

# ***“Be Ye Therefore Perfect”***

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*This address was given, at the 2002 BYU Women’s Conference*

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When you make your bed in the morning, do you think to yourself, “I can’t wait to come back to bed tonight”? Women work so hard, and rest can be so refreshing. The gospel teaches us to want to be perfect—and it wears us out. We think we have to do it all today. Perfection!

As I discussed this topic with my husband, he said, “So what are you going to tell them—to mellow out?” He’s a pediatrician; he understands how women think.

Since receiving this assignment, I have tried to understand if women still worry too much about becoming perfect. Let me share with you what a few sisters have said: “I have a hard time relating to the Savior. He was so perfect, and I am so imperfect.” “The Atonement applies to everyone else. I’m not good enough.” “Only when I am perfect enough can I have the Lord’s grace to help me.”

Just recently a talk was given on this campus entitled “‘Be Ye Therefore Perfect’—Handling Obsession with Perfection,” by Jeffrey Marsh.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, there is a need for the subject of perfection to be addressed. And so today, I want you to ask yourself, What is my understanding of the

principle “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”? (Matthew 5:48).

Is our understanding healthy? Is it based on true doctrine?

You see, our perception of a principle matters. What we perceive may be based not on fact but on our own ideas, and sometimes we get off course. When we get off course in understanding the doctrine, we can get off course in life. Regarding perception, Elder Cecil O. Samuelson said, “For some, they become so obsessed or consumed with their every thought, action, and response that they may become far too extreme in their own perceptions of what is expected of them.”<sup>2</sup>

Speaking of perception, I have a great illustration. Do you remember the talk President Gordon B. Hinckley gave about the six “B’s”?<sup>3</sup> My granddaughter prayed that President Hinckley would do better in school. When her parents asked her why, she said, “Well, you know—it’s because of his six ‘B’s.’” Our perception really matters.

Do we have a true understanding of the principle of perfection, or are we like the biblical Jews who didn’t recognize the Savior because they looked beyond the mark? Are we so caught up in how the world sees us—having perfect children, perfect homes, and perfect lives—that we are looking beyond the mark?

Thinking we can and should be perfect now seems rather arrogant to me. Elder Bruce D. Porter has said: “I have often thought that perfectionism stems from pride and self-centeredness. It is what the Lord warned W. W. Phelps against in the Doctrine and Covenants: ‘And also he hath need to repent, for I, the Lord, am not well pleased with him, for he seeketh to excel, and he is not sufficiently meek before me’ (D&C 58:41).”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps those who do not understand the principle of perfection do not have a correct understanding of the Atonement and the whole plan of salvation. It is as simple as this: we can never become perfect alone. No one can. It is only with the Lord’s help that we can be made perfect. Perfection is a process.

- And so, as we discuss the process of becoming perfect, I hope this talk is a one size fits all. Let’s discuss four ways that will help us become better

outfitted as we work toward perfection: learn the doctrine, apply the Atonement, be kind to ourselves, and keep the Spirit.

### Learn the Doctrine of Perfection

The Lord has said, “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48). That is God’s standard. Each day we continually strive to do a little better than the day before. I love the way President Hinckley says it: “Do the best you can.”<sup>5</sup>

Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught: “No man in mortality can become wholly perfect; that is, he cannot have his exaltation here in this state of frailty and uncertainty.”<sup>6</sup> Only our Savior attained that goal. “No other mortal—not the greatest prophets nor the mightiest Apostles nor any of the righteous Saints of any . . . [age]—has ever been perfect [in this life].”<sup>7</sup>

We can do some things perfectly, such as paying our tithing or keeping the Sabbath day holy. But other commandments are not so easily accomplished.

The scriptures do speak of having a perfect knowledge, but even having a perfect knowledge will not save us. The devil’s angels had a knowledge of who the Savior was, and they still chose to side with Satan.

President Joseph Fielding Smith said, “It will take us ages to accomplish this end [of perfection], for there will be greater progress beyond the grave.”<sup>8</sup>

The Lord taught the Prophet Joseph Smith: “Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, continue in patience until [you] are perfected” (D&C 67:13). That is good advice for all of us.

