
"BE YE THEREFORE PERFECT": THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR PERFECTION

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The Sermon on the Mount has been described as the greatest sermon ever given.¹ This discourse contains both timeless truths and timely advice for the challenging circumstances of our day. During the course of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ called his disciples to a higher, more ethically demanding, standard of living.² Matthew chapter 5 concludes with the Savior's declaration, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). A primary definition of the English word "perfect" is "being in a state of undiminished or highest excellence" and "flawless."³ If readers superimpose this modern understanding of the word onto this passage, however, one might react as biblical scholar C. C. Torrey did, calling it "mere nonsense."⁴ In this context, the commandment has the potential to cause sincere disciples to despair or give up trying because of the overwhelming demands of achieving a state of flawlessness.⁵

This chapter explains the historical context and significance of the scriptural command to be perfect. First, I will analyze the Old Testament

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background, discussing how *teleios*, the Greek word translated as “perfect,” is used in the Septuagint as well as its Hebrew equivalent in the Hebrew Bible. Second, I will discuss how *teleios* was used in the Greek world and elsewhere in the New Testament.⁶ Finally, I will present what Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars have taught about the quest for perfection. I will demonstrate that the essential sense of the Savior’s command to be perfect is a call to live the gospel of Jesus Christ to the best of one’s ability, using the Atonement to repent when necessary. I believe this is good news for disciples of Christ who have a desire to do what is right but may be struggling under the weight of a perceived expectation for flawless behavior in their lives.

PERFECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Savior’s declaration to be perfect even as Father in Heaven is perfect would have reminded his Jewish audience of familiar concepts from the Old Testament.⁷ The most obvious example was Noah, described in Genesis as “a just man and perfect in his generations” (Genesis 6:9).⁸ The Hebrew word translated as “perfect” is *tamim* and means among other things, “whole, sound, healthful” and “having integrity.”⁹ The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—uses the word *teleios* (the same word used in Matthew 5:48) to mean perfect in the sense of “complete” and “entire.”¹⁰ Neither the Hebrew word nor the Greek word carries the connotation that Noah had somehow achieved a state of flawlessness. Certainly the example of Noah’s drunkenness would argue against that interpretation (see Genesis 9:20–21).

Elder Russell M. Nelson taught about those whom the scriptures characterize as perfect. “Scriptures have described Noah, Seth, and Job as perfect men. No doubt the same term might apply to a large number of faithful disciples in various dispensations” but “does not mean that these people never made mistakes or never had need of correction.” Rather, the process of “mortal perfection can be achieved as we try to perform every duty, keep every law, and strive to be as perfect in our sphere as our Heavenly Father is in his.”¹¹ Modern scripture states that “Noah and his sons hearkened unto the Lord, and gave heed, and they were called the sons of God” (Moses 8:13). Thus Noah and his children demonstrated

their perfection or complete integrity by means of their loyal obedience to the Lord. This is likely what Noah's perfection indicates.

The Savior's declaration to be perfect may have recalled Deuteronomy 18:13. In this passage the Lord Jehovah commanded the Israelites, "Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God."¹² In what way were the Israelites to be "perfect"? Specifically, they were commanded, "Thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations" (Deuteronomy 18:9).¹³ In other words, Israelites would be considered "perfect" if they abstained from the evil traditions of non-Israelites and dedicated themselves to the religious practices revealed by Jehovah. In light of such examples, John Nolland concluded that the word *teleios* in the Septuagint "has a basic meaning of 'whole/entire' and in relation to human behaviour before God points to wholeheartedness and lack of compromise with pagan practices."¹⁴

Similarly, Solomon instructed the Israelites, "Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day" (1 Kings 8:61). Here, as elsewhere in 1 Kings, the Septuagint uses *teleios*, but it is translated from the Hebrew word *shalem*, which means "complete, safe, at peace."¹⁵ In 1 Kings, the concept of having a "perfect" heart is directly connected to faithfully worshipping Jehovah. At the end of his life, Solomon's "heart was not perfect with the Lord his God" because his wives had "turned away his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). Likewise, under the administration of Rehoboam, the people of Judah participated in "all the abominations of the nations which the Lord cast out before the children of Israel" (1 Kings 14:24). Abijam, the son of Rehoboam and grandson of Solomon, is described as a man whose "heart was not perfect with the Lord his God," because he "walked in all the sins of his father" (1 Kings 15:3). Abijam's son Asa, on the contrary, is said to have possessed a "heart [that] was perfect with the Lord" (1 Kings 15:14) because he dedicated vessels of silver and gold and brought them "into the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 15:15). Thus, in the Old Testament, having a perfect heart refers to a state of "exclusive worship, without idolatry, wholly obedient to God's will" and people who "serve Yahweh wholly and undividedly."¹⁶ Again, the concept of perfection in these Old Testament references is not flawless behavior

but rather a life of complete loyalty to Jehovah in spite of temptations and setbacks.

GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

The classical Greek idea of perfection differs from that found in the above examples from the Bible. For example, around 400 BC Plato had taught that a “perfect” (*teleios*) man was one who had achieved “firm and true views.”¹⁷ Plato explained the process by which one could attain this level of perfection: “The man who by recollection of what he once saw in God’s proximity presses on to the world of ideas and thus reaches up to true being, he alone is perfect.”¹⁸ The Platonic concept of perfection as the human ideal of true knowledge and true virtue is not precisely the understanding found in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁹

The concept of *teleios* continued to develop over the centuries. By the time of the New Testament, Hellenistic ideas had penetrated into Palestine and surrounding areas and affected the way that Jews viewed their relationship to God and the world around them.²⁰ In particular, the discussion of *teleios* engaged Jewish thinkers from the first century AD such as Philo of Alexandria. This important Hellenistic Jewish philosopher’s explanation of the process of becoming “perfect” (*teleios*) focused on integrity: “The perfect man must be pure in every word and action, and in his whole life.”²¹ Philo elsewhere clarified that this type of perfection should not be understood to be the same thing as living in a state of flawlessness: “There is no one born, however perfect he may be, who can wholly avoid the commission of sin.”²² According to Philo, this state of perfection is not achieved alone by keeping all the laws of God but rather is a gift from God: “Perfection is found in no created thing but . . . it does appear in them at times owing to the grace of the great Cause of all things.”²³

Philo’s conclusions seem to correspond with the teachings of Moroni on grace and achieving perfection. Moroni taught, “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” (Moroni 10:32).²⁴ Thus, as we obey and trust in the Savior to the utmost of our ability, we become “sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ” (Moroni

10:33). This allows the individual to "be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32). Moroni carefully utilizes passive verbs to teach, as Philo did, that we do not attain this state of perfection on the basis of our own merits.

PERFECTION ELSEWHERE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In order to understand more fully the command to be perfect as Father in Heaven is perfect, one should study the use of the word *teleios* elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. An important example to consider is the story of the man who approached Jesus and asked, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" The Savior responded by telling him to "keep the commandments." After the man claimed, "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" the Savior explained, "If thou wilt be perfect [*teleios*], go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (see Matthew 19:16–21).

As W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison have concluded, the meaning of *teleios* in this case "can hardly be a reference to sinlessness."²⁵ Significantly, the Savior indicates that a person does not achieve this type of perfection by simply keeping all the commandments. In the context of the story, as an upstanding Jew who kept the Ten Commandments, the young man would have already likely made it a practice to give some of his wealth to those in need.²⁶ But that past obedience was not enough to achieve perfection or completeness. The heart of perfection is true discipleship; it is following the Savior.²⁷ The man needed to learn that "the discipleship of the kingdom is not simply a matter of obeying commandments; it requires an absolute commitment."²⁸ Discipleship consists of submitting to current commandments with continuing loyalty, not begrudging the sacrifice the Savior requires of us today by pointing to yesterday's obedience.

Similarly, the Epistle of James states, "Let patience have her perfect [*teleios*] work, that ye may be perfect [*teleios*] and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1:4). James was calling fellow Christians to "unwavering steadfastness" through their endurance of trials.²⁹ One should not be "a double minded man [who] is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8), but rather uniformly and completely focused on doing what is right in the most difficult circumstances. Without that unified devotion, like the man who

approached the Savior, one will be “wanting” or, in other words, lacking the most important element of discipleship.

In addition to loyalty and patience, James expounds two facets of perfection: words and deeds: “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect [*teleios*] man, and able also to bridle the whole body” (James 3:2). For some, the tongue is the most difficult member of the body to control.³⁰ In addition, the words one speaks are a manifestation of what is in one’s heart.³¹ Thus, as Sophie Laws has concluded, “The man who is master of his speech is *ipso facto* in total control of himself.”³² In a sense, if a disciple of Christ is able to discipline this unruly member of the body, that person may demonstrate his or her total inner devotion and commitment to God. As James summarized, “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18). For James, a perfect man is completely devoted to fulfilling the will of God in word and especially in deed.

