



# Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

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Volume 12 | Number 3

Article 5

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9-1-2011

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

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A perfectionist paradigm distorts the doctrine of perfection.  
When doctrine is misunderstood, spiritual and emotional problems can follow.

# “Be Ye Therefore Perfect”: Beyond the Perfectionist Paradigm

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During the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord declared, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). For Latter-day Saints, this is a profound and ennobling invitation. As the literal “offspring of God” (Acts 17:29), we can rise to “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Indeed, the possibility of godlike perfection is fundamental to a Latter-day Saint understanding of eternal life. Those who obtain eternal life become *like God* and thereby can *live with God*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, in our present state we are extremely lacking in godly attributes. Yet, as the Prophet Joseph Smith positioned our potential, “with time, growth, and grace men and woman [can] eventually arrive at a godlike station: ‘Then shall they be gods.’”<sup>2</sup>

President Boyd K. Packer taught that this knowledge ought to inspire “a feeling of self-worth, dignity, [and] self-respect” in God’s spirit children.<sup>3</sup> However, for some Latter-day Saints, the talk of godlike perfection is a source of anxiety and discouragement. Ironically, those most distressed by the doctrine of perfection tend to be some of the most diligent, obedient, and

conscientious members of the Church. It is not uncommon for such souls to describe themselves as perfectionists.

Perfectionism is not some benign personality trait that simply inspires individuals to excellence. To the contrary, an increasing body of research suggests that perfectionist strivings can become maladaptive and lead to a host of debilitating mental health problems.<sup>4</sup> Elder Cecil O. Samuelson of the Seventy, who has spent much of his career as a professor and practitioner of medicine, observed that there is concern among some General Authorities about perfectionism in the Church. Addressing missionaries at the Provo Missionary Training Center, he pointed out that perfectionism often troubles “the most talented people” who are “excellent students, model children, and outstanding young people.”<sup>5</sup>

While it is critical to bring increased attention to the mental health issues swirling around perfectionism, it is equally vital to shed light on how a perfectionist paradigm distorts the doctrine of perfection. When doctrine is misunderstood, spiritual and emotional problems can follow. For example, Latter-day Saint perfectionists may “beat themselves up when things aren’t perfect,” live with tremendous “pressure to be perfect but never feel good enough,” or believe they must “do everything perfect” to be accepted by God.<sup>6</sup> In short, they can constitute a cadre of conscientious but despondent Latter-day Saints. This paper will demonstrate that perfectionism corrupts the doctrine of perfection and creates unnecessary burdens in the lives of those who seek perfection through a perfectionist paradigm.

### **The Perfectionist Paradigm**

The perfectionist paradigm typically combines unrealistic expectations with an unhealthy preoccupation with faults, weaknesses, mistakes, and sins. Since perfectionism entails an extreme concern over shortcomings in performance, fear of failure is a constant concern.<sup>7</sup> Though it is correlated with conscientiousness,<sup>8</sup> perfectionism goes far beyond diligent effort and “demand[s] absolute perfection from the self.”<sup>9</sup> Thus perfectionists tend to engage in an unrelenting quest for flawlessness and berate themselves or others for falling short of this impossible standard.

For a perfectionist, any growth achieved through honest effort is eclipsed by the perceived gap between expectations and actual performance. In fact, perfectionism is not primarily focused on self-improvement at all, but rather it is focused on attaining flawlessness. Furthermore, it is not simply

good enough to be perfect in something; perfectionists must be “perfect in all aspects of their lives.”<sup>10</sup> For example, a perfectionist college student may obsess about maintaining a 4.0 GPA,<sup>11</sup> fuss about keeping an immaculate apartment, fret about performing their Church calling without fault, and be consumed with completing their to-do list today—all with exactness!

Perfectionist thinking constantly sets people up for failure because it creates expectations that are “beyond reach or reason.” When “impossible goals” are pursued “compulsively and unremittingly,” their achievement can become the entire basis of individual worth.<sup>12</sup> Unable to consistently reach their unreasonable standards, perfectionists are constantly assaulted by feelings of inadequacy and tend to engage in “severe self-criticism and self-doubt.”<sup>13</sup> Their foreboding sense of failure can even produce “feelings of self-hatred.”<sup>14</sup> In time, this fear of failure can induce intense anxious feelings that can keep perfectionists from doing anything at all. “Thus, it is not high personal standards per se that contribute to poor emotional adjustment; rather, it may be the responses that people have to their perceptions that they consistently fail to meet their own standards that lead to emotional difficulties.”<sup>15</sup>

Even as perfectionists are besieged with feelings of failure, they may aggressively defend their unrealistic expectations. This is a psychological necessity since they measure their self-worth by the *attainment* of their towering standards. By connecting self-worth to flawless achievement of expectations, failure to meet their expectations is seen as a failure of the soul. In turn, criticism of a perfectionist’s expectations is likely to be received as criticism of their individual worth. This can all become very perplexing for others since perfectionists tend to be “members of a moral militia marching bedraggled but brave to the cadence of ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ that [they] alone can hear.”<sup>16</sup> In the end, Elder Samuelson observed, this is all a very “self-centered” affair since the measures are of their own making and *do not* come from God.<sup>17</sup>

At this point, a perfectionist reading this paper may be tempted to defend their expectations as legitimate, especially when they consider the divine decree to “be perfect,” even as God the Father and Jesus Christ are perfect (see Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48). But this appeal to scripture will not help their cause. Quite frankly, godly perfection is an illusion of the highest order for any human being. It is not only unrealistic, it is impossible—that is, until we speak of Jesus Christ. In addition, the quest for perfection outside of the

Atonement of Jesus Christ is a manifestation of unadulterated pride, for we can be made perfect only in Christ (see Moroni 10:32).

