

Is perfection an achievable goal?

Matthew 19: 16- 26

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Spencer W. Kimball, the 12th President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon Church, or the LDS Church, said that God demands perfection from his children and that we can achieve it.

“This progress toward eternal life is a matter of achieving perfection. Living all the commandments guarantees total forgiveness of sins and assures one of exaltation¹ through that perfection which comes by complying with the formula the Lord gave us. In his Sermon on the Mount he made the command to all men: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48). 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 attainable. Perfection is an achievable goal.”

(*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pp.208-209 quoted in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ & his Apostles*, p.386)

Jesus Christ commanded, “*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*” (Matthew 5:48) Both Evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints, take this command seriously. The Bible and the LDS Church agree that perfection is an achievable goal. Does this mean that we are to work hard towards this goal and eventually make it? No, says the Bible. The present tense (*‘be perfect’*) should be noted. God demands that His people *be perfect* right now with the same perfection the Heavenly Father has. But the LDS Church seems to explain Jesus’ command to *be perfect* in Matthew 5:48 as a “future perfection”, and they may *become perfect* and will eventually attain eternal life/godhood/ exaltation. What does the Bible teach about how can we be perfect now? In Matthew 19:21, Jesus tells a rich, moral young man who was eager for eternal life, how he ‘would be perfect.’

Let us carefully compare the official teachings about perfection taught by the LDS Church with perfection taught by the Bible. This paper proceeds in three parts: (1) A young rich ruler in Matthew 19. (2) What lack I yet? (3) Is perfection is an achievable goal? We use the King James Version, the Bible version preferred by the LDS Church. We also use some of the LDS scriptures - *The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine & Covenants* (2013), official teaching manuals: *Gospel Principles* (2009), *The Life and Teachings of Jesus & His Apostles* (1979) and the *Doctrine and Covenant Student Manual* (Religion 324-325) and a non official LDS book: *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1999) by Spencer W Kimball.

1 Matthew 19:16-26 “What Good Thing Shall I Do, That I May Have Eternal Life?”

A rich young man came to Jesus and asked a question. “*Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*” (16) The young man firmly believed that he could earn eternal life by doing some good works, that he had strictly obeyed God’s commandments. But he still felt that something was missing, that there was more he had to do. But Jesus was saying in v.17 that even what he had done was not ‘good’ enough.

Jesus answered the young man’s question, saying “*there is none good, but one, that is, God.*” God is holy and perfect but man is sinful and imperfect (See Psalm 14:3, Ecclesiastics 7: 20). The young man had been unsure of *what good is essentially*, and *what the nature of good God demand is.*² He needed to compare himself with God, not with other people. Unless he changed his way of thinking of being “good”, he would be far from the kingdom of heaven.

Then Jesus continued with some of God’s commandments, “*...but, if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*” (17) Jesus referred to the commandments to abstain from murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, then to honour his father and mother and love his neighbours (18-19). These commandments deal with how we treat others. The young man answered, “*All these things have I kept from my youth.*”³

The man was probably disappointed by Jesus’ reference to the commandments. As a religious Jew he would have known them by heart. He expected something more. He asked, “*What lack I yet?*” Jesus said, “*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.*” (21) “*Jesus’ response in v21 was indeed something to so, but something so radical and that it would undermine his whole way of life and leave everything at God’s disposal.*” (R.T. France)⁴ If he wanted to be perfect, he must get rid of his stumbling block, for this man, his wealth, which Jesus saw as a hindrance to his spiritual progress and follow Jesus wholeheartedly. The young man was unaware that he had broken the first and the greatest commandment, to have no other gods but the one true God. His wealth stood between him and the service of God, and would miss out on eternal life (22).

Jesus amazed the disciples, as they thought the rich were blessed by God. Jesus went on to say, “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*” (24) The rich young man trusted his wealth. He was too big, too self-sufficient, and proud to pass through the needle’s eye.⁵ He lacked the simple trust and dependence that childlike people have (Matt.19: 13-15). Adults are likely to rely on their strength and wisdom (18:3), the righteous are likely to rely on their goodness (Luke 18:9-14). These attitudes make the inheritance of eternal life impossible.

The disciples asked, “*Who then can be saved?*” (25) Jesus answered, “*With men, this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.*” (26) Giving eternal life is always God’s work. We must be humble enough to trust God with simple childlike faith. Children can be selfish, proud and intemperate, but they often have something we adults rarely have: trustfulness and total dependence.⁶ What is totally impossible for human beings to do, God can do.

2 Let’s talk about it! : What lack I yet?

Mr. Kimball says, “Being perfect means to triumph over sin”, and “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.” “If you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which is the greatest of all the gifts of God.” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 14:7) “If your God prepares the way for you, you must surely keep all the commandments.” (1*Nephi* 3:7) But, *Have you triumphed over sins, including sins of inner thoughts and attitudes and sins of omission* (James 4:17)? *Have you lived all the commandments? If not, how do you know you are truly forgiven?*⁷ So what do you lack?

(a) “I repent of my sins every day.”

If you say, “I repent of my sins every day,” **have you sincerely repented according to the teachings of the Mormon Church?** (See *Gospel Principles*, Chapter 19)⁷ **Do you find it hard not to commit the same sins again?** “Those who receive forgiveness and then repeat

the sin are held accountable for former sins.” (*Gospel Principle*, p.231, See D&C 82:7) 1 John 1:8 says that if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

(b) “But I’m trying!”