The letters of the Apostle Paul contain further nuances of this concept. Paul used the term *teleios* to mean “full-grown, mature, adult.”³³ In his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul taught: “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect [*teleios*]” (1 Corinthians 2:6; see also Colossians 1:27–28). Joseph A. Fitzmyer concluded Paul was referring to “Christians who have developed fully in their faith-lives.”³⁴ Paul confirms this in the next chapter: “I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual [people], but as unto carnal [people], even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Corinthians 3:1–2).³⁵ Disciples of Christ are to be completely mature, understanding the important doctrines of the gospel and focusing on obedience to them.

As Paul further stated concerning this maturity, “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men [*teleios*]” (1 Corinthians 14:20). In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul likewise warned that disciples “henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Rather, the Lord provided apostles and prophets “for the perfecting of the saints” (Ephesians 4:12). The Greek word translated as “perfecting” is *katartismos*, which means “equipping” through

“training” and “discipline.”³⁶ Thus ecclesiastical leaders have been provided to give Church members the necessary tools so that they might “come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [*teleios*] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). The sense here is not that these leaders make followers of Christ without flaw, but rather the structure of the Church provides a way for disciples to help one another develop spiritually together. As F. F. Bruce concluded, “Each individual Christian ought to grow up into spiritual maturity, but spiritual maturity in the individual Christian is not enough: there must be spiritual maturity in the corporate personality of the church. And one indispensable prerequisite for such corporate maturity is spiritual unity.”³⁷ In other words, it is not enough for a disciple to be focused on his or her individual pursuit of perfection. Perfecting the Saints is intended collectively as families and as members of the family of Christ. This does not release us from personal responsibility but rather expands our responsibility to strengthen one another as brothers and sisters.

THE COMMAND TO BE PERFECT

Analyzing the context of Matthew 5:48 within the sermon allows us to understand more clearly the command to be perfect as Father in Heaven is perfect. Early in the sermon, the Savior exclaimed, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). This may have been one of the provocative statements that caused the people to be “astonished at his doctrine” (Matthew 7:28).³⁸ How could the disciples of Jesus surpass the scribes and Pharisees, who prided themselves on their ability to keep all of the regulations of the law of Moses? The key is to understand how the Savior was to “fulfill” the law of Moses. The ritual portions of the law would be fulfilled in that they would no longer be required once the event they pointed to—the Crucifixion of Christ—occurred.³⁹

But the ethical portions of the law of Moses were fulfilled in a fundamentally different way. They did not cease to be in force following the death of the Savior. Rather, the moral obligations of the law were intensified and raised to a higher standard.⁴⁰ In the Joseph Smith Translation (JST),

the Savior taught this new and important understanding: “I give unto you a commandment that *ye suffer none of these things to enter into your heart*” (JST, Matthew 5:28; emphasis added).⁴¹ While the regulations of the law were very often concerned with an individual’s outward actions, the gospel of Christ was also concerned with the inward intent of that person’s heart.⁴² The Savior demanded more than merely avoiding adultery, murder, and other sinful behavior. The scribes and Pharisees felt they were righteous because they were able to do this. The gospel of Jesus Christ focuses on what a person not only does but also thinks and feels, a higher standard indeed.

This principle is illustrated in the Beatitudes.⁴³ The fourth beatitude states, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6).⁴⁴ The Savior did not say “blessed are the righteous,” implying that one must live a life absolutely free from error. Rather, one is to desire righteousness as intensely as one who is hungry and thirsty desires food and drink.⁴⁵ Stephen E. Robinson concluded concerning this beatitude: “This beatitude refers to people like you and me who want to do what is right, who long for, who hunger and thirst after righteousness—the pure righteousness of God, the perfect righteousness and absolute innocence of the celestial kingdom. Blessed are they who desire with all their hearts to be righteous as Christ is righteous, to be perfect as he is perfect, who long for it and seek it, and who would give anything for it, though they do not have it.”⁴⁶

