

# *“Be Ye Therefore Perfect”*

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I am grateful to add my welcome and greeting to you at the beginning of an exciting fall semester. This is a wonderful time of year. We hope you have had a productive, if not restful, summer and a welcome change of pace to help prepare for the challenging and exciting work of the weeks ahead. You are not yet too far behind in your course work, and the prospects for this fall are bright. This has the promise of a terrific year. It will be an even better year for each of us personally if we can avoid making unnecessary or foolish personal mistakes. You may believe I am talking only about slothfulness or Honor Code violations. Equally concerning to me is the rather common problem of perfectionism.

One area of confusion not rare among us is the notion that worthiness is synonymous with perfection. It is not! One can be fully worthy in a gospel sense and yet still be growing while dealing with personal imperfections. It might be understandable to believe what behavioral scientists describe as perfectionism is laudable. In fact it is not. It is corrosive and destructive and is the antithesis of the healthy quest for eventual perfection that the Savior prescribes.

All of us need to come to realistic and true perceptions about our environment and ourselves. Part of our educational responsibility at

BYU is to gain wisdom, personal insight, and understanding as well as informed appreciation for the world around us. Because, as a group, you are so good, I hope you will understand my concerns. They are not criticisms, but they occasionally give me pause.

The uneasiness of which I speak is largely rooted in misunderstandings some have about timing and also about definitions. With respect to timing, we can confuse our current or proximal circumstances with distant or eternal expectations. With definitions, as I have mentioned, some mistakenly consider worthiness to be the same as perfection. This is not true. While both errors—timing and definitions—may be comprehensible, and thus somewhat excusable, errors they are, and these faulty views of reality may have serious consequences if not corrected. Just as it is necessary to have the fundamentals of architecture and engineering in place to build a successful bridge across a body of water, so it is necessary to be properly grounded in understanding and in doctrine to build the proper bridge from where we are to eternal life.

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*Cecil O. Samuelson was BYU president when this devotional address was delivered on 6 September 2011.*

The Savior said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). What did He mean? To whom does it apply? How might this happen? As you ponder these and other related questions, let me make some observations that might be helpful to you in conceptualizing this commandment as it applies to each of us.

The Lord gives no commandment that is not possible for us to keep or achieve. Likewise, much of what the Lord requires us to do is focused on our interactions with others. Frequently, heaven’s expectations involve the support of families, friends, teachers, and Church and priesthood leaders, as well as the efforts we make in behalf of others. BYU exists precisely because we need each other, and especially our trusted faculty and advisors, to guide and assist us in our quest for education, which will serve all of us for eternity.

Some things, like the law of chastity and our BYU Honor Code, are rational, current perfection possibilities because they are mainly up to us alone. They are, as the Doctrine and Covenants explains, “given for a principle with promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints” (D&C 89:3).

Other things, like our test scores and grades, are mostly up to us, but also depend on the judgment and standards of our teachers and professors. Still, they are not entirely in our control, and thus our goals for achievement and perfection need to keep the involvement and choices of others in mind.

Under even less control, although not entirely out of our hands, are matters such as whether or not we will be asked out for a date next weekend. Or, if we are doing the asking, the issue arises as to whether or not our invitation will be accepted. If we are unsuccessful, then we can try a new strategy or perhaps an improved mouthwash next time. Just remember, other people may make poor decisions that affect us in these matters too!

Lastly, we all run the risk and usually have an experience of being the recipient of the terrible choices of another person in which we have virtually no control or influence in an event that might be extremely hurtful to us. I think of the tragic victims of drunk drivers or uninvited physical assaults and the like.

Thus it is extremely important to understand clearly which options and events are under our control and which are not. Too often we may be tempted to blame others for our deficiencies when in reality we should take responsibility. I have heard students offer criticisms of faculty members who chose to give examinations after a holiday weekend, for example, when the students could have prepared better and earlier. Unfortunately, we also see those who blame themselves unduly when circumstances were not completely under their own control. This is not only unproductive but can be debilitating.

Let us be clear: No one is perfect in everything and likely will not be any time soon. Almost thirty years ago I heard Elder Bruce R. McConkie, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, explain to a group of university students that “you can’t be purer than pure.” If this is true, that we won’t likely be perfect in everything in this life whatever we do or how hard we try, then what are we to make of the Savior’s commandment to be perfect?

At the outset, let me remind you of the footnote references to a Sermon on the Mount verse found in our LDS edition of the New Testament. First, the Prophet Joseph Smith did not shy away from this notion of perfection. This is what the Joseph Smith Translation of this verse says: “Ye are therefore commanded to be perfect” (JST, Matthew 5:50). Perfection isn’t just something nice to inspire us or uplift us to greater heights. It is a commandment of the Lord. Second, from the Greek, where the English translation of this scripture comes, we are reminded that the notion of being perfect should be understood as being “complete,

finished, [or] fully developed” (Matthew 5:48, footnote b).

Further, this instructive footnote refers us to a verse in the Doctrine and Covenants given to the Saints in the early days of the Church. In November 1831, all members of the Church were relatively new converts. They had testimonies of the gospel and its truthfulness, and they were trying to do their best, but they did not fully understand all of the details or nuances of our doctrine. At least in this respect they may have been very much like most of us. Listen to what they were told: “Wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected” (D&C 67:13). At least two things seem clear in this instruction. First, we are not perfect now. Second, we can become perfected if we are patient and take advantage of the requisite ways of thinking and behaving.

Thoughtful patience is part of the perfection process. Like these early Saints, we may be confused and make the mistake of misplacing an eventual essential eternal goal with the expectation of total perfection in the immediate now. This can be a serious error that can be very harmful.