Perfectionism twists and distorts the doctrine of perfection. Thus the problem with perfectionism is not high expectations; it is neurotic expectations that are unrealistic and oppressive. The problem with perfectionism is not a sense of inadequacy; it is a sense of inadequacy that ignores the fact we all “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The problem with perfectionism is not conscientious effort; it is effort that has not been energized by Christ’s grace. The problem with perfectionism is not striving for godliness; it is striving for godliness without “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:20). Put simply, perfectionism *is not* what the Lord was asking for when he commanded us to be perfect.

## Teleios

A study of the Greek word *teleios*, from which we get the English rendering “perfect” in Matthew 5:48, suggests that the call for perfection has eternal implications. *Teleios* denotes completeness<sup>18</sup> and can describe someone who is fully developed or finished (see Matthew 5:48, footnote b). In some New Testament contexts, *teleios*<sup>19</sup> simply describes a mature disciple of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 2:6; Philippians 3:15; New International Version, Colossians 4:12)<sup>20</sup> or a divine attribute (see Romans 12:2; Hebrews 9:11; James 1:17; 1 John 4:18). However, in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie instructed, we are talking about “infinite and eternal perfection.”<sup>21</sup> Thus the Sermon on the Mount is far more than an exhortation for ethical behavior; rather, it is an eschatological<sup>22</sup> exhortation unfolding our ultimate possibilities. Jesus invites all willing disciples to become celestial citizens in the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3, 10). Indeed, everything about this sermon is designed to lift our eyes to a higher and holier place.<sup>23</sup> In this sermon, Jesus Christ did not simply come to expose the chasm between God and man; he came to fill it.<sup>24</sup> And by so filling it he opened the way for all believers, in the words of the Apostle Paul, to be “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17).

## Eternal Perfection: A Distant Objective

As the Greek prefix *tele*<sup>25</sup> suggests, perfection is to be viewed as a distant objective, to be achieved far into the next life.<sup>26</sup> The Prophet Joseph Smith made the timing of eternal perfection clear when he taught, “It will be a great while



James Tissot, *The Sermon on the Mount*

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned [the principles of exaltation]. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”<sup>27</sup>

The Lord counseled the first elders of the Church, “Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected” (D&C 67:13). In contrast, perfectionism, with its unrealistic expectations and obsession with flawless performance, tends to encourage impatience. So much of the anxiety and depression surrounding perfectionism can be tied to an unwillingness to accept the fact that growth in mortality takes time and is realized through small, incremental improvements.

When Jesus Christ came to earth, even he did not receive a “fulness at the first, but received grace for grace” (D&C 93:12). If the Lord “continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13), that sends us an unmistakable signal that we work out our salvation gradually “and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19). As Elder Russell M. Nelson noted, “Just prior to his crucifixion, [Christ] said that on ‘the third day I *shall be perfected.*’ Think of that! The sinless, errorless Lord—already perfect by our mortal standards—proclaimed his own state of perfection yet to be in the future. His *eternal* perfection would follow his resurrection and receipt of ‘all power . . . in heaven and in earth.’”<sup>28</sup> The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that to be like God we must go “from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”<sup>29</sup>

Success in our mortal probation is fundamentally measured by gradual improvement and is not achieved through some illusionary fast track to perfection. Elder Marvin J. Ashton reminded us that “perfection is an eternal trek,” and thus direction is more important than speed, “if it is leading toward eternal goals.”<sup>30</sup> President Heber J. Grant taught the principle of improvement beautifully when he said, “If we are trying, to the best of our ability, to improve day by day, then we are in the line of our duty. If we are seeking to remedy our own defects, if we are so living that we can ask God for light, for knowledge, for intelligence, and above all for His Spirit, that we may overcome our weaknesses, then, I can tell you, we are in the straight and narrow path that leads to life eternal; then we need have no fear.”<sup>31</sup> Mortality, then, is

a part of the pathway to perfection; it is not the final destination. This being the case, Elder Nelson concluded, we “need not be dismayed if our earnest efforts toward perfection now seem so arduous and endless. Perfection is pending.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Christ, Covenants, and Perfection**

A critical message of hope to all weary and worn-down perfectionists is that each of us will receive the necessary time to work out our salvation. In King Benjamin’s words, “All things must be done in order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27). But even this fact may not comfort the uneasy perfectionist, for perfectionism not only entails impatience over personal performance but promotes an unhealthy notion of self-reliance. Perfectionism focuses on personal abilities at the cost of divine grace. In the perfectionist mantra, we must be perfect and we must do it on our own merits. Consequently, at its core, perfectionism is connected with the sin of pride because it diminishes, if not dismisses, the crucial role of Christ in achieving perfection.