Significantly, in the JST the Savior states that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will “be filled *with the Holy Ghost*” (JST, Matthew 5:6; emphasis added).⁴⁷ This implies that the reception of the Holy Ghost is not reserved exclusively for those who have never made a mistake but for those trying to do what is right.⁴⁸ Sheri L. Dew taught concerning this beatitude: “Hungering and thirsting translate to sheer spiritual labor. Worshiping in the temple, repenting to become increasingly pure, forgiving and seeking forgiveness, and earnest fasting and prayer all increase our receptivity to the Spirit. . . . The Spirit simply cannot be restrained among righteous women [and men] who are doing their best.”⁴⁹

These preliminary teachings of the Sermon on the Mount set the stage for a better understanding of Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”⁵⁰ In what way are

disciples of Christ to be "perfect" (*teleios*)? During the first few centuries AD, the Greek word *teleios* carried similar connotations as it did in the Septuagint, including the meanings "full-grown," "mature,"⁵¹ and "fully developed." Elder Russell M. Nelson taught, "In Matthew 5:48, the term *perfect* was translated from the Greek *teleios*, which means 'complete.' . . . Please note that the word does not imply 'freedom from error'; it implies 'achieving a distant objective.'"⁵²

Disciples are to be as completely devoted as God. Immediately preceding the commandment to follow God's example of perfection, the Savior explained what this entails: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Disciples show love toward all people because this is exactly what God does: "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). To become as perfect or as completely devoted as God is, disciples must not only keep the two great commandments to love God and to love their neighbor but also demonstrate love toward those who do not love them.⁵³

This kind of love is further illustrated throughout the antitheses.⁵⁴ The Savior reminded his Jewish audience that the law of Moses prohibited murder, adultery, and false oaths, but his gospel taught that one should avoid the prerequisites of anger and lustful thoughts and swearing oaths (see Matthew 5:21–30). He reminded them that the law of Moses permitted divorce but then taught that divorce was not permitted except in cases of fornication (see Matthew 5:31–32). Finally, Jesus warned his audience about the way that some misinterpreted the injunctions "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and "love thy neighbor."⁵⁵ He commanded them, instead, to turn the other cheek and to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44).⁵⁶ God is filled with pure love for all people, whether they love him or not. And this divine love is devoid of anger, lust, false claims, and desires for revenge. This is the love that disciples must possess as they become as fully devoted, or as perfect, as God is.⁵⁷

LATTER-DAY INSIGHTS

Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars have added significant insight into a proper understanding of the goal of perfection for disciples of Christ. Certainly, there are certain aspects of our lives in which we can be absolutely without flaw right now. Elder Mark E. Petersen taught:

A certain degree of perfection is attainable in this life. I believe that we can be one hundred percent perfect, for instance, in abstaining from the use of tea and coffee. We can be one hundred percent perfect in abstaining from liquor and tobacco. We can be one hundred percent perfect in paying a full and honest tithing. We can be one hundred percent perfect in abstaining from eating two meals on fast day and giving to the bishop as fast offering the value of those two meals. We can be one hundred percent perfect in keeping the commandment which says that we shall not profane the name of God. We can be perfect in keeping the commandment which says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." (Ex. 20:14.) We can be perfect in keeping the commandment which says, "Thou shalt not steal." (*Ibid.*, 15.) We can become perfect in keeping various others of the commandments that the Lord has given us.⁵⁸

But living a life entirely free from mistakes is simply not possible for us. For example, speaking of those who may interpret the call to perfection to mean a demand for current flawlessness, President Joseph F. Smith taught, "We do not look for absolute perfection in man. Mortal man is not capable of being absolutely perfect."⁵⁹ This state of sinlessness may not be obtainable in mortality, but, as President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, "We are commanded to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. It will take us ages to accomplish this end, for there will be greater progress beyond the grave, and it will be there that the faithful will overcome all things."⁶⁰

Elder Gerald N. Lund noted that the modern use of the word "perfect" can carry the meaning of "having all flaws and errors removed."⁶¹ Disciples of Christ cannot make themselves perfect through their own merits, but Christ can remove our flaws and errors through the power of his Atonement. Concerning those individuals who are brought forth in

the Resurrection of the just, the Prophet Joseph Smith saw in vision that “these are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood” (D&C 76:69).⁶² Stephen E. Robinson wrote concerning this: “Those who inherit the celestial kingdom are *just* men and women, that is, men and women who want justice, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. They are good neighbors, and they do the best they can. This makes them just—good people. These good people are then *made* perfect through the perfect atonement of a perfect Christ.”⁶³

