

Understanding the Doctrine of Perfection

Ronald E. Bartholomew

This address was given at the 2002 Family Expo Conference

© 2002 by Brigham Young University,
Division of Continuing Education
All rights reserved.

For further information write:

BYU Family Expo,
136 Harman Continuing Education Building,
Provo, Utah 84602.
(801) 422-3559
E-mail: conferences@byu.edu
Home page: <http://familyexpo.byu.edu>

1. It is Heavenly Father's plan for us to be as perfect as He is (Matt. 5:48).

President Benson said: “The scriptures teach that man was created in the image and likeness of his Creator (Genesis 1: 26–27). Fundamental to the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the belief that the purpose of man's whole existence is to grow into the likeness and image of God. We accept quite literally the Savior's mandate: ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48; see 3 Nephi 12:48). As eternal beings, we each have in us a spark of divinity. As God's offspring, we have His attributes in us. We are gods in embryo, and thus have an unlimited potential for progress and attainment.” (*Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, pp. 20–21.)

President Lorenzo Snow said: “If there ever was a thing revealed to man perfectly, clearly, so that there could be no doubt or dubiety, this was revealed to me, and it came in these words: ‘As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be.’ This may appear to some minds as something very strange and remarkable, but it is in perfect harmony with the teachings of Jesus Christ and with His promises. He said: ‘To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne’ (Revelation 3:21). The Apostle Paul also taught in this wise: ‘Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. . . .’ (Philippians 2:5–8). This is the high destiny of the sons of God, they who overcome, who are obedient to His commandments, who purify themselves even as He is pure. They are to become like Him; they will see Him as He is; they will behold His face and reign with Him in His glory, becoming like unto Him in every particular.” (*Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, p. 5.)

In 3 Nephi 12:48 Christ reworded the command given before his death and resurrection. Instead of ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). He said, "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect"--thus implying his attainment of that divine possibility. However, Elder McConkie stated that "He had an advantage that none of us has. He was the Son of God, and he came into this life with a spiritual capacity and talent and an inheritance that exceeded beyond all comprehension what any of the rest of us was born with. . . ." (1976 *Devotional Speeches of the Year*, p. 400.)

While this realization may seemingly put this divine attainment beyond our feeble grasp, the scriptures testify that there are *mortals* who have attained perfection as well. D&C 132:37 states: "Abraham . . . Isaac also and Jacob did none other things than that which they were commanded; and because they did none other things than that which they were commanded, they have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods." Elder McConkie said of this verse: "This concept that some of the children of our Father have already become gods is a sound doctrinal reality. . . . This high status is now enjoyed by all of the prophets and righteous saints who were with Christ in his resurrection. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as examples and prototypes, whose attainments stand as a pattern of all others similarly situated, are specifically named by revelation as having already attained Godhood." (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, Vol 1, Footnotes, p. 32.)

2. We should not expect this level of perfection in mortality.

Joseph Smith said: "When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave." (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 348.)

Joseph F. Smith said: "We do not look for absolute perfection in man. Mortal man is not capable of being absolutely perfect. Nevertheless, it is given to us to be as perfect in the sphere in which we are called to be and to act, as it is for the Father in heaven to be pure and righteous in the more exalted sphere in which he acts. We will find in the scriptures the words of the Savior himself to his disciples, in which he required that they should be perfect, even as their Father in heaven is perfect; that they should be righteous, even as he is righteous. I do not expect that we can be as perfect as Christ, that we can be as righteous as God. But I believe that we can strive for that perfection with the intelligence that we possess, and the knowledge that we have of the principles of life and salvation." (*GD*, p. 132.)

Joseph Fielding Smith said: "Salvation does not come all at once; we are commanded to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. It will take us ages to accomplish this end, for there will be greater progress beyond the grave, and it will be there that the faithful will overcome all things, and receive all things, even the fulness of the Father's glory. I believe the Lord meant just what he said: that we should be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect. That will not come all at once, but line upon line, and precept upon precept, example upon example,

and even then not as long as we live in this mortal life, for we will have to go even beyond the grave before we reach that perfection and shall be like God. But here we lay the foundation. Here is where we are taught these simple truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in this probationary state, to prepare us for that perfection. It is our duty to be better today than we were yesterday, and better tomorrow than we are today. Why? Because we are on that road, if we are keeping the commandments of the Lord, we are on that road to perfection." (*DS*, 2:18.)

Elder Bruce R. McConkie said this about "that road to perfection": "As members of the Church, if we chart a course leading to eternal life; if we begin the processes of spiritual rebirth, and are going in the right direction; if we chart a course of sanctifying our souls, and degree by degree are going in that direction; . . . then it is absolutely guaranteed—there is no question whatever about it—we shall gain eternal life." (1976 *Devotional Speeches of the Year*, p. 400.)