### Understand and Apply the Atonement

The Atonement helps us to become perfect. It has a daily, weekly application. Sometimes we don’t fully understand how to apply the Atonement; we can become confused, and then we get down on ourselves. We’ve been taught, “If I do my best, the Lord will make up the difference,” but that statement may seem to imply that the Atonement works only at the end of this life. The Atonement is so much more—and each day the power of the Atonement is there for us to cleanse our sins and help us become perfected in Christ.

Another misunderstanding involves our taking the Atonement as a blank check to sin. This misunderstanding sometimes happens to teenagers when they don't understand the doctrine. Because they don't understand the importance of the Atonement, they think they can deliberately do something wrong and quickly repent. They mock the Atonement by taking it lightly.

The sacrament helps us apply the Atonement each day of our lives. Each week, as we figuratively kneel at the sacrament table, we sincerely repent and are cleansed of our sins—our Savior, through His grace, makes it possible for us to become holy, without spot. While we may not be perfect, we are worthy. Elder Samuelson declared: “Worthiness and perfection are not synonyms! All of us are ‘works in progress.’ We can be worthy while still needing improvement.”<sup>9</sup>

This is why Elder Robert E. Hales has said—and he never said anything with more promise—“Tell the women of the Church that if they are worthy to hold a current temple recommend and can partake worthily of the sacrament each week, they will make it.”<sup>10</sup>

Elder Melvin J. Ballard made this unforgettable statement: “I am a witness that there is a spirit attending the administration of the sacrament that warms the soul from head to foot; you feel the wounds of the spirit being healed, and the load being lifted.”<sup>11</sup>

When I first heard that, I'm not sure I understood it. Week after week, as I sat alone in the congregation with seven children while my husband had responsibilities on the stand, it was not always easy to feel the Spirit. But I thought to myself, “If Elder Ballard said it, then I must be missing out on something.” So, over the years I have put it to the test.

Dear sisters, it is my testimony that the Spirit of the Lord always attends our sacrament meetings. It warms us from head to foot. You can feel the burdens of your soul being lifted. That Spirit is given to cleanse us, to comfort us, to inspire and to teach us. It is the reason why our Church leaders keep encouraging us to be reverent in our sacrament meetings—so that we can hear the voice of the Spirit. It is there in such rich abundance if we will have ears to hear.

The Savior gave us the Atonement to bless our lives. We cannot afford to take the Atonement lightly. When we understand the power of the Atonement and apply it daily, we are working toward perfection. Each day

we do the best we can. Each night we kneel and ask for forgiveness for the mistakes we have made that day. The power of the Atonement changes our hearts gradually—as the Spirit teaches us self-mastery and takes away our desire for sin.

Our Father in Heaven wants us to understand the Atonement and teach it to our families. Take the time to teach this doctrine to your children. We want to tuck them in so they won't fall out.

### Be Kind to Yourself

Elder James E. Talmage said: “So great are the difficulties and dangers [of this earth life], so strong is the influence of evil in the world, and so weak is man in resistance thereto, that without the aid of a power above that of humanity no soul could find its way back [home] to God from whom [he] came. The need for a Redeemer lies in the inability of man to raise himself from the temporal to the spiritual plane, from the lower kingdom to the higher.”<sup>12</sup>

Recognize that making mistakes is all part of the plan. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin said, “Our Heavenly Father . . . understands that we will make mistakes at times, that we will stumble, that we will become discouraged and perhaps even wish to give up and say to ourselves [that] it is not worth the struggle.”<sup>13</sup>

Several months ago I was giving a short presentation in a General Authority meeting. Right in the middle, I forgot what I was saying and someone else had to pick up where I left off. I thought about it for days. It wasn't until I watched Michelle Kwan fall on the ice in her skating routine during the Olympics that I realized this: Everyone makes mistakes—it is part of living in mortality. Only then could I let it go.