More recently, Elder Nelson taught that our understanding of perfection will be enhanced by dividing it into two basic categories: mortal perfection and eternal perfection.⁶⁴ Mortal perfection is achieved through the kind of faithful obedience, uncompromised loyalty, and righteous desires discussed above. Just like Noah, Seth, and Job, we attain this mortal perfection “if we do the best we can” to be “faithful disciples” and “strive to be as perfect in our sphere as our Heavenly Father is in his.”⁶⁵

Eternal perfection is a different matter: “Our Heavenly Father has eternal perfection,” but, significantly, this type of perfection is “much more than errorless performance.”⁶⁶ Jesus Christ himself, for instance, never broke a commandment during his mortal life, but when he commanded his Jewish audience to be perfect he did not include himself as one who had achieved perfection. Not until after his Atonement, death, and glorious Resurrection did the Savior declare to the Nephites, “I would that ye should be perfect *even as I*, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48; emphasis added). Only then did the Savior achieve eternal perfection. Thus, as Elder Nelson concluded, “Eternal perfection is reserved for those who overcome all things and inherit the fulness of the Father in his heavenly mansions.”⁶⁷ In light of the resurrected Savior’s words to the Nephites, disciples are called to achieve eternal perfection not merely by means of a life of obedience but also through the blessings of the Atonement, including the Resurrection.

CONCLUSION

The Savior’s command to be as perfect as our Father in Heaven has sometimes been misunderstood as a call to achieve an immediate state of flawlessness. But there are a number of factors that caution us against such

an interpretation. The Greek and Hebrew words used in the Sermon on the Mount, the Septuagint, and the Hebrew Bible do not carry the meaning of flawless behavior. The context of the commandment within the Sermon on the Mount and latter-day prophetic teachings confirm this. Though our ultimate goal as disciples of Christ should be to eventually achieve such a state of being, the Savior was not teaching, “Be ye therefore flawless, right now, in mortality.”

The clearest insight into the meaning of the Savior’s plea for perfection comes from a prophet of the Lord. President Brigham Young taught concerning disciples of Christ who are striving for perfection, “*If they do the very best they know how, they are perfect.*”⁶⁸ His interpretation of Matthew 5:48 is well worth repeating:

We all occupy diversified stations in the world, and in the kingdom of God. Those who do right, and seek the glory of the Father in heaven, whether their knowledge be little or much, or whether they can do little or much, if they do the very best they know how, they are perfect. It may appear strange to some of you, and it certainly does to the world, to say it is possible for a man or woman to become perfect on this earth. It is written “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” Again, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.” This is perfectly consistent to the person who understands what perfection really is.

If the first passage I have quoted is not worded to our understanding, we can alter the phraseology of the sentence, and say, “Be ye as perfect as ye can,” for that is all we can do, though it is written, be ye perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. *To be as perfect as we possibly can, according to our knowledge, is to be just as perfect as our Father in heaven is.* He cannot be any more perfect than He knows how, any more than we. When we are doing as well as we know how in the sphere and station which we occupy here, we are justified in the justice, righteousness, mercy, and judgment that go before the Lord of heaven and earth. We are as justified as the angels who are before the throne of God. The sin that will cleave to all the posterity of Adam and Eve is, that they have not done as well as they knew how.⁶⁹

If disciples are as faithful as they can be according to the knowledge they possess, in the same way that Noah, Seth, and Job were faithful according to their own knowledge, they are perfect. If disciples are completely devoted to applying the teachings of Jesus Christ and if they utilize his Atonement when they make mistakes, they are perfect. If disciples are filled with love that is free from anger, lust, and vengefulness to the utmost degree that they possibly can, they are perfect. Simply put, if disciples are earnestly doing their best to live the gospel of Jesus Christ—including repenting as often as they need to—they are perfect. It is hoped that this knowledge will comfort those who really are giving their best efforts to live the gospel but who are also discouraged and tempted to give up because no matter how hard they try, their best effort does not measure up to what they perceive as perfection.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Ezra Taft Benson, *Come unto Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 37; Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, October 1920, 48; Bruce R. McConkie, “Upon This Rock,” *Ensign*, May 1981, 75; Thomas S. Monson, “The Way Home,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 15; Sterling W. Sill, *That Ye Might Have Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 268; and Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1941, 95.

2. On this, see Frank F. Judd Jr., “The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From Bethlehem through the Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 325–27.

3. See *Webster’s New College Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “perfect.”

4. Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Four Gospels: A New Translation* (New York: Harper, 1933), 291.