None of us can be saved except through the “merits, and mercy and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8; see also 2 Nephi 10:24; 2 Nephi 25:23; Mosiah 3:17). We are all “unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21), we are all “eternally indebted” (Mosiah 2:34), and in reality we all ought to be “begging for a remission of [our] sins” (Mosiah 4:20). We all need help. More to the point, we all need the Atonement.

While the reach of the Atonement may extend into the lives of all people, the extent to which we *personally* experience the Atonement is dependent upon our willingness to receive Christ. While he stands at the door and knocks, we must choose to let him in (see Revelation 3:20). And how do we let him in? By making and keeping sacred gospel covenants. In fact, the degree to which we access the blessings of the Atonement is directly related to our willingness to participate in the ordinances of salvation and the associated covenants. Significantly, in the word *teleios* we find a nuanced reference to covenants. John Welch, quoting John I. Durham, has written that Matthew’s usage of *teleios* does not denote “the perfect ethical personality,” but rather employs “the Old Testament sense of the wholeness of consecration to God.’ It tends towards the meaning of ‘living up to an agreement or a covenant.’”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in Greek religious literature, *teleios* describes a “person who has become fully initiated in the rituals of a religion.” Welch continues: “The

word is used in Heb. 5:14–6:1 to distinguish between the initial teachings and the full instruction. Generally in the epistle to the Hebrews, the term follows a ‘special use’ of Hellenistic Judaism, with the word *teleioo* meaning ‘to put someone in the position in which he can come, or stand, before God.’ Early Christians continued to use this word in this way in connection with their sacraments and ordinances.”<sup>34</sup>

Making and keeping covenants gives us increased access to the redeeming power of the Atonement.<sup>35</sup> For instance, disciples who keep their covenants not only “retain a remission of [their] sins” (Mosiah 4:12, 26)<sup>36</sup> but have their very natures changed (see Mosiah 5:1–8). Moreover, if we keep our covenants then Christ will “seal” us his, and we will “have everlasting salvation” (Mosiah 5:15). The connection between the Atonement, covenants, and perfection is made plain when the scriptures describe those who dwell in the presence of God as follows: “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, emphasis added). In short, only as we make and keep sacred covenants can we achieve eternal perfection.<sup>37</sup>

Where perfectionism places an unwarranted focus on flawless performance, the gospel invites us to focus on our covenant relationship with Christ. This relationship requires that we not only accept and abide the stipulations of the covenant but also joyfully embrace the promised blessings. We are not expected to change ourselves through our own efforts but to accept that even after expending our best efforts we can only “become a saint through the atonement of Jesus Christ” (Mosiah 3:19; see also 2 Nephi 25:23).

The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob assures us that the “Lord God will fulfill his covenants” (2 Nephi 6:12) and that he will “deliver his covenant people” (2 Nephi 6:17). He will deliver us from our worst enemies—even death, hell, and the devil (see 2 Nephi 8:9–10; 9:10–13, 19, 26). For this reason, Jacob implores the covenant people to “cheer up” and take solace in the knowledge that “after [we] are reconciled unto God” we will be saved “through the grace of God” (2 Nephi 10:23–24). In the context of covenants, we have every reason to live with a “perfect brightness of hope” (2 Nephi 31:20).

### **The Role of Sins and Weaknesses in the Pursuit of Perfection**

Perfectionism instills a false and counterproductive view of sin and weakness. Research has found that “one of the most important functions of being raised in a perfectionistic family may be to promote not only a constant emphasis on the attainment of standards but also a preoccupation with evaluating how near or how far family members are from being perfect.” Being “highly evaluative people,”<sup>38</sup> they tend to be hypercritical of themselves and others.

When the realities of daily living constantly verify how often they fall short of their lofty expectations, perfectionists can foster an acute sense of personal failure. Where a nonperfectionist may treat the discrepancy between their standards and performance as an opportunity for growth, perfectionists tend to see such discrepancies as a sign of failure. This pessimistic perspective can lead to “chronic self-doubt and anxiety.”<sup>39</sup>

Fixated on failures and weaknesses, whether real or imagined, perfectionists can easily be persuaded to define themselves in terms of those failures and weaknesses. In turn, these failures and weaknesses can be exponentially magnified to the point that a cruel self-portrait is painted. Sadly, this unsavory caricature tends to discount personal strengths and successes. Thus perfectionists may give intellectual assent to the scriptural truth that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10) but will not be able to apply and personalize this truth to their own souls.

When asked about personal growth and success, perfectionists may become tongue-tied. This silence need not be interpreted as a facade of false modesty but as evidence of blindness. They cannot speak because they honestly cannot see any improvements, at least any that merit consideration. Ask them to address their sins and weaknesses, and they will provide a lucid analysis, with a complete inventory of their shortcomings. Elder Samuelson observed, “These good people suffer from exaggerating their minor mistakes, weaknesses, or shortcomings to the point that they may become dysfunctional.”<sup>40</sup>

### **The Need for Self-Forgiveness**

One of the most transcendent and beautiful dimensions of the Lord’s healing power is his willingness to forgive us of our sins. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). And yet, even while the Lord forgives and forgets (see D&C 58:42),

perfectionists may cling to feelings of guilt for years. God's forgiveness they can accept; self-forgiveness is a struggle.