The admonition for patience seems to imply multiple efforts and necessary time as part of our quest for perfection rather than sudden spurts or immediate events. What are the steps and how long is the time? How do we deal with our impatience? How do we set the proper balance in our striving that results in positive progress and also in recognition and understanding when we fail or do not immediately achieve the perfection we seek? How do we come to an understanding that the Lord’s promises really apply to you and me individually in spite of our significant weaknesses? These are important questions. All of the standard works are replete with references to the expectation of perfection, and yet all seem to acknowledge that the perfecting of the Saints is a process that is likely never to be absolutely

complete in mortality. (See Topical Guide, s.v. “perfection,” 364–65.)

In the Lord’s great Intercessory Prayer found in the Gospel of John, we learn that as Jesus prayed to the Father for the unity of the apostles and the Saints, He also prayed that these, His devoted followers, might “be made perfect in one” (John 17:23). They were good, loyal, and devoted but apparently were not yet perfect. Again, maybe a little like most of us, I hope.

The Apostle Paul admitted he had what he described as “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7) that caused him to be buffeted by Satan. He prayed for relief from this weakness or problem, and Paul recounted the Lord’s answer to him:

*And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore [said Paul] will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [2 Corinthians 12:9]*

We may not be happy with our deficiencies, but we also should not be incapacitated by them.

We teach the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. I believe if you look carefully at what, for example, I myself and others have said and written, you can find ample evidence that we endorse these notions. There are times, however, when these cardinal strengths can become handicapping sins. Just as a young mother or father reaches out a hand of encouragement and support for a young baby who is beginning to think about walking, so our Savior and His Father do the same for us as we begin to think about risking a quest to get on the road to eventual perfection. Remember, while we mortals may tease each other on occasion, it is not in the personality or approach of our Redeemer. That is, He never pulls back his hand when it is extended.

True, you and I, like Peter walking on the Sea of Galilee, might lose faith and withdraw ourselves, but God never does and never will withdraw the hand and support offered. But, and this is really a significant qualification, because of the necessity of agency and choice, we must be the one to grasp, figuratively or literally, the extended hand.

It is that outreached hand that we call grace. I believe this is what Nephi was explaining when he said:

*For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.* [2 Nephi 25:23]

Some may opine that Nephi is suggesting that a bargain is being struck. That is, Jesus offers His salvational hand only after we have done everything possible by ourselves. Others have proclaimed that since He offers His grace, we don't need to do anything at all ourselves to achieve salvation. While it is true that the gifts of immortality and resurrection are given universally to all, without qualification, it is also true that eternal life, meaning living again in the presence of the Father and the Son, is made available to those willing to make and keep covenants and live according to the commandments—in other words, being committed to reach out our hands and grasp the hand of grace offered by the Savior.

We all know, as did the Father and the Son from the very beginning, that “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). That is why we have repentance, baptism, and the sacrament. Our perfection is a very long process and not an event or even a fairly short series of progressive events. In my judgment, perhaps the most helpful explication of this is given by the great prophet Moroni in literally his concluding counsel, teaching, and

testimony before sealing up the plates that we now know as the Book of Mormon:

*Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.*

*And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.* [Moroni 10:32–33]

For me, this is the great secret and the tremendous comfort that a clear understanding of the Savior's Atonement and grace provides. We do not and cannot become perfect in everything by ourselves. We achieve eventual perfection because of, not in spite of, His grace. In a real sense we are called to be partners with Him in the perfection process. He knows what we do not know and has the strength we do not have. He asks that we do our part, but He does ask that we *really* do our part.

How do we do our part? We try our very best, understanding that we have both strengths and weaknesses. We understand that the Savior is reaching out to us and provides all that is necessary if we accept Him fully. He said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). But that is not all. As He affirmed His love for us, He also gave this instruction:

*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.*

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.* [John 13:34–35]

Most suffering from the syndrome of perfectionism do not have nearly as much trouble loving God and others as they do themselves. Almost all of us can accept without reservation that we must love God without restrictions or qualifications (see Matthew 22:37–38) while sometimes forgetting the essential components of the companion verse. Yes, we must love our neighbor (see Matthew 22:39), but, just as certainly, we need to learn to love ourselves. Loving ourselves includes not being unreasonable or too hard on ourselves when we make mistakes or act imperfectly. Please be clear that I am not excusing sin or slothful behavior. I am hoping for clarity and wisdom in our own personal assessments.

I do not believe that the Lord wishes us to be unrealistic about our limitations. In fact, I believe Moroni got it right as he reported the explanation of the Lord to him after he went in prayer because of the weaknesses he felt in himself. This was the assurance Moroni received in the face of his self-recognized deficiencies:

*And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and 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]*

Please remember that at BYU you never need to be alone. When you have challenges about your abilities to measure up—and we all do from time to time—recognize that your teachers, advisors, bishops, and other Church leaders and the excellent professionals in our Counseling Center are all willing to assist you as you do your part in accepting the grace of Christ and being patient in your progress.

Please remember that worthiness is vital, but it is not the same as perfection. It is an important step along the way, but it may reflect more on your current direction than on your final destination. As the Lord has promised, “All things must come to pass in their time” (D&C 64:32), and your time at BYU and during mortal life is to move toward the ideal with hope and confidence while retaining the necessary perspective that not everything, especially perfection, can be achieved quickly or at once.

The gospel is true, and so are you. Because our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, are perfect, our dearest aspiration is to become like Them and eventually achieve the perfection that is possible and promised, even though each of us has such a long way to go. You have the confidence and prayers of the leadership of the Church and of this university. I invoke my blessings and love for you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.