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The Commandment to Be Perfect and the Clarifying Role of the Book of Mormon

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Perfection, like eternity, is a difficult concept to grasp fully. Our limitations in this life make us inherently mystified at the thought of being or becoming perfect. Just as our finite minds struggle in comprehending the infinite, our imperfect minds have a hard time understanding the perfect. Nevertheless, the Lord commanded us, “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48). At times when our inadequacies seem unconquerable, this commandment looms over us, teasing us, as if to say, “Why don’t you just give up?” At other times, it prods us along, encouraging our efforts when we realize that “the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the things which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7).

Our quest for perfection in this life can take us down many roads that lead to undesirable destinations. Excessive devotion to educational attainment, physical prowess and attributes, career ambitions, and social praise are ways in which our desire for perfection may become misdirected. Society’s view of what is perfect primarily focuses on the outward attributes and accomplishments of the individual. As humans, we are constantly comparing ourselves to others to see how we measure up. This comparison gives us a twisted view of perfection and often a depressing view of ourselves.

However, the Lord does not want us to be depressed, nor did He give us the commandment to be perfect to accentuate our comparisons with others. The Book of Mormon clarifies this commandment as it invites us to become “perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32) and to develop perfect faith in the Atonement of Christ. Thus, the truths found in the Book of Mormon can reduce feelings of despair and can encourage spiritual progress as we strive to obey God’s commandments. The following is a comparison of scriptural passages that discuss perfection, showing the uniqueness of the Book of Mormon in relationship to the Old and New Testaments concerning this topic.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

A well-known declaration of the commandment to be perfect is found in the New Testament. Jesus said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). However, the Old Testament is an important part of our knowledge of this commandment because it teaches two important aspects about perfection. First, the commandment “be ye therefore perfect” is not an isolated statement tucked away in the corner of scripture; it threads through all scripture as a description of God’s exalted status and His desire for us to be like Him. Second, the attribute of perfection is not reserved for an elite few after death and resurrection but is attainable in this life and has been attained by several people.

In the first book of the Old Testament, God speaks to Abraham, saying, “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Genesis 17:1). In Deuteronomy, the commandment, “thou shalt be perfect with the Lord” is given (Deuteronomy 18:13). In 1 Kings, the Lord speaks through Solomon, saying, “Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God” (1 Kings 8:61). These scriptures tell us that God has revealed this commandment on multiple occasions to multiple prophets, not only through His Son in Matthew and in 3 Nephi.

But even after having the commandment revealed to us, as in the Old Testament, it is hard to understand its implications fully. For instance, how do we know in what way we are supposed to be perfect? Also, as humans, aren't we inherently imperfect beings since we all fall short and are therefore unlikely to ever be perfect in this life? These questions are not addressed completely in the Old Testament.

Significantly, we do know that some mortals were considered perfect in this life. This knowledge gives us hope in our quest for perfection as we strive to follow the examples of the Old Testament. The Old Testament calls Job a "perfect and an upright" man (Job 1:1). The example of Job and others challenges the opinion that Jesus was the only perfect man to ever walk the earth. In one sense, this opinion is true: Jesus is the only man never to have sinned. However, it is comforting to know that the Lord has considered other men perfect in this life and has given us examples such as Job to show us it is possible to be obedient to this commandment. Elder Russell M. Nelson taught this same principle of how perfection is not reserved for an exclusive few. He said: "[The] 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. Alma said that 'there were many, exceedingly great many,' who were pure before the Lord."¹

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament emphasizes the importance of this commandment in much the same way as the Old Testament. For instance, most of the New Testament references to perfection come in the same imperative form as in the Old Testament, commanding us to be perfect. The main difference is that the New Testament describes perfection more fully as a process of becoming. It changes from a commandment "be ye perfect" to "be perfected." In John, it says "that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:23). In Ephesians, the reason for the organization of the Church is "for the

perfecting of the saints” (Ephesians 4:12). In 2 Timothy, Paul says scripture is written so “that the man of God may be perfect” (2 Timothy 3:17).

An example of the process of perfection, or being perfected as described in the New Testament, is given in Matthew 19. A young man comes to Jesus and asks Him, “What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). In response, Jesus outlines commandments, such as thou shalt not kill, commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness. The young man replies, “All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?” (Matthew 19:20). His reply reveals that he had demonstrated obedience so far in his life, but he feels that he is not yet to the point of obtaining eternal life or being like God. Jesus, in responding to the young man, does not give him another commandment in the form of thou shalt or thou shalt not. Instead, He personalizes His instruction for the young man by saying, “If thou wilt *be perfect*, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Matthew 19:21; emphasis added). The young man, unwilling to comply with this last request, “[goes] away sorrowful: for he had great possessions,” thus showing his inability to make the next step toward perfection (Matthew 19:22).

Along with describing perfection as a process, the New Testament suggests attributes of those who are perfect. Some of these indicators include having unity, sacrifice, wisdom, charity, patience, and offending not in word. James says, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body” (James 3:2). He also says, “Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire” (James 1:4). In Colossians, we are instructed to “put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Colossians 3:14). It is important to understand in what sense we are perfect when we possess these attributes. Obviously we are not perfect in the sense that Christ was perfect, having never sinned. Instead, we are perfect in the sense of being complete, or whole. In speaking of this, Elder Russell M. Nelson said, “The term *per-*

fect was translated from the Greek *teleios*, which means ‘complete.’ *Teleios* is an adjective derived from the noun *telos*, which means ‘end.’”² Therefore, someone who is perfect in the Lord’s eyes is someone who is complete and in possession of the attributes that Christ has. The young man who was unwilling to give up his possessions was not perfect in this sense because he lacked the attribute of sacrifice.

