If I were to ask which of the Lord’s commandments is most difficult to keep, many of us might cite Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

Keeping this commandment can be a concern because each of us is far from perfect, both spiritually and temporally. Reminders come repeatedly. We may lock keys inside the car or even forget where the car is parked. And not infrequently we walk intently from one part of the house to another, only to forget the reason for the errand.

When comparing one’s personal performance with the supreme standard of the Lord’s expectation, the reality of imperfection can at times be depressing. My heart goes out to conscientious Saints who, because of their shortcomings, allow feelings of depression to rob them of happiness in life.

We all need to remember: men are that they might have joy—not guilt trips! We also need to remember that the Lord gives no commandments that are impossible to obey. But sometimes we fail to comprehend them fully.

Our understanding of perfection might be aided if we classify it into two categories. The first could pertain uniquely to this life—mortal perfection. The second category could pertain uniquely to the next life—immortal or eternal perfection.

**Mortal perfection**

In this life certain actions can be perfected. A baseball pitcher can throw a no-hit, no-run ball game. A surgeon can perform an operation without an error. A musician can render a selection without a mistake. One can likewise achieve perfection in being punctual, paying tithing, keeping the Word of Wisdom, and so on. The enormous effort required to attain such self-mastery is rewarded with a deep sense of satisfaction. More importantly, spiritual attainments in mortality accompany us into eternity.

James gave a practical standard by which mortal perfection could be measured. He said, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.”

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.

This does not mean that these people never made mistakes or never had need of correction. The process of perfection includes challenges to overcome and steps to repentance that may be very painful. There is a proper place for chastisement in the molding of character, for we know that “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.”

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.

**Eternal perfection**

But Jesus asked for more than mortal perfection. The moment He uttered the words “even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” He raised our sights beyond the bounds of mortality. Our Heavenly Father has eternal perfection. This very fact merits a much broader perspective.

Recently I studied the English and Greek editions of the New Testament, concentrating on each use of the term perfect and its derivatives. Studying both languages together provided some interesting insights, since Greek was the original language of the New Testament.

In Matthew 5:48 the term perfect was translated from the Greek teleios, which means “complete.” Teleios is an adjective derived from the noun telos, which means “end.” The infinitive form of the verb is teleioino, which means “to reach a distant end, to be fully developed, to consummate, or to finish.” Please note that the word does not imply freedom from error; it implies achieving a distant objective. In fact, when writers of the Greek New Testament wished to describe perfection of behavior—precision or excellence of human effort—they did not employ a form of teleios; instead, they chose different words.

Teleios is not a total stranger to us. From it comes the prefix tele- that we use every day. Telephone literally means “distant talk.” Television means “to see distantly.” Telephoto means “distant light,” and so on.

With that background in mind, let us consider another highly significant statement made by the Lord. Just prior to
His crucifixion, He said that on “the third day I shall be perfected.”13 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.14 His eternal perfection would follow His resurrection and receipt of “all power . . . in heaven and in earth.”15

The perfection that the Savior envisions for us is much more than errorless performance. It is the eternal expectation as expressed by the Lord in His great intercessory prayer to His Father—that we might be made perfect and be able to dwell with them in the eternities ahead.16

The Lord’s entire work and glory pertains to the immortality and eternal life of each human being.17 He came into the world to do the will of His Father, who sent Him.18 His sacred responsibility was foreseen before the Creation19 and was foretold by all His holy prophets since the world began.20

The atonement of Christ fulfilled the long-awaited purpose for which He had come to the earth. His concluding words upon Calvary’s cross referred to the culmination of His assignment—to atone for all humankind. Then He said, “It is finished.”21 Not surprisingly, the Greek word from which finished was derived is teleios.

That Jesus attained eternal perfection following His resurrection is confirmed in the Book of Mormon. It records the visit of the resurrected Lord to the people of ancient America. There He repeated the important injunction previously cited but with one very significant addition. He said, “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect.”22 This time He listed himself along with His Father as a perfected personage. Previously He had not.23

Resurrection is requisite for eternal perfection. Thanks to the atonement of Jesus Christ, our bodies, corruptible in mortality, will become incorruptible. Our physical frames, now subject to disease, death, and decay, will acquire immortal glory.24 Presently sustained by the blood of life25 and ever aging, our bodies will be sustained by spirit and become changeless and beyond the bounds of death.26

Eternal perfection is reserved for those who overcome all things and inherit the fulness of the Father in His heavenly mansions. Perfection consists in gaining eternal life—the kind of life that God lives.27

Ordinances and covenants of the temple

Scriptures identify other important prerequisites to eternal perfection. They relate to the ordinances and covenants of the temple.28 No accountable individual can receive exaltation in the celestial kingdom without the ordinances of the temple. Endowments and sealings are for our personal perfection and are secured through our faithfulness.29

