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KnoWhy #335 - What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?

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Abstract: The command of Jesus in 3 Nephi 12:48 to be perfect may become easier to understand when viewed in its context. Both the Hebrew and Greek words for perfect can sometimes be connected to covenants, and a careful examination of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and a comparison with the Book of Mormon, shows that God was asking us to covenant to be devoted to Him, as He is devoted to us.



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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PERFECT?

**“Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I,
 or your Father who is in heaven is perfect.”**
3 Nephi 12:48

CONTEXT AND CONTENT

When Jesus appeared to the people at Bountiful, he taught them things that were similar to what He said in His Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament (Matthew 5–7).¹ However, the temple context of 3 Nephi, as well as some significant differences in wording, bring the inspiring words of Jesus more fully to light. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus had said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” This verse can seem overwhelming or be discouraging to read,² because when viewed with our modern idea of “perfection,” in mind, it seems to indicate that Christ wants everyone to perform the impossible task of living a picture-perfect life.³

However, the Greek word translated as *perfect* in Matthew 5:48 can also mean “finished,” or “completed.”⁴ Instead of expecting people to be “without mistake,” Jesus may have been commanding them to be made whole through making covenants with Him.

Surrounding Context

It is significant that the verses leading up to the command to be perfect in the Book of Mormon differ from the surrounding verses in Matthew, and can give more insight into the meaning of 3 Nephi 12:48. The verses

leading up to 3 Nephi 12:48 teach, “those things which were of old time, which were under the law, in me are all fulfilled. Old things are done away, and all things have become new.” The preceding verses to Matthew 5:48, on the other hand, simply discuss why people should love their enemies and then states that people should be perfect. Thankfully, a study of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the atonement of Jesus Christ suggests that this difference may have something to do with covenants.⁵

Perfection in Hebrew

The Hebrew equivalent of this word, also translated as “perfect”⁶ can sometimes be connected to covenants. In the Old Testament, God sometimes commands people to be connected to him through covenants by using the word *perfect*.⁷ In Deuteronomy 18:13, for example, the Lord commands, “Thou shalt be *perfect* with the Lord thy God.”⁸ The previous verse clarifies that God wanted his people to reject the sins of their neighbors and “be perfect” with Him, or covenant to follow him (Deuteronomy 18:12).⁹

This is how this word is used in Joshua 24:14 (emphasis added): “fear the Lord, and serve him in *sincerity* [or

completely] and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served ... in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.”¹⁰ In this case, God commanded the people to covenant to serve the Lord rather than serving other gods.¹¹ Psalm 119:1–2 also connects this word with complete dedication to the Lord: “Blessed are the *undefiled* [or perfect] ... that seek him with the whole heart.” In this example, the word implies covenanting to seek the Lord completely, or with the “whole heart.”¹² Thus, a covenant to follow God’s way, rather than any other way, is one possible way to understand *perfection*.¹³

Perfection as a New Covenant

Just as the people in Joshua 24 covenanted to devote themselves to the Lord and reject paganism completely, so in 3 Nephi people were commanded to reject Mosaic customs in favor of Christ’s new way.¹⁴ In rejecting old ways in favor of covenanting to be completely devoted to the new, they could become “perfect.”¹⁵ The Greek word translated into English as *perfect* in Matthew 5:48 was used in Hebrews 5:14–6:1 “to distinguish between the initial teachings and the full instruction (‘full age,’ ‘perfection’).”¹⁶ This implies that people were to leave behind “old things” that had passed away, the Law of Moses, and covenant to be committed to the new instruction that Christ was now delivering to them.¹⁷

Christ’s statement is also similar to Leviticus 19:2: “Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy,” or, translated slightly differently, “I would that ye should be holy as I, the Lord your God am holy.”¹⁸ Based on the similarities in wording between these scriptures, it seems reasonable that Christ was comparing holiness and perfection. In the scriptures, being *holy* means being set aside for the use of God.¹⁹ Christ thus may have been reminding us that we should covenant to devote ourselves to God.²⁰ The context of this chapter also reminds us to love Him and our neighbors and to repent when we fall short, so the grace and power of Jesus Christ will be sufficient to make us perfect, ultimately complete, and one with Him.

Differences in Wording

In addition, the different wording of the verse itself shows that God wants us to make covenants, promising to be committed to following Him.²¹ In 3 Nephi 12:48, the resurrected Jesus said, “I would that ye should be perfect even as *I, or your Father* who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48, emphasis added; cf. Matthew

5:48).²² While Matthew 5:48 invites righteous people to become perfect as the Father is perfect, 3 Nephi 12:48 included Jesus, our exemplar, as well.²³ It seems that Jesus adds himself to 3 Nephi 12:48 because in the New Testament he was still mortal and had not yet completed his mission. However, when Jesus makes this statement in the Book of Mormon, He had already ascended to the Father, “had become glorified with God,” and had fully lived up to His covenants to be true to His Father.²⁴

The Book of Mormon’s version of the verse is a command to be not only like God, but like Christ. For example, Jesus concluded his teaching to the people in Bountiful with the admonition, “Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). He also taught that one of the most significant ways we can be like Him is by making and keeping covenants: “be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day...for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do; for that which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do” (3 Nephi 27:20–21).