At one level, this failure to forgive oneself might be explained by the heightened sense of right and wrong common among perfectionists. They can become pathological worriers. Their fears may lead to depressing "if only" rehashing of the past or anxiety-ridden "what if" postulating about the future. When the requirements for sincere repentance have been met but repentant perfectionists choose to doubt they have been forgiven, then a lack of trust in the Atonement may be at issue. As Stephen Robinson insightfully observed, there are times we may believe in Christ but not believe that Christ has the ability to expunge sin from our soul.<sup>41</sup> In this case, what is needed is the development of real faith in both Christ's *willingness* and his *ability* to redeem each individual sinner.<sup>42</sup>

A more subtle reason a perfectionist may find self-forgiveness difficult has less to do with Christ's capacity to redeem and more with a perfectionist's tendency towards self-absorption. Self-presentation can become an overriding preoccupation. An obsession with others' perceptions makes self-forgiveness nearly impossible. To continually agonize over what others might think of our past sins keeps those sins in the forefront of our thoughts. Whether those perceptions are accurate or erroneous, over time they become integrated into one's self-understanding.

About such an apprehension over peer perceptions, one young woman admits to having lived a double life. She writes, "I used to be consumed with being 'perfect.' And not just being perfect in church things, but also in school work, in my appearance, in what I said and how I acted." Focused on maintaining this flawless image, she publicly presented herself as someone "that always did everything right." But in the end, she acknowledged, it was a "charade." And why keep up this charade? "I was concerned that if people knew the real me, the part I kept secret, then maybe they wouldn't want to be my friend."<sup>43</sup> When our life is a calculated facade to cover imperfections, we are infected with what Paul called "sorrow of the world" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Worldly sorrow keeps us focused on our sins for all the wrong reasons. And in the case of perfectionists, worldly sorrow keeps them so preoccupied with what others think that what God thinks becomes ancillary. In this context, one young woman lamented, "I think I try hard to be perfect for other people instead of working toward it for myself and to please the Lord." Moreover, the longer perfectionists are focused on what others think, the

more they will base their identity on their fears. Increasingly engrossed with their fears, it is not long until they view themselves with contempt.

Satan seeks to manipulate feelings of guilt, fear, and self-doubt for ungodly ends. Since his goal is to destroy our souls, he encourages negative self-talk. For instance, the following scorn-ridden self-analysis would bring him joy: “Look at me. I have failed again. Everybody probably knows I am a loser. And if they don’t, they will despise me when they find out what I am really like. I deserve to feel bad all the time. God won’t forgive me; he probably hates me. If I would just work harder and do better, then maybe I would have a chance to be accepted and loved. But I will never be good enough. What’s the use in even trying?” Such slanderous self-analysis insulates perfectionists from the love of God and can send them into a downward spiral of self-condemnation.

To counter this destructive cycle, perfectionists need to reconsider what they do with their feelings of guilt. When, for instance, their fine-tuned conscience is harassed by feelings of fault, they need to allow those feelings to fuel “godly sorrow” that “worketh repentance to salvation” (2 Corinthians 7:10) rather than allow such feelings to consume them with self-condemnation. Godly sorrow, Elder Chad D. Richardson wrote, “leads us to fully recognize the wrongs we have committed without giving in to the temptation to see ourselves as worthless or beyond God’s love.” Furthermore, “there is no room in godly sorrow for self-contempt.”<sup>44</sup> In short, godly sorrow leads us to Christ, and Christ always builds up, strengthens, encourages, and moves us forward.

The beauty of godly sorrow is that it inspires us to redefine the way we see our past sins. As we repent we *forgive* and as we forgive we *forget*. Elder Richardson noted, however, that this is “a special kind of forgetting. We don’t forget the sin and its effects; rather, the memory ceases to be part of how we see ourselves.” The memories of past sins lose their “edge of guilt and self-recrimination.” Thus we are not “defined by our sins,”<sup>45</sup> but we are inspired by our growth, the Lord’s mercy, and the possibilities of continued progress.

It is imperative that perfectionists understand and embrace mercy. Forgiveness is an act of mercy. The Savior offers mercy because he is filled with compassion (see Alma 7:11). We don’t deserve his mercy, and we cannot earn it. No matter how hard we work, no matter how many good deeds we perform, no matter how diligently we obey the commandments, we still must “rely wholly upon the merits of him who is might to save” (2 Nephi 32:19).

Though we cannot earn the Lord's mercy, we can give him an acceptable offering—even that of a “broken heart and a contrite spirit” (2 Nephi 9:20; see also 2 Nephi 2:7). Contrary to the perfectionist's worldview, a broken heart and contrite spirit is not an unblemished heart and a flawless spirit. Rather, it is a submissive heart and a penitent spirit, which paves the way for a pure heart and perfected spirit. While the perfectionist falsely assumes that God expects untarnished performance for us to be saved, the scriptures declare that “none but the truly penitent are saved” (Alma 42:24).