This requirement also pertains to our ancestors. Paul taught “that they without us should not be made perfect.”30 Again, in that verse, the Greek term from which perfect was translated was a form of teleios.31

In latter-day revelation the Lord was even more explicit. His prophet wrote: “My dearly beloved brethren and sisters, let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining to our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation. . . . They without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect.”32

Encouragement from the Savior’s example

Our climb up the path to perfection is aided by encouragement from the scriptures. They hold the promise that we shall, if faithful in all things, become like Deity. John the beloved Apostle wrote:

“ ‘We should be called the sons [and daughters] of God. . . . When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

“And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.”33

Continuing encouragement comes as we follow the example of Jesus, who taught, “Be ye holy; for I am holy.”34 His hope for us is crystal clear! He declared: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.”35 Thus our adoration of Jesus is best expressed by our emulation of Jesus.36

People have never failed to follow Jesus because His standards were imprecise or insufficiently high. Quite to the contrary. Some have disregarded His teachings because they were viewed as being too precise or impractically high! Yet such lofty standards, when earnestly pursued, produce great inner peace and incomparable joy.

There is no other individual to compare with Jesus Christ, nor is there any other exhortation equal to His sublime expression of hope: “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect.”37

This divine entreaty is consistent with the fact that as begotten children of heavenly parents, we are endowed with
the potential to become like them, just as mortal children may become like their mortal parents.

The Lord restored His church to help us prepare for perfection. Paul said that the Savior placed in the Church apostles, prophets, and teachers “for the perfecting of the saints, . . . for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” 38

The perfect man described in Paul’s quotation is the completed person—teleios—the glorified soul!

Moroni taught how to gain this glorious objective. His instruction stands in any age as an antidote for depression and a prescription for joy. I echo his plea: “Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; . . . love God with all your might, mind and strength. . . . [Then] ye may be perfect in Christ, . . . holy, [and] without spot.” 39

Meanwhile, brothers and sisters, let us do the best we can and try to improve each day. When our imperfections appear, we can keep trying to correct them. We can be more forgiving of flaws in ourselves and among those we love. We can be comforted and forbearing. The Lord taught, “Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now . . . ; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected.” 40

We need not be dismayed if our earnest efforts toward perfection now seem so arduous and endless. Perfection is pending. It can come in full only after the Resurrection and only through the Lord. It awaits all who love Him and keep His commandments. It includes thrones, kingdoms, principalities, powers, and dominions. 41 It is the end for which we are to endure. 42 It is the eternal perfection that God has in store for each of us. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Those words were given additional intensity in the Joseph Smith Translation: “Ye are therefore commanded to be perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (JST, Matt. 5:50).

2. See 2 Ne. 2:25.


4. James 3:2; emphasis added.

5. See Gen. 6:9; D&C 107:43; Job 1:1.

7. See Heb. 5:8.


10. Incidentally, the feminine form of this noun is teleia, the Greek term for a period at the end of a sentence.


12. A few examples include:
   • “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise” (Matt. 21:16; emphasis added).
   • “The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master” (Luke 6:40). In both of these verses, perfect came from the Greek term katartizo, which means “to fit out, equip, put in order, arrange, adjust; to fit or frame for one’s self”—an act of preparation.
   • Another speaks of “perfect understanding” (Luke 1:3; emphasis added). In this instance, perfect came from the Greek adverb akribos, which means “exactly, accurately.”
   • Another verse refers to those who touched the hem of the Master’s garment and “were made perfectly whole” (Matt. 14:36; emphasis added). Perfect in this instance came from the Greek diasozo, which means “to preserve through danger, to bring safely through, to save, keep from perishing, to rescue.”


14. In the Greek text of that proclamation, the verb teleione was again used, in its future tense—teleiouma.

15. Matt. 28:18; see also D&C 93:2–22.


17. See Moses 1:39.

18. See 3 Ne. 27:13.


22. 3 Ne. 12:48; emphasis added.


24. See Alma 11:45; D&C 76:64–70.

25. See Lev. 17:11.

26. LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v. “resurrection”: “A resurrection means to become immortal, without blood, yet with a body of flesh and bone.”


30. Heb. 11:40; emphasis added.

31. Teleioo

32. D&C 128:15; see also Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 159.

33. 1 Jn. 3:1–3. For additional commentary, see Joseph Fielding Smith, The Way to Perfection, pp. 7–9.

34. 1 Pet. 1:16; see also Lev. 11:44–45; Lev. 19:2; Lev. 20:26.

35. 3 Ne. 27:27.


37. 3 Ne. 12:48.

38. Eph. 4:12–13; emphasis added.


41. See D&C 132:19.
42. This concept is supported by the fact that in verses of the New Testament that refer to the *end* for which we are to endure, the Greek word from which *end* was translated was also derived from *telos* (see Matt. 10:22; Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:13).