The Old and New Testaments give us considerable insight into the commandment to be perfect. We learn that God speaks often about perfection through His prophets. We also learn that we do not have to be sinless to be perfect, nor do we have to be free of mistakes. What is required to be obedient to this commandment is that we become completely or fully developed in the sense of obtaining godly attributes. Even with this understanding, difficulties still remain in trying to comprehend the commandment of perfection. For instance, how do we gain the attributes of godhood as described in the New Testament? Also, we may feel that we are hopelessly imperfect and therefore do not have the ability to obey the commandment. In answering these issues, the Book of Mormon teaches us how to overcome our imperfections and qualify ourselves for the blessings of Christ’s Atonement.

THE BOOK OF MORMON

The Book of Mormon does not talk about perfection in the same way the Old and New Testaments do. The one time that the Book of Mormon does discuss it in a similar way is when Jesus comes to the Americas and says, “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). The Book of Mormon helps us understand that we must become “perfect in Christ,” growing in faith, hope, and charity (Moroni 10:32). It stresses the importance of strengthening our faith in Christ and coming to a perfect knowledge of God. This difference plays an important part in our knowledge of not only how we overcome our imperfections but also how we obtain godlike attributes.

The following are examples of how the Book of Mormon discusses perfection. Jacob says, “For why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a *perfect* knowledge of him?” (Jacob 4:12; emphasis added). Nephi says, “Ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a *perfect* brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men” (2 Nephi 31:20; emphasis added). In Alma, Captain Moroni is described as a “man of a *perfect* understanding . . . who was firm in the faith of Christ” (Alma 48:11, 13; emphasis added). As a consequence of his “*perfect* knowledge of God,” the brother of Jared “could not be kept from within the veil; therefore he saw Jesus” (Ether 3:20; emphasis added). The Book of Mormon thus focuses on developing our faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, illuminating the pathway these prophets followed to perfection.

The Book of Mormon goes a step beyond just telling us to have perfect faith or a perfect knowledge. It teaches us the way to point our faith and knowledge and reaffirms that these powers must not be separated. In the scriptures and throughout history, examples of people who have disconnected these two attributes have been given. These are people who have gone against the Lord’s counsel to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) and have decided to seek it only through study. Often, they do this as a result of some distorted concept of perfection that they want to attain. Alma talks about lawyers who “were learned in all the arts and cunning of the people; and this was to enable them that they might be skillful in their profession” (Alma 10:15). The lawyers’ desire to be “skillful in their profession” overcame their desire to have perfect faith. Accordingly, their knowledge was not based on “true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer” (Helaman 15:13). Similarly, in 2 Nephi, we are warned against the separation of faith and knowledge. Nephi says: “O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it

profiteth them not. And they shall perish. But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29).

Likewise, faith without knowledge can be spiritually damaging. Paul said to the Romans that Israel had “a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2). Peter counseled that we should give “all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge” (2 Peter 1:5). Together, faith and knowledge in Jesus Christ are the catalysts for our perfection. When separated, they can lead to our spiritual downfall.

On the other hand, as faith and knowledge work together we become blessed with the grace of God that enables us to overcome all things. This enabling power, as described in the Book of Mormon, was expounded by Elder David A. Bednar in a recent BYU-Idaho devotional. He said, “May I suggest that the Book of Mormon is our handbook of instructions as we travel the pathway from bad to good to better and to have our hearts changed.” He continued: “Individual willpower, personal determination and motivation, and effective planning and goal setting are necessary but ultimately insufficient to triumphantly complete this mortal journey. Truly, we must come to rely upon ‘the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.’”³ Many disappointments arise in our lives because we fail to understand this principle taught in the Book of Mormon. When we feel that we must rely on our own strength to accomplish our goals we are limited by our own strength and willpower. However, when we come to a perfect knowledge and faith in Christ’s Atonement we are able to overcome all things “in the strength of the Lord” (Mosiah 9:17; see also Ether 12:27). Elder Bednar stated, “The Book of Mormon is replete with examples of disciples and prophets who knew and understood and were transformed by the enabling power of the Atonement in making that journey.”⁴

CONCLUSION

As one author has said: “We humans are a demanding bunch. We don’t bound out of bed in the morning aspiring to mediocrity, but rather

striving for *perfection*. The *perfect* job. The *perfect* shoes to go with the *perfect* outfit. We head to the beach on a *perfect* summer day to find the *perfect* spot to get the *perfect* tan.”⁵ Being a demanding bunch can lead to being a discouraged bunch, especially when it comes to perfection. In our journey toward perfection, the Book of Mormon does indeed become our “handbook of instructions.” By illuminating the Old and New Testaments, it allows us to keep a proper perspective on the commandment to be perfect. By perfecting our knowledge of and faith in Christ we can qualify for the blessings of the enabling power of His Atonement. President Hinckley’s challenge to read the Book of Mormon last year came with great promises, not the least of which was “a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to [God’s] commandments.”⁶ With the knowledge the Book of Mormon brings, our desire to be like God and His Son through obedience to the commandment to be perfect results in motivation instead of discouragement as we strive to perfect our faith and knowledge in Christ’s Atonement. “And this is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3; emphasis added).

NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 86.
2. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” 86.
3. David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” Brigham Young University-Idaho devotional, January 8, 2002; <http://speeches.byu.edu/read/read.php?id=-789&x=77y=5> (accessed April 15, 2006).
4. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord.”
5. Eric Goodman, *LSAT 180* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), ix.
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Testimony Vibrant and True,” *Ensign*, August 2005, 3.