Perfectionism places undue emphasis on performance and not enough emphasis on penitence. When we are penitent we meekly acknowledge our sins, mistakes, and weaknesses; at the same time, the penitent rejoice that through Christ's grace sins can be forgiven, mistakes can be fixed, and weaknesses can be transformed into strengths. When we are penitent, we offer our best efforts to work out our salvation and feel solace that his “grace is sufficient” (D&C 17:8) to compensate for all of our sins and imperfections. When we are penitent, striving is more important than performing, and what we are becoming overshadows what we have done. While perfectionism is filled with self-condemnation, guilt, doubt, and despair, penitence is filled with self-forgiveness, peace, confidence, and hope.

### **Imperfection Is Not Sin**

Ironically, some of the struggles related to self-forgiveness are not even directly connected with sin. One individual, for example, shared the following self-disclosure: “I am a complete ‘Type A,’ color red, tightly wound perfectionist [and] I have always had a hard time forgiving myself for my imperfections.” This confession is troubling because it implies that imperfection is equivalent with sin and therefore demands forgiveness.

Theologically speaking, we seek forgiveness for our sins and not for our imperfections. “Sin,” Elder Orson F. Whitney carefully noted, “is the transgression of divine law, as made known through the conscience or by revelation.” We sin when we do “the opposite of what [we know] to be right.”<sup>46</sup> This being true, we can make mistakes without committing sin. On this matter, Elder Oaks taught: “A deliberately wrong choice in the contest between what is clearly good and what is clearly bad is a sin, but a poor choice among things that are good, better, and best is merely a mistake.”<sup>47</sup> Consequently, “in the treatment process we should not require repentance for mistakes, but we are commanded to preach the necessity of repentance for sins.”<sup>48</sup>

Just as there is a difference between sins and mistakes, there is also an important difference between sins and imperfections. Synonyms for *imperfection* include such words as *shortcoming*, *weakness*, *limitation*, *deficiency*, *defect*, *flaw*, and *fault*. These words are descriptive of our inherited mortal and fallen condition, which condition includes a myriad of physical, emotional, and mental defects. Whether we struggle because of a physical deformity or are confounded by the perplexities of same-gender attraction, it is vital to understand that the existence of mortal imperfections in and of themselves do not constitute sin. We may sorrow with the prophet Nephi because of the weaknesses of the flesh (see 2 Nephi 4:17), but their mere existence in our lives does not make us sinful.

When perfectionists are unclear about the difference between sin and imperfection, they create for themselves unnecessary burdens. They may unwittingly equate sin with imperfection and in so doing double, triple, or even quadruple the dosage of guilt in their lives. Artificially elevated levels of guilt are harmful. While guilt may serve as a necessary means to move us to repentance, it can be counterproductive when applied to our imperfections. As author Wendy Ulrich wrote, “In mortality we will always be weak, we will always have some of our weaknesses, and we will always need God’s grace to respond constructively. But weakness is not sin!”<sup>49</sup>

A classic example can be found in depression. It is true that “despair cometh because of iniquity” (Moroni 10:22). It is also true that dark feelings of depression can come because the biochemistry of the brain is out of sync. Hence, righteous people who fumble through the dark corridors of clinical depression are suffering from a treatable defect of their mortal bodies and are not guilty of sin. How tragic when a dedicated disciple suffering from this serious physical illness—a mortal imperfection—spends precious energy seeking self-forgiveness for their feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and despair. As Stephen Robinson observed, “The compulsive and the perfectionists among us need to realize that a large part of why things go wrong in this life is the Fall—not their own incompetence.”<sup>50</sup>

The all-important issue as we consider our imperfections is whether we are wise enough to connect them to the Atonement. The Apostle Paul, for instance, prayed for the removal of “a thorn in the flesh,” but his pleadings did not bring respite. Instead of receiving deliverance from this unspecified weakness, he discovered that the Lord’s “grace is sufficient” and that through the “power of Christ” he could be strong (2 Corinthians 12:7–9). The Lord

said of the Prophet Joseph Smith, “In weakness I blessed him” (D&C 35:17). The Book of Mormon reinforces this principle as follows: “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 will humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then I will make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27; see also Jacob 4:7). In this scriptural context, weakness, which comes from our imperfection, is a divinely ordained pathway to God’s grace.<sup>51</sup>

Surely we need to recognize our imperfections, learn from them, and seek the Lord’s sustaining support to grow from them, but we do not need to seek forgiveness for them. Rather than seeking forgiveness for weakness, the conscientious should seek *growth* through them; rather than striving to *shun* their weaknesses, they should *embrace* them as stepping-stones to progression through the Lord’s grace.

### **An Inspired Alternative to Self-Condensation**

Perfectionism is not about a lack of commitment, desire, or determination to do what is right, but rather it is a problem of misunderstanding that leads to misdirection and self-deception. Consequently, to tell a discouraged and weary perfectionist to pray more often, read the scriptures longer, and provide more service may simply end up making things worse since they are likely already doing these things with great fervor and diligence. Remember, in perfectionism, there is no such thing as good enough.