5. See, for example, Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 13–17.

6. Though it is unlikely that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered in Greek, the New Testament Gospels have preserved its teachings in Greek.

7. In a similarly worded command, Jehovah instructed the Israelites, “Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2; see also Leviticus 11:44–45, 20:26, and 21:8). King David praised the Lord by declaring, “With the merciful thou wilt shew thyself merciful, and with the upright man thou wilt shew thyself upright” (2 Samuel 22:26). The word translated as “upright” in the Septuagint of this verse is the same word translated as “perfect” in Matthew 5:48.

8. Job is similarly described as “perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1; see also Job 1:8, 2:3). The Hebrew and Greek terms,

however, are not the same as the ones in Genesis 6:9 and Matthew 5:48. Modern revelation also describes Seth as “a perfect man” (D&C 107:43).

9. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 1071.

10. J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1996), 2:471.

11. Russell M. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 86.

12. The New International Version of the Bible renders this passage, “You must be blameless before the Lord your God.” Similarly, Jehovah commanded Abraham, “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Genesis 17:1).

13. Similarly, King David stated, “I was also upright [*tamim*] before him, and have kept myself from mine iniquity.” He was perfect because he was loyal to Jehovah and did not depart from the regulations of the law of Moses (see 2 Samuel 22:22–24).

14. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 271.

15. See Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1023–24. The Greek word *teleios* is also used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word *shalem* in other instances—including 1 Kings 11:4 and 15:3,14—demonstrating the similarity between the Hebrew and Greek terms.

16. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:72; hereafter cited as *TDNT*.

17. Quoted in Kittel, *TDNT*, 8:69. For a convenient English translation of Plato’s discussion, see Edith Hamilton and Huntinton Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

18. Quoted in Kittel, *TDNT*, 8:69.

19. As Ulrich Luz has pointed out, the Greek philosophical concept of *teleios* (i.e., true knowledge and true virtue) “may have offered an important point of contact” with *teleios* in the New Testament, but the latter idea is centered on the Old Testament notion of “undivided obedience to God” (*Matthew 8–20* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001], 513, especially n. 32).

20. See, for example, Martin Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judea in the First Century After Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

21. English translation from C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 504; see also citation from Kittel, *TDNT*, 8:71.

22. English translation from Yonge, *The Works of Philo*, 558; see also Kittel, *TDNT*, 8:71.

23. English translation from Yonge, *The Works of Philo*, 199; see also Kittel, *TDNT*, 8:71.

24. Moroni does not define exactly what he means by “perfection,” but is clear that it is not achieved through human effort apart from the grace of Christ. Stephen Robinson refers to Moroni’s concept of perfection in Christ as “partnership perfection” whereby we earnestly but imperfectly strive to keep the commandments and love God, but “from the moment we enter into the covenant with [Christ], our mistakes are covered—we are perfected in him provided only that we continue in the covenant relationship” (*Believing Christ*, 49).

25. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:48.

26. See Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 558.

27. See Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 514.

28. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 558.

29. Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1980), 53.

30. See specifically James 3:8: "The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

31. James 3:13–18; see also Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 256.

32. Laws, *The Epistle of James*, 145.

33. Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995.

34. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 174. Anthony C. Thiselton explained, "To translate it as *perfect* in this verse (AV/KJV) is not appropriate. The semantic opposition derives its force from that between babies and adults" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], 231).

35. In this context, the term *teleios* could also carry the connotation of "initiated" (Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 995). On this issue, see John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 74–78. But note also the caution of taking this particular interpretation too far (see Paul Johannes du Plessis, "TEAEIOΣ: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament" (doctoral thesis, Theologische Hogeschool, Kampen, 81–85).

36. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 526.

37. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 86–87.

38. On the reaction of the people, see Judd, "The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount," 316–18.

39. For example, Amulek taught, "It is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled; yea, it shall be all fulfilled, every jot and tittle, and none shall have passed away. And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:13–14; see also Alma 25:15, 3 Nephi 9:17–19, and Galatians 3:24–25).

40. On this, see Judd, "The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount," 324–27.

41. This particular JST change is not in the footnotes of the LDS edition of the Bible; see Thomas A. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 14.

42. Certainly the law of Moses was concerned with inward qualities such as love. See Deuteronomy 6:5 (love of God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love of neighbor). The focus, however, was on how that love was manifest by outward actions. The Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:3–17) are a classic example of how the love of God

and the love of one's neighbors were to be manifest through outward actions. On this, see Robert J. Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 240–41.