Dwelling on our weaknesses can be self-defeating and harmful. Each one of us needs to be honest with ourselves. But, it is absolutely essential that in our self-analysis that we do not become so self-absorbed that it slows our progress. Elder Samuelson observed: “It is a tendency for too many of us to glory in or dwell on our weaknesses, [our] temptations, and [our] shortcomings. We must recognize them, get help when [it] is appropriate, but move on as soon as possible and not be preoccupied by them.”<sup>14</sup>

A dear friend once indirectly gave some great advice. Offering an opening prayer in Sunday School, she said, “Heavenly Father, bless us that when we make mistakes we can forgive ourselves quickly, so we can get on with our lives.” I have never forgotten that.

Love yourself. Focus more on the efforts you make to do good. Remember that sometimes it is more important to do the right things than it is to do things right or perfectly.

Brother Marsh said: “Often, ‘our sacrifices’ . . . are more sacred to the Lord than the results. Prayers we say, however imperfect, are sacred to God. Home evenings held, however much a disaster, count in the eyes of God. Your efforts and desires to be good, and to do good, never go unnoticed by our Eternal Father.”<sup>15</sup>

Several Christmases ago, I attended a sacrament meeting put on by a ward choir. It was a beautiful program, but the timing between the musical numbers and the dialogue was unusually slow. I found myself becoming impatient and judgmental, and yet I didn’t want to lose the Spirit. Heavenly Father must have known my thoughts because into my mind came the words, ‘Their offering is acceptable unto Me.’ I learned a valuable lesson that day. It didn’t matter that the program was not perfect. Their sacrifice was an acceptable offering to the Lord.

### Keep the Spirit with You

One of the hardest things for all of us is to keep the Spirit with us all of the time. And yet, the Savior promises us that it is possible. How do we do it?

Prayer. “The most important thing [we] can do is learn to talk to God.”<sup>16</sup> There is nothing like it in all the world. I have heard President Hinckley say, “Prayer is a miracle.” Prophets have said they do not worry about those who pray twice a day. Now, if they don’t worry about us, then we don’t need to worry about ourselves, as long as we sincerely pray twice a day.

One sister who went through divorce relates how she prayed to Heavenly Father and was blessed by the power of the Atonement: “I had no one to turn to, no place to go, except onto my knees. I prayed as I had never prayed before. I fasted faithfully, meaningfully, and often. I read and studied the scriptures from cover to cover for the first time in my life. . . . And He was there. He heard my humble pleadings. He put his arm of love around me. He

forgave me of my sins and [He] showed me a better way. I was amazed at the happiness, [the] success, and opportunity that came into my life.”<sup>17</sup> This sister’s sincere prayer activated the Atonement in her life.

President Boyd K. Packer said, “The Atonement has practical, personal, everyday value; apply it in your life. It can be activated with so simple a beginning as prayer. You will not thereafter be free from trouble and mistakes but [you] can erase the guilt through repentance and be at peace.”<sup>18</sup>

For some time, I had a consuming problem in my life that I didn’t understand. I had prayed about it forever. Finally in desperation, I said, “Heavenly Father, I don’t get this. Please help me to fix it.” And He did! The point is, we must be honest. We must pray from the depths of our heart. Heavenly Father then knows we are serious, and He is honor bound to bless us with help. He may not give us the answer we want, but He will always give us peace.

Heavenly Father loves us so. We are His children. He wants us to have a good relationship with Him. He told Enoch, “Unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father” (Moses 7:33).

Heavenly Father can and will answer your prayers. As we pray more often, the Spirit of the Lord strengthens our faith. With the prophet Moses we can say, “I will not cease to call upon God, I have other things to inquire of him: for his glory has been upon me” (Moses 1:18).

How do we keep the Spirit? We need to pray.

Read the scriptures daily. President Spencer W. Kimball was not kidding when he said we must become sister sriptorians. Most of my generation were not raised on the scriptures. If you have teenagers, you know how well versed they are in the scriptures. We have some catching up to do. We must be examples to our children; otherwise, we are like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. The younger generation may have to wait for us to die off before they can enjoy the promised land.