Regrettably, one of the destructive mind games played by perfectionists is to equate seeking help with an undignified admission of weakness and failure. Perfectionist researchers Gordon L. Flett and Paul H. Hewitt write, “People with high levels of perfectionist self-presentation are less willing to seek help, in part because the act of seeking help can be construed as an open admission of failure to important others.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, to ask for help is viewed as a shameful display of weakness and consequently perfectionists can be resistant to change.<sup>53</sup> In the perfectionist mantra, you don’t ask for help; you just work harder to perfect yourself, “regardless of the stress.”<sup>54</sup>

The prophet Nephi has a compelling message for self-condemning perfectionists who feel trapped and yet are unwilling to seek help. Nephi was a man of impeccable spiritual stature. Even in the face of defiant and rebellious brothers and a lifetime of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Nephi remained steadfast. Certainly he exemplifies a diligent, faithful, and conscientious servant of the Lord.

In light of his unyielding commitment to do what is right, the following lament is profoundly instructive—especially for the perfectionist tormented by a spirit of self-loathing. In a moment of intense self-criticism, Nephi wrote: “O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins” (2 Nephi 4:17–19). In the context of Nephi’s life, these words perplex us. How can one who is so good feel so wretched?<sup>55</sup> Certainly, we could accept a scathing self-rebuke if it were uttered by Laman, but what possible iniquities could cause righteous Nephi to feel deep affliction or distress to the point of intense anxiety? It should be noted that these words are not some generalized regret about the fallen nature of man but are dripping with the pain of personal disappointment. But this very fact entails a vital lesson for those self-condemning perfectionists who are acutely aware of their sins and imperfections.

These laments have potent possibilities—for good or for evil. For instance, poignant moments of self-criticism can become ironclad predictions of the future. “O wretched man that I am!” can quickly descend into “O wretched man that I will always be!” Future hopes of progress can be quashed while harsh self-judgments are pronounced with a haunting finality. In this condition, deterministic language imprisons a soul and renounces the liberating language of free will and repentance.

Convinced of their worthlessness, perfectionists may lacerate their souls with a barrage of negative self-talk. Emotional welts can appear as they call themselves losers, ugly, useless, stupid, and irrelevant. This degrading language of self-hatred is a form of emotional self-flagellation and completely undermines the liberating truth that “with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

It is vital to note that Nephi does not become a victim of such ugly self-condemnation. He does not give his sins and weaknesses control and power over his life. It is true that he frankly acknowledges them, but once he does so he moves on. Notice the pivotal word of hope he uses: “nevertheless” (2 Nephi 4:18). In other words, in spite of his sins and weaknesses he knows in whom he has trusted and that is *not* in his sins and weaknesses (see 2 Nephi 4:34). As Nephi turns his eyes heavenward, the entire tone and texture of his psalm changes. Words of bitter contrition are replaced by sweet expressions of gratitude. With eyes focused on Christ, he recounts the Lord’s “support”

and remembers feeling his “consuming” love and the “great things” he has seen as he was caught away on “the wings of the Spirit.” Firmly fixed on his Redeemer, Nephi is empowered to “rejoice in the [Lord], my God, and the rock of my salvation” (2 Nephi 4:17–32). In essence, his despair is replaced by joy as he contemplates being wrapped in the Lord’s “robe of righteousness” (2 Nephi 4:33), which is symbolic of the Atonement.<sup>56</sup>

Yes, it is necessary to experience Nephi-like sorrow and be grieved by our sins, but we must allow those feelings of sorrow to move us to a better place—even to Christ, “the rock of [our] salvation,” where we can find an “escape” from whatever enemies we face and receive joy in our hearts (2 Nephi 4:30–33).

## Conclusion

Latter-day Saint doctrine and culture can pose special challenges to those with perfectionist tendencies. When a religious culture that is “characterized by a pervasively systematic monitoring and reification of progress”<sup>57</sup> is coupled with perfectionist inclinations for flawless performance, we may have a possible explanation for President Dieter F. Uchtdorf’s observation at a general Relief Society broadcast: “To me it appears that our splendid sisters sometimes undervalue their abilities—they focus on what is lacking or imperfect rather than what has been accomplished and who they really are. Perhaps you recognize this trait in someone you know really well. The good news is that this also points to an admirable quality: the innate desire to please the Lord to the best of your ability. Unfortunately, it can also lead to frustration, exhaustion, and unhappiness.”<sup>58</sup>

Though President Uchtdorf did not specifically address perfectionism in his talk, there can be little question that many of the frustrated, exhausted, and unhappy women in the Church struggle with it. As we have discussed in this paper, a critical means of addressing the problem of perfectionism is to teach the doctrine of perfection with clarity. When this doctrine is correctly understood, the distortions and concomitant dangers of perfectionism can be exposed. In the light of true doctrine, a perfectionist can pursue the Lord’s commandment to “be perfect” with hope and not despair. Personal weakness can become an avenue to God’s grace rather than a ball and chain that impedes progress. And finally, seeking the Lord’s help in times of trial can be seen as a means to triumph rather than a shameful admission of failure.