Do you say, “I’m trying”? Mr. Kimball said, “Trying is not sufficient. Nor repentance complete when one merely tries to abandon sin...To try is weak. To do the best I can do is not strong. We must always do better than we can.” (*The Miracle of Forgiveness*, pp.164-165) What a daunting prospect! To have to achieve perfection by your own strength and wisdom. “*For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.*” (James 2:10) You know your heart. Offending even a small law makes you guilty of breaking the whole law. Nothing escapes God’s notice. (Matt.22: 18, Luke 6:8, John 4:17-19) The smallest thing done wrong, no matter how small or insignificant makes you imperfect. Then, **what did Jesus mean when he said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father who is in heaven is perfect”?**

(c) “With men, this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”

Matthew 5:48 does not teach that we can become perfect or achieve sinless perfection in this life. This idea is foreign to the immediate context of Matthew 5:48 as well as to the rest of the Bible, because man is, by nature, sinful. **The Bible teaches that sin is basically rebellion against God (Genesis 3, Romans 1:21-23) and human beings were born into the world in a state of sin (Psalm 51:5), are dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:5) and by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).**

In Matthew 5:43-47, Jesus teaches his followers to go beyond the “superficial observance of the letter of the law.”⁸ To love one’s enemy, for instance, is an important part of being a son of the heavenly Father.⁹ We are to love the just and the unjust, as God’s love extends to all people (5:45). But love is not the only characteristic of God which Jesus demands of his followers, but God’s perfection.¹⁰ **In 5:48, by commanding his disciples to be perfect, Jesus was stating what God’s standard is.** Can we meet the standard by our personal achievement? Certainly not!

The rich young man thought that he was O.K. and deserved eternal life and that Jesus would recognise his goodness. But he was not good enough. No one is. Neither you nor me. This is the point Jesus was making. The only one who is good is God. But even the best men do not measure up to God’s perfect standard. God cannot lower the entrance requirement for eternal life. Being perfect is impossible for us! “*With men, this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.*” God provided the way for you to be declared perfect in God’s sight. God’s Word tells me that I am perfect right now. How can I say that?

3. Perfection is an achievable goal.

First, the Bible teaches that perfection now, in this life, is possible through the sanctification of our Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:10, 14).¹¹ How? Jesus was free from all sin (John 8:46, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15). He is the only one who is perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect. Because of his perfection he was qualified to make atonement for our sins. He was *a lamb without blemish and spot*, Christ was able to offer *His precious blood* for us (1 Peter 1:19).

Second, the Bible teaches that as a result of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for us, believers have been sanctified (‘made holy’) (Hebrews 10:10) and “he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” (Hebrews 10: 14).¹² Believers have already been perfected by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Please note the tense. “*Hath perfected*” is a *completed action, not a future action.*

Third, the Bible teaches that believers have received the status of perfection or the status of saints.¹³ We are still in a state of sin, but we are saints in God’s sight (2 Corinthians 1:1, Ephesians 1: 1). This is what justification by faith means. God declares us righteous or perfect.

Fourth, the Bible teaches that as a result of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for us, all our sins, our past sins and the sins we will still commit, will be blotted out from God’s record, and will never be brought up against us¹⁴ (Hebrews 10:17, Colossians 2:13-14). Hebrews 10:17-18 says, “*And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.*” God says that he will *not remember our sin* (Jeremiah 31:34) Incredible! “*But with God all things are possible*”.

Conclusion: *Perfection now, in this life, is achievable through the sanctification of Jesus Christ.* Inheriting eternal life by trying to *live all the commandments* is frightening. “*There is none good, but one, that is, God,*” says Jesus. We are all weak and sinful. How can we talk about perfection when sin is evident in our lives? If you try to achieve perfection by your own wisdom and strength, you are like this rich young man. He had paid strict attention to the commandments of God. But he still felt that he was coming short of inheriting eternal life. Instead of adding other commandments to achieve perfection he needed to submit humbly to the perfection Jesus was willing to offer and follow him wholeheartedly. What is our stumbling block which prevents us from following Jesus wholeheartedly? Are you the childlike people who trust completely on Jesus of the New Testament? What do you lack?

NOTES

1. A LDS teaching manual, *Gospel Principles*, Chapter 47 says, “Exaltation is eternal life, the kind of life God lives. He lives in great glory. He is perfect. He possesses all knowledge and all wisdom. He is the Father of spirit children. He is a creator. We can become like our Heavenly Father. This is exaltation.” One of the blessings of exaltation is godhood. (<https://www.lds.org/manual/gospel-principles/chapter-47-exaltation?lang=eng>) (See Doctrines and Covenants 132:20-23- D&C is one of the LDS scriptures)

2. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1992)* p.489

3. Zane C.Hodges, “*You know the Law*” in “*The Rich Young Ruler*” “Had he? Of course not! What child is there who has *always* honoured his father and mother? Where is the man who loves his neighbour as himself from his youth and upwardly? Even if he had avoided the grosser sins on the list, he had certainly not avoided them all.”

4. R.T. France, MATTHEW in the “*New Bible Commentary*” (Nottingham, England, IVP, 2011) P.930

5. Zane Hodge, “*Aftermath and Surprise*”, in “*The Rich Young Ruler*”

6. Leon Morris, *Ibid*, p.459

7. Bill McKeever, “*Are you abiding a Celestial law?*”

8. R.T. France , p.912

9. D.A Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Carlise, UK, Baker House, 1994) p.59-60

10. *Ibid*

11. John Farkas, “*BE YE PERFECT AND THE GRACE OF GOD*”

12. David Peterson, HEBREWS in the “*New Bible Commentary*” (Nottingham, England, IVP, 2011) P.930

13. “*Being ‘cleansed,’ ‘sanctified’ and ‘made perfect’ are virtually synonymous in Hebrews.*” *The Reformation Study Bible*, English Standard Version (FL, USA, Ligonier Ministries, 2005) p.1791

14. F.F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NTCNT, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans,1990) p.248