As we read the scriptures daily and apply them to our lives, we can find answers to our problems in the scriptures. A young woman sent this wonderful letter to our office:

“About a year ago I had a seminary lesson about understanding the scriptures and receiving guidance and comfort from the Lord through them. . . I decided that I really wanted to know the scriptures and benefit from them. At first, I was impatient that there was no difference in my reading, [but] I did not forget the yearning I had to experience the comfort the scriptures offer.

“During an especially trying time when I felt my whole world crashing down, it finally happened. I was reading no more intently than usual when I came across the words spoken in D&C 121—‘My son, peace be unto thy soul, thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment. . . .’ This was the comfort I [was] searching for. The verse lit up my soul and was set off from the rest of the chapter. I knew my patience and unfailing determination to experience comfort from the Lord through the scriptures had finally been found. As I continued to read and pray with this constant desire, more and more scriptures have opened up to me.”<sup>19</sup>

You, too, can be filled with the Spirit of the Lord as you ponder and study the sacred scriptures.

Prepare yourself for the sacrament each week. As women we are so good at preparing our meals for Sunday, but do we think about our own spiritual preparation? Perhaps on Saturday we could talk to Heavenly Father and ask Him to help us prepare ourselves spiritually for Sunday worship. As we think about our need to repent and our desire to improve, the Spirit will teach us.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell has said, “Little wonder that when we partake of the sacramental bread we ask to have the Spirit always with us. Only then are we safe; otherwise, without the Spirit, we are left to ourselves. Who would ever want to solo, anyway?”<sup>20</sup>

Prayer, scripture study, and partaking of the sacrament each week will help us keep the Spirit as we work toward perfection.

The Savior is our greatest example of perfection. His total humility to the Father is what set Him apart. He said, “I do always those things [which] please [the Father]” (John 8:29). We also have great need for humility. Because humility and perfection are inseparably intertwined, if we want to understand how we can become perfect, we must be humble.



“President Spencer W. Kimball . . . achieved so much success through humility. . . . [working on it] every single day of his life. . . .

“When asked how to remain humble, [he] offered this formula:

“First, you evaluate yourself. What am I? I am the circle. I am the hole in the doughnut. I would be nothing without the Lord. My breath, my brains, my hearing, my sight, . . . my everything depends [on] the Lord. . . . That is the first step and then we pray, and pray often, and we will not get . . . [off] our knees until . . . [our] unhumbleness has dissipated, until [we] feel the humble spirit and realize, “I could die this minute if it were not for the Lord’s good grace. I am dependent upon him—totally dependent upon him.”<sup>21</sup>

I want you to know how much I love the Savior. He is our Rock and our Redeemer. Like you, I am grateful for His willingness to help us become more perfect. President Hinckley said: “Now, you are not perfect. It isn’t likely that there will be a great hole in the earth here as you are translated. You are not quite ready for that. But let us build Zion here. Let us cultivate the spirituality of the people. Let us teach faith.”<sup>22</sup>

Perfection is a process. Enjoy life. Have fun. Don’t waste too much time worrying about your mistakes. A little guilt goes a long way. In a recent fireside to the young adults of the Church, Elder M. Russell Ballard said: “Don’t waste your days of probation. . . .

“Remember, you can be exalted . . . without a college degree. You can be exalted without being slender and beautiful. You can be exalted without having a successful career. You can be exalted if you are not rich and famous. So focus the best you can on those things in life that will lead you back to the presence of God—keeping all things in their proper balance.”<sup>23</sup>

The Lord Himself has told us: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children . . . And [you] cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours” (D&C 78:17–18). In other words, dear sisters, as long as we are worthy to carry a current temple recommend and worthily partake of the sacrament each week, we will make it! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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## Notes

1 W. Jeffrey Marsh, “‘Be Ye Therefore Perfect’—Handling Obsession with Perfection,” Women’s Services and Resources Addictions Conference, Provo, Utah, 6 February 