The power of true doctrine was recently reaffirmed to me through a student in one of my institute classes. She was the quintessential Latter-day Saint: faithful, friendly, kind, diligent, conscientious, intelligent, and personable. After a couple of classes, I was able to quickly identify her as the type of faithful institute student I could rely upon to be a class president. So I asked and she accepted. However, in the process of the conversation I discovered the plethora of good things she was doing, including serving as her ward Relief Society president. After this discovery, I pressed her why she would accept an assignment to be an institute class president when she was obviously already doing more than she could handle. Her answer was filled with the telltale signs of perfectionism.

During that semester we discussed Elder Nelson’s 1995 general conference talk “Perfection Pending.”<sup>59</sup> The ensuing class discussion and several informal after-class conversations opened her eyes to the problems of perfectionism and what the Lord was really asking of her. As she came to understand the doctrine, she applied it to her life and found renewed hope. I conclude with her words:

My life has changed so much because I now understand what it means to be perfect. I know so much better what the Lord expects of me and it is a relief. The most uplifting thing I came to understand is that Jesus Christ is yoked together with me as I strive to do my best. . . . I used to beat myself up over feelings of inadequacy, weakness, doubt and because I would make mistakes. I now have a healthier attitude. Heavenly Father wants me to see my weaknesses as an opportunity for growth. I enjoy self-reflection and talking with the Lord about the progress I’ve made and where I can do better. And what is really great is I can see my progress. I still have times when I get upset with the choices I make but it’s a healthy balance that gives me motivation to do better versus tearing myself down to the point of giving up. I have daily hope and daily peace. The Spirit can dwell with me and is a source of motivation to do my best and then rely on the grace of God. **RE**

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## Notes

1. “(This destiny of eternal life or God’s life should be familiar to all who have studied the ancient Christian doctrine of and belief in deification or apotheosis). For us, eternal life is not a mystical union with an incomprehensible spirit-god. Eternal life is family life with a loving Father in Heaven and with our progenitors and our posterity.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 86–87.

2. David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 194–95.

3. Boyd K. Packer, “The Pattern of Our Parentage,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 67.

4. “Perfectionism is a medical condition characterized by severe self-criticism and self-doubt, often accompanied by anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive behavior. It can

lead to appetite and sleep disturbances, confusion, problems in relationships, inability to concentrate, procrastination of important tasks, and, if left untreated, major depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide.” “What Is Perfectionism?,” *New Era*, January 2006, 13. Researchers Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt have concluded, “We believe that perfectionism is associated with significant levels of impairment and distress not only for perfectionists but for their family members as well.” This “impairment and distress” is correlated with “such significant problems as anxiety, depression, suicide, and eating disorders.” Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment: An Overview of Theoretical, Definitional, and Treatment Issues,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, ed. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002), 10.

5. Cecil O. Samuelson, “What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?,” *New Era*, January 2006, 10.

6. Written comments received from institute students in the author’s classes.

7. A. Marie Habke and Carol A. Flynn, “Interpersonal Aspects of Trait Perfectionism,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 158; Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt, Joan M. Oliver, and Silvana Macdonald, “Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents: A Developmental Analysis,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 125.

8. Murray W. Enns and Brian J. Cox, “The Nature and Assessment of Perfectionism: A Critical Analysis,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 53–54; Habke and Flynn, “Interpersonal Aspects of Trait Perfectionism,” 153–54.

9. Flett and Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment,” 18. In a perverse twist, a perfectionist may not be concerned about “being conscientious but in proving their conscientiousness, and this requires demanding more and more of themselves, unendingly.” C. Terry Warner, *Bonds That Makes Us Free: Healing Our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves* (Ann Arbor, MI: Shadow Mountain, 2001), 117.

10. Flett and Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment,” 5.

11. The “excessively perfectionist student who views an A+ in a course as his or her expected performance will view anything but the A+ as a failure and will experience stress as a result. . . . In addition, even if a perfectionistic person performs some task flawlessly, little satisfaction may be experienced because he or she still views the performance at least somewhat as a failure. As an illustration, one of Hewitt’s patients obtained a coveted A+ in a difficult course he was taking; after receiving the A+, he continued to denigrate himself, stating that he should have been able to get the A+ without studying so hard and that his situation simply reflected that he was not as bright as he thought he should be.” Paul L. Hewitt and Gordon L. Flett, “Perfectionism and Stress Processes in Psychopathology,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 259.

12. David Burns, quoted in Enns and Cox, “The Nature and Assessment of Perfectionism,” 33.

13. “What Is Perfectionism?,” 13.

14. “What Is Perfectionism?,” 13.

15. Robert B. Slaney, Kenneth G. Rice, and Jeffrey S. Ashby, “A Programmatic Approach to Measuring Perfectionism: The Almost Perfect Scales,” in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 81.

16. Warner, *Bonds That Make Us Free*, 116.

17. “What Is Perfectionism?,” 13.

18. James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Crusade Bible Publishing), 784; James Strong, “Greek Dictionary of the New Testament,” in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 71.

19. Paul also uses the word *teleios* in connection with becoming like God. Disciples are to come to “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).

20. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 3:195, 451.

21. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:231.

22. “The eschatological viewpoint is that which sees and judges everything in terms of a great eternal plan. Whether we like it or not, we belong to the eternities; we cannot escape the universe. All our thoughts and deeds must be viewed against an infinite background and against no other. *Eschatos* means ‘ultimate’ and refers to that which lies beyond all local and limited goals and interests.” Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 1–2.

