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MATTHEW 5:48: IS PERFECTION AN ACHIEVABLE GOAL?

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Jesus taught in Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father, which is in heaven is perfect” (KJV). This verse has been quoted many times over the years by top leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon). For example, twelfth Mormon president Spencer W. Kimball explained, “This living all the commandments guarantees total forgiveness of sins and assures one of exaltation through that perfection which comes by complying with the formula the Lord gave us.” After citing Matthew 5:48 Kimball added, “Being perfect means to triumph over sin. This is a mandate from the Lord. He is just and wise and kind. He would never require anything from his children which was not for their benefit and which was not attainable. Perfection therefore is an achievable goal.”¹

Kimball took his cue from 1 Nephi 3:7 in the Book of Mormon, a unique LDS scripture. The New World prophet Nephi said he knew “that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.”

In recent years, however, some Mormon speakers have disagreed with the concept that all of God’s commandments can be fulfilled. In fact, “the rather common problem of perfectionism” was considered so in need of correction at LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, that Cecil O. Samuelson, the school’s president, dedicated an entire devotional to it at the beginning of the fall 2011 semester. Explaining that Matthew 5:48 has been misinterpreted by many, Samuelson said, “One area of confusion not rare among us is the notion that worthiness is synonymous with

perfection. It is not! One can be fully worthy in a gospel sense and yet still be growing while dealing with personal imperfections.”²

Over the years, some Christian teachers also have utilized Matthew 5:48 to stress the need for perfection. For example, Charles Finney — a key leader of the Second Great Awakening — stated in 1837, “I will now show that Christian Perfection is attainable, or practicable in this life. It may be fairly inferred that Christian Perfection is attainable, from the fact that it is commanded. Does God command us to be perfect as he is perfect, and still shall we say it is an impossibility? Are we not always to infer, when God commands a thing, that there is a natural possibility of doing what he commands?”³

So what did Jesus mean when He said, “Be ye therefore perfect”?

Understanding the Context of Matthew 5:48. As with all proof texts, context is crucial. First, the *overall* context must be considered. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chaps. 5–7), Jesus speaks in an idealistic sense. This makes it difficult to interpret and apply His teaching to contemporary living. Earlier in chapter 5, Jesus said that lusting after a woman was equal to adultery, so “if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (v. 29 ESV). This places the sin of adultery in an entirely new category! In the next verse, He taught that “if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” It seems apparent that He was not demanding the plucking out of eyes and the chopping off of hands every time someone sinned. If so, nobody would have any eyes or hands left to eliminate! Later, in 5:39–40, He told the crowd that “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” Just how are you doing with this teaching?

Second, the *immediate* context of the verse in question needs to be understood. Matthew 5:43–47 says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” Jesus concluded, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Greek word for *perfect* here is *teleios*, which can be understood as *complete* or *mature*. In fact, the ESV uses *mature* for *teleios* in 1 Corinthians 14:20, Ephesians 4:13, and Hebrews 5:14 and 6:1.

Some teachers during that day may have added a “but hate your enemies” imperative with “love your neighbor” (Lev. 19:18). Jesus took away what undoubtedly

was a popular (and innately human) interpretation by teaching how love and prayer for one's "enemies" ought to be the rule rather than the exception. As Leviticus 19:2 states, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." In the same way, Jesus commanded His followers to take the higher road by imitating the holiness of God. After all, it's not difficult to love those who love us. Even while understanding that another may be undeserving, going out of your way to love "your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 20:27) remains the higher standard.

An illustration to this principle is given in Luke 20:29 when Jesus was asked to define "neighbor." He proceeded to tell the story of the Good Samaritan and commended the one who showed mercy, even at a great personal cost. "You go, and do likewise," Jesus said in verse 37. In our modern culture, life is cheap. Random shootings take place. Skin color sometimes makes a difference in attitudes toward each other. And let's be honest, not a whole lot of mercy is shown on social media — how often do we see otherwise nice people level their targets with seething electronic posts? Jesus, however, set a standard that bypassed all hatred, racism, and in-your-face slams against those considered "enemies." Jesus commanded His followers to be "perfect" in love, even if the other party was not a friend or ally.

While striving for holiness is advocated, the Bible never equates performing good deeds with attaining God's righteousness. In Matthew 6:12 — just a few verses after He had said, "Be ye perfect" — Jesus acknowledged that His followers would be *imperfect* by commanding them to pray the words "forgive us our debts." The rest of that sentence concludes, "as we also have forgiven our debtors," meaning that Christians who receive forgiveness from their sins need to be willing to forgive those who sin against them. At the end of His prayer, Jesus offered another hard saying when He commented, "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14–15).

An illustrative parable describing this attitude is given in Matthew 18:21–35. Jesus said a man owed the king an insurmountable debt of "millions of dollars" (NLT). Pleading with the king to have patience, the servant apparently thought more time could solve his problem. Thankfully for him, the king had compassion and canceled the debt. However, this same man demanded payment of a "few thousand dollars" owed by another servant and had him arrested when he couldn't pay. When the king found this out, he threw the first servant into prison until his impossible debt could be settled. In verse 35, Jesus concluded, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

I have found very few who believe that "perfection" is God's requirement actually consider themselves "perfect" at that time. This mindset of trying to attain this

state contradicts the gospel message. Fortunately, justification comes by grace through faith and *not* by works (Eph. 2:8–9). It is through a person’s belief (Acts 4:12; 16:31; Rom. 10:9–10) as well as God’s mercy (Titus 3:5) that a relationship with God is even possible. While working out one’s faith through works (sanctification) is important, it comes only after justification has taken place. Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921) succinctly summed up this idea when he said, “Justification by Faith, we see, is not to be set in contradiction to justification by Works. It is set in contradiction only to justification by our Own Works. It is justification by Christ’s Works.”⁴

Since the Bible clearly teaches that salvation is not of works, what did Jesus mean when He said, “Be ye perfect”? Contrary to Spencer W. Kimball, “total forgiveness of sins” does *not* come by “living all the commandments.” Perfection in keeping commandments is impossible even with a lifetime of tomorrows. Jesus was not claiming that His followers had to “be perfect” in order to receive forgiveness; rather, He was calling His people to honor God by reflecting His holiness even while approaching Him in daily repentance. While God’s standards remain high and should be the goal, the ultimate work for salvation was performed by Someone other than ourselves. It’s called “amazing grace” for a reason. —Eric Johnson

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NOTES

- 1 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 208–9; cited in the LDS Church manual *Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 386. On page 286 of *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Kimball again cited Matthew 5:48 and wrote, “We are gods in embryo, and the Lord demands perfection of us.”
- 2 “Be Ye Therefore Perfect,” BYU Devotional, September 6, 2011. Available at https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/cecil-o-samuelsan_be-ye-therefore-perfect/.
- 3 Charles Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians* (New York: John S. Taylor, Brick Church Chapel), 1837, 255.
- 4 “Justification by Faith, Out of Date?” *The Christian Irishman*, May 1911, 71.