DOCTRINE AND PRINCIPLES

Therefore, the way in which we are to be perfect is by committing to follow Christ. This is not to say that we will not make mistakes, or that we will not waver at times. It simply means that we have made covenants to obey God, and that we try to live up to those covenants. We set ourselves aside for the service of God through the covenants of baptism and the temple, thus making us “perfect” in our consecration to God. It is through covenanting to follow God that we become one with him, and therefore become *perfect*.²⁵

Far from asking us for the unattainable, when Christ told us to be perfect, He was simply calling us to do our sincere best. He wants us to make the covenants of baptism and the temple, and try to live up to those covenants to be completely dedicated to Him, as He is completely dedicated to doing the work of His Father.²⁶ We can become perfect in the ways that God and Christ are perfect. To do this, we must live lives of consecrated dedication to God, as Christ did.²⁷

Christ is the ultimate example of how to live, and His complete commitment to God is a reminder of how we all should live our lives.²⁸ We can all covenant to be ded-

icated to Heavenly Father, just as Christ was. Like the people in the book of Joshua, we can all choose to serve the Lord rather than clinging to the negative influences in our lives. We can all leave behind “those things which were of old time” in our lives so that for us, “all things have become new.” This is how we can choose to live like Christ, and be perfected like He is.

Christ’s Atonement is the ultimate act of dedication to God and humanity in all of human history, and calls all of us to be more dedicated to Christ and each other. Christ asks us to be completely committed to Him, as He is to us. Through the Atonement, we can become “perfect in Christ” and live lives of devotion to God, as He did. Elder C. Scott Grow has stated, “Through our faith in His atoning sacrifice, the Savior cleanses us, heals us, and enables us to know Him by helping us become like Him ... As we strive to become like God, He can make of us more than we could ever make of ourselves.”

Moroni, in his concluding exhortation to all readers of the Book of Mormon, understood and conveyed this concept well: “And again, I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing. . . . Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:30, 32).

FURTHER READING

President Thomas S. Monson, “Choices,” *Ensign*, May 2016, online lds.org.

Elder Robert D. Hales, “To Act for Ourselves: The Gift and Blessings of Agency,” *Ensign*, May 2006, online lds.org.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “Response to a Call,” *Ensign*, May 1974, online at lds.org.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Mormon, See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Jesus Deliver a Version of the Sermon on the Mount at the Temple in Bountiful? (3 Nephi 12:6),” *KnoWhy* 203 (October 6, 2016).

2. To have everything in the Book of Mormon lead up to this point, and then to have Christ give a commandment that seems, at first, to be impossible to keep is puzzling, to say the least. See Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 4:52–53.

3. See D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011), 2:161–163.

4. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 58.

5. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 114.

6. See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans’s Publishing Company, 2005) 270–1. See also R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 228–229.

7. The Old Testament describes both Noah (Genesis 6:9) and Job (Job 1:1), as “perfect” and Abram was commanded to be “perfect” (Genesis 17:1). Even animal sacrifices were expected to be “perfect” (Leviticus 22:21). See Johannes Botterweck, Ringgren Helmer, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., “Tmym,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 699–711.

8. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 119.

9. Moroni 10:32 helps to explain more about what this perfection means. It states that through God’s grace we “may be perfect in Christ.” The word *with* in Deuteronomy could be translated simply as *in*, suggesting that these phrases are basically the same concept. See F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, eds., “im,” *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

- (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing Company, 1996), 871–874.
10. These all are translated from the same Hebrew word, *tamim*, which appears in the Hebrew Bible more than one hundred times, and is often translated as *perfect* by the King James translators. See George Wigram, ed., *The Englishman's Hebrew Concordance of the Old Testament: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1980), s.v., *tmym*.
11. This Hebrew word is closely related to *tmm*, which appears to derive from an archaic Hebrew word having a sense of “completion.” So, in Joshua 3:17, the children of Israel passed “clean over Jordan” or “*tmm* over Jordan” which could well be translated, “completely over the Jordan.” Similarly, in 1 Kings 6:22, when the Temple of Solomon was “finished” *tmm* appears again. It is likely that the concept of being “finished” or “complete” may also apply in the case of *tamim*. See Wigram, ed., *Englishman's Hebrew Concordance*, s.v., *tmym*.
12. There are actually several words that can be translated as “perfect” in the Old Testament, such as the Hebrew word *salem*, which is also translated as “perfect” in the King James Version of the Bible. This word may also be related to the word for *perfect*. See Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 60. For more on how this word is translated in the King James version of the Bible, see Wigram, ed., *Englishman's Hebrew Concordance*, s.v., *shlm*.
13. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 61.
14. For more on this, see Jonathon Riley, *Holy, Without Spot: The Relationship Between Holiness and Perfection in Moroni 10:32–33* (honors thesis, Brigham Young University, 2012).
15. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 58.
16. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 58–59.
17. The word also is used to refer to the temple. For more on the temple connotations of the sermon, see John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009).
18. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 119.
19. See Botterweck, Helmer, and Fabry, “*Tmym*,” 699–711.
20. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 61.
21. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Is The Lord's Prayer Different In 3 Nephi? (3 Nephi 13:9),” *KnowHy* 204 (October 7, 2016).
22. For more on the Sermon at the Temple, see John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*.
23. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 94–95.
24. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple*, 96.
25. On the relationship between covenants and becoming one with God, see Margaret Barker, “The Lord Is One,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2017): 75–97.
26. Christ constantly calls out to us to gather us together to Him, but we have to listen. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:322.
27. This involves truly listening to Him and obeying Him. See S. Brent Farley, “The Appearance of Christ to the People of Nephi (3 Nephi 11–14),” in *The Book of Mormon, Part 2: Alma 30 to Moroni*, Studies in Scripture, Volume 8, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1987), 149.
28. For more on how we can follow the example of Christ through living His gospel, see Robert L. Millet, “This Is My Gospel,” in *3 Nephi 9–30, This Is My Gospel*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., Book of Mormon Symposium Series, Volume 8 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 1–24.