43. Matthew 5:3–12 are usually called the Beatitudes. The word “beatitude” comes from the Latin *beatius*, “blessed” or “happy.”

44. The word “righteousness” is translated from the Greek term *dikaïosunē*, which means, among other things, “the quality or characteristic of upright behavior” (Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 248).

45. Note also the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” Similarly, this beatitude does not teach “blessed are the pure” (i.e., those who are pure from any mistakes), but rather blessed are those who are pure in their hearts (i.e., their desires to do what is right, even though they may not be without flaw). Compare also the words of the brother of Jared: “Do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; . . . nevertheless, O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires” (Ether 3:2).

46. Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 21.

47. Wayment, *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament*, 12; compare 3 Nephi 12:6.

48. The Lord declared concerning reception of spiritual gifts, “For they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, *and him that seeketh so to do*” (D&C 46:9; emphasis added).

49. Sheri L. Dew, “We Are Not Alone,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 96.

50. The verb form is future (“you will be”) and functions as an imperative (“you are to be”) similar to the other commands in this chapter (“you shall love your neighbor,” etc.). On this, see Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 270–71.

51. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 995–96.

52. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 86; note also the conclusion of W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann: “It does not have here the later Greek meaning of being ‘totally free of imperfection’” (*Matthew* [New York: Doubleday, 1971], 72).

53. Donald A. Hagner concluded that the disciples of Jesus “are to be ‘perfect’ (*teleios*)—that is, they are to be like their Father in loving their enemies” (*Matthew 1–13* [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 135).

54. The antitheses are statements that contrast what the law of Moses taught with what the Savior taught. For example, the law of Moses taught that you should not kill, while Jesus taught that you should not be angry with your brother (see Matthew 5:21–22). W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison concluded; “Although Jesus’ words are contrasted with the words of the Torah, the two are not contradictory” and “his demands surpass those of the Torah without contradicting the Torah” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1:507). For more, see Eric D. Huntsman’s chapter in this volume.

55. The intent of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Leviticus 24:19–20) was to provide restitution for damages, but it eventually seems to have been used as an excuse for revenge.

56. While the command to love neighbors is central to the law of Moses (Leviticus

19:18), the idea of hating enemies is nowhere in the written law. Note that Jesus says, "You have heard that it hath been said" (Matthew 5:43), indicating this was an oral teaching of the time. It seems to have been taught by some Jews, including the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Community Rule teaches that members of the Qumran community should "love all the sons of light" and "hate all the sons of darkness" (1QS 1.9–10). For a convenient English translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

57. David Hill concluded concerning Matthew 5:48: "The emphasis is not on flawless moral character, but on whole-hearted devotion to the imitation of God—not in the perfection of his being, but of his ways. In their acts of love, reconciliation and faithfulness, the disciples are to show God's attitude to men" (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972], 131).

58. Mark E. Petersen, in Conference Report, April 1950, 153; see also Bennett, "Our Goal Is Perfection," *Ensign*, November 1976, 29–31; and Cecil O. Samuelson, "What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?" *New Era*, January 2006, 10.

59. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 132. Harold B. Lee also taught, "It is impossible for us here in mortality to come to that state of perfection of which the Master spoke, but in this life we lay the foundation on which we will build in eternity" (*Decisions for Successful Living* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973], 41).

60. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954–1956), 2:18; compare also *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 348.

61. Gerald N. Lund, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, August 1986, 39.

62. See also Moroni 10:32–33 and the discussion of these verses above.

63. See Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 27; emphasis in original.

64. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 86.

65. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 86.

66. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 86–87; compare Elder Bruce C. Hafen: "Being free from sin is not the same thing as attaining a state of perfection" (*The Broken Heart* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 164).

67. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 87.

68. Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:129. Compare also another prophetic insight from Brigham Young: "Do just as well as you know how in all things. . . . And if you live every day of your lives according to the best light and understanding you possess, glorifying God, our Heavenly Father, just as far as your knowledge extends, I will promise you eternal life in the kingdom of God . . . The grand difficulty with the people is they do not do quite as well as they know how; it is that which hinders us from accomplishing the work given us to do" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:220).

69. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* 2:129–30; emphasis added. President Gordon B. Hinckley similarly taught: "Do what you can do, in the best way you know, and the Lord will accept of your effort" ("Rise to the Stature of the Divine within You," *Ensign*, November 1989, 96).