statement as it is worded just yet. The Lord says that if a part of my body—part of my physical wholeness (but something I could live without if I had to)—is giving me problems, I should cut it off. The Lord is telling us that if we wish to be perfect, complete, in our observance of the law of sexual morality, our bodies, our thoughts, and our lives should have no part that works against the good of the whole. If it were an eye that was the root of our sexual sin, we should be willing to give it up and take on that disability, even though we'd really like to keep it. It should be that important to us.

But since it doesn't seem like a good idea to jump into penitent self-mutilation just yet, how does this sound: Men, if you can't keep the eye away from, say, pornography on the Internet or cable TV, would you be willing to cut off the Internet or the cable service? If you've gotten into this stuff; have tried to change; talked to your bishop; broken off from it for a week, a month, six months, but keep coming back to it; at what point are you willing to cut it off?

I can hear some of you saying, "But the computer is my life. The Internet is central to my schoolwork and will be central to my career. Plus, it's great for genealogy." Fair enough. But if you're not winning the war, if you're not going to be able to have a healthy marriage now and a marriage at all in the eternities, if you can't, as Moroni said, "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32), do you really think your career ought to be your chief consideration, the end of your existence?

I don't want to pick on just the guys. Women, are you willing to pull the plug on your service if you find yourselves getting and looking for a buzz from having titillating chats with often-anonymous virtual "friends"? Both genders: Are you willing to sever yourself from

a TV show or a DVD that doesn't necessarily show forbidden skin or actions but simply assumes and builds its skin-deep plot around the notion that people try out their crushes and infatuations in the bedroom before they commit themselves to another? If silently rooting for a couple to have premarital or extramarital sex with each other on the screen—no matter what you actually see or don't see—is not looking at another person to lust after him or her, I don't know what is.

But this isn't the place to stop our thinking, because we can't remove all of the TVs and computers in all of the places we might be in this world. You will be alone in a hotel room on a business trip, and you'll have to make the choice not to even turn to the wrong channel rather than playing the self-deceiving game we play of just flipping through all the channels to see what's on, hoping in willed ignorance to be flashed.

The Lord asks us in this particular section of the Sermon on the Mount to think honestly about what we're looking for. While we're being honest with ourselves about this, it is also an occasion to think about what it means to look at another human being in any context. Do we look to detach some part of another's being to use or consume it—not just in the sexual context we've been talking about but, for example, with a server at a restaurant? Despite that person's complexity, humanity, and, thus, potential divinity, do we turn them into an extension of our own will for power or pleasure? The Lord might be suggesting that doing so is a form of maiming someone. Is that why the Lord tells us to give up a part of ourselves—that a severed arm would be just recompense for looking at anyone to *do* anything with them?

If we are to do something, it ought to be *for* the other, not with or to them. This imperative to do and to be for others is why the Lord finished His discussion of the law in Matthew 5 with two breathtaking revisions of the law.

Because it's about time to conclude, we don't have time to consider fully what the Lord is saying in these passages. For that matter, a talk of any length is inadequate to this task. Let me just say this in closing: When the Lord tells us to "turn the other cheek," He's not just asking us to take responsibility for our own actions and responses and to accept our responsibility to the other who stands before us, be they impoverished or threatening. He's also inviting us to acknowledge the other's humanity and capacity to be responsible for what he or she does.

There are lots of problems with answering aggression with aggression, not the least of which is that we imitate the aggressor in such a response. We allow the aggressor to set the terms in which our interaction with them takes place and, indeed, let the act, not the actor, govern the interaction. Offering our cloak when our coat is required is a way of imputing a reasonable motive to another's action, allowing the action to define itself as a statement of need or fear that we might actually be able to do something about. Moreover, in asking us to give what they would take from us, He is asking us to extend to them the right to rethink what they wanted and why they wanted it; to acknowledge their right and capacity to change without being compelled to do so, just as we would prefer not to be compelled to do or give something—the Golden Rule, in other words.

The Lord isn't trying to cover every possible aggressive or passive-aggressive situation here. Surely He isn't asking us to respond to a child abuser or someone who has just shot someone else by cheerfully offering the person another victim. But when the Lord tells us to love, bless, and pray for those who do us wrong or are fundamentally set against us—an enemy—He is offering Himself to us, isn't He, to do for them what we would do for them if we could? Isn't that why the Lord got so excited over Nephi, son of Helaman, because he arrived at the point that he wouldn't ask for

anything for himself or others that the Lord, in His perfection, wouldn't Himself want to do (see Helaman 10:4–10)?

The Lord wants us to be instruments in His hands, agents for His work, but it sounds to me that if we became much like Him in this life, He wouldn't mind too much if we asked

Him—nicely, like Nephi did—to be a means for us to conduct His work and His glory: the immortality and eternal life of our fellow humans. That we be more like Him in doing His work is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.