Brigham Young gives us this to ponder: "It is written, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' This is perfectly consistent to the person who understands what perfection really is. . . . We can alter the phraseology of the sentence, and say, 'Be ye as perfect as ye can,' for that is all we can do, though it is written, be ye perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. He cannot be any more perfect than he knows how, any more than we. When we are doing as well as we know how in the sphere and station which we occupy here, we are justified in the justice, righteousness, mercy, and judgment that go before the Lord of heaven and earth. We are as justified as the angels who are before the throne of God. The sin that will cleave to all the posterity of Adam and Eve is, that they have not done as well as they knew how." He added: "When we use the term perfection, it applies to man in his present condition, as well as to heavenly beings. We are now, or may be, as perfect in our sphere as God and angels are in theirs, but the greatest intelligence in existence can continually ascend to greater heights of perfection." (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, p. 89.)

President Joseph F. Smith said: "I sincerely hope that the spirit of the conference will abide with us, will go with us to our homes, and that we will be able to continue to build on the foundations of the gospel of the Son of God until we become perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect, according to the sphere and intelligence that we act in and possess. I do not expect that any of us will ever become in mortality quite so perfect as God is perfect; but in the spheres in which we are called to act, and according to the capacity and breadth of intelligence that we possess, in our sphere, and in the existence of the talent, the ability, and intelligence that God has given to us, we may become as perfect in our sphere as God is perfect in his higher and more exalted sphere. I believe that." (*GD*, p. 252.)

Elder James E. Talmage said: "Our Lord's admonition to men to become perfect, even as the Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48) cannot rationally be construed otherwise than as implying the possibility of such achievement. Plainly, however, man cannot become perfect in mortality in the sense in which God is perfect as a supremely glorified Being. It is possible, though, for man to be perfect in his sphere in a sense analogous to that in which superior intelligences are perfect in their several spheres; yet the relative perfection of the lower is infinitely inferior to that of the higher. A college student in his freshman or sophomore year may be perfect as freshman or sophomore; his record may possibly be a hundred per cent on the scale of efficiency and achievement; yet the honors of the upper classman are beyond him, and the attainment of

graduation is to him remote, but of assured possibility, if he do but continue faithful and devoted to the end.” (*Jesus the Christ*, chapter 17, "relative to perfection.")

3. Becoming "perfect, even as our Father," is a process, not an event.

Luke 2:52 states that Jesus “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” The word “increased” implies growth, learning—and how could He grow and learn if he were already perfect? D&C 93:12–17 reveals that even the Lord Jesus Christ did not receive of the “fulness at first, but received grace for grace.” President Lorenzo Snow said simply: “Perfection comes in stages.” (*Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, p. 32.)

President Ezra Taft Benson gives us some excellent guidance as to *how* the process of becoming like Heavenly Father works: “The process of adding one godly attribute to another, as described by Peter, becomes the key. . . . Let our actions be Christlike so that by our diligence and with God's grace we may add to our character faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, and diligence. Our objective is to attain such a ‘divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:5–7). (*Teachings of President Ezra Taft Benson*, pp. 3, 328.) As just quoted, President Benson points out that two things are required for us to become perfect: “our diligence” and “God's grace.” Let us examine each of these one at a time, beginning with “our diligence.”

Spencer W. Kimball taught that the power to overcome our weaknesses and become like God lies within each of us. He said: “We are sons and daughters of God, possessing seeds of godhood. We are not limited by instinct as are the beasts. We have godly power to grow and to overcome and become perfect. Sin was permitted in the world, and Satan was permitted to tempt us, but we have our free agency. We may sin or live righteously, but we cannot escape responsibility. To blame our sins upon the Lord, saying they are inherent and cannot be controlled, is cheap and cowardly. To blame our sins upon our parents and our upbringing is the way of the escapist. One's parents may have failed; our own backgrounds may have been frustrating, but as sons and daughters of a living God we have within ourselves the power to rise above our circumstances, to change our lives. Man can change human nature. Man must transform his life. We will be punished for our sins. We must accept responsibility for our sins. We can overcome. We must control and master ourselves.” (*Faith Precedes the Miracle*, pp. 175–176.) Joseph Smith taught that “All beings who have bodies have power over those who have not. The devil has no power over us only as we permit him.” (*Teachings*, p. 181.)

But how do we even begin to master ourselves and overcome Satan, sin and temptation? President Benson suggests the practical process of goal-setting. He suggests that we conquer these things one at a time. He said: “Every accountable child of God needs to set goals, short- and long-range goals. A man who is pressing forward to accomplish worthy goals can soon put despondency under his feet, and once a goal is accomplished, others can be set up. Some will be continuing goals. Each week when we partake of the sacrament we commit ourselves to the goals of taking upon ourselves the name of Christ, of always remembering Him and keeping His commandments.” (See Moroni 4:3; D&C 20:27.)