23. Elder James E. Talmage noted, “The kingdom of heaven was the all-comprising text of this wonderful sermon; the means of reaching the kingdom and the glories of eternal citizenship therein are the main divisions of this treatise.” *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 217.

24. Jesus was, as Alfred Edersheim writes, “the connecting link—so to speak, the theological copula between the ‘state’ and the promise. . . . He stands between our present and our future, and ‘has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.’” Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1994), 365.

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

26. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:18–19.

27. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 348.

28. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 87; emphasis in original. When we compare Matthew 5:48 with 3 Nephi 12:48, we find further evidence that *eternal perfection* cannot be realized until after Christ’s resurrection. But even though eternal perfection cannot be achieved in this life does not mean Jesus Christ was not perfect in his mortal ministry. In every possible way, other than not having a resurrected body and receiving all power, he was perfect. On this matter, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “None ever were perfect but Jesus; and why was He perfect? Because He was the Son of God, and had the fullness of the Spirit, and greater power than any man.” *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 187–88. In like manner, over the years prophets and apostles have repeatedly referred to the mortal Christ as a perfect man. See Thomas S. Monson, “Patience—A Heavenly Virtue,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 59; Howard W. Hunter, “What Manner of Men Ought Ye to Be?” *Ensign*, May 1994, 64; Gordon B. Hinckley, “Our Great Mission,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 89.

29. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 346–47.

30. Marvin J. Ashton, “On Being Worthy,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 20–21.

31. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Heber J. Grant* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 31.

32. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 88.

33. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 58.

34. John W. Welch, “New Testament Word Studies,” *Ensign*, April 1993, 29.

35. Even as we experience the weaknesses inherent in morality, through a covenant relationship with Christ we can achieve a finite, mortal perfection, as did such men as Seth, Noah, and Job (see D&C 107:43; Moses 8:27; Genesis 6:9; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). “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. If we do the best we can, the Lord will bless us according to our deeds and the desires of our hearts.” Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 86.

36. David A. Bednar, “That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 31; Boyd K. Packer, “The Touch of the Master’s Hand,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 24.

37. Regarding the relationship between covenants and perfection, Elder Oaks has taught, “The gospel of Jesus Christ is the plan by which we can become what children of God are supposed to become. This spotless and perfected state will result from a steady succession of covenants, ordinances, and actions, an accumulation of right choices, and from continuing repentance” Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 33. Similarly, Elder Nelson declared, “No accountable individual can receive exaltation [perfection] in the celestial kingdom without the ordinances of the temple. Endowments and sealings are for our personal perfection and are secured through our faithfulness.” Nelson, “Perfection Pending, 87.

38. Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, and Macdonald, “Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents,” 106–7.

39. Flett and Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment,” 9.

40. Samuelson, “What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?,” 12.

41. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

42. To increase confidence in Christ, the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, must be studied with an eye for the Atonement. Personal revelation must be sought, received, and acted upon in order to verify the reality of forgiveness. In the process, an Enos-like trust can develop. Upon receiving a personal revelation that his sins were forgiven, Enos felt his “guilt was swept away” because he knew “God could not lie” (Enos 1:6).

43. Another woman writes, “I’ve always been so concerned with making everyone around me happy that it was starting to make me miserable.” In like manner, a college student confided, “I have an extremely difficult time with being a perfectionist. The first ‘B’ I had ever received in my life was the semester my dad died in college. I thought that if I let any of my weaknesses or faults show no one would love me.”

44. D. Chad Richardson, “Forgiving Oneself,” *Ensign*, March 2007, 32.

45. Richardson, “Forgiving Oneself,” 32.

46. In Bruce L. Brown and Terrance D. Olson, “Sin,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1314.

47. Dallin H. Oaks, “Sins and Mistakes,” *Ensign*, October 1996, 63.

48. Dallin H. Oaks, “Sins and Mistakes,” *Ensign*, October 1996, 62–63.

49. Wendy Ulrich, *Weakness Is Not Sin* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 31.

50. Stephen E. Robinson, *Following Christ: The Parable of the Divers and More Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 64.

51. In her book *Weakness Is Not Sin*, Wendy Ulrich persuasively teaches that when we are humble, weakness can be transformed into strength through the Lord’s help. She describes this process as follows: elimination of the weakness, growth through the weakness, perceiving that the weakness under some conditions may serve as a strength, the development of compensating strengths, and gaining an enhanced capacity to testify of God’s gracious and

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merciful kindness because we humbly acknowledge our weakness. Ulrich, *Weakness Is Not Sin*, 94–110.

52. Flett and Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment,” 26.

53. Flett and Hewitt, “Perfectionism and Maladjustment,” 20.

54. Slaney, Rice, and Ashby, “Programmatic Approach to Measuring Perfectionism,” 80.

55. Wretched: “Very miserable; sunk into deep affliction or distress, either from want, anxiety or grief.” Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “wretched.”

56. Hugh W. Nibley, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ, Part 1,” *Ensign*, July 1990, 18.

57. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 308–9.

58. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Happiness, Your Heritage,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 117.

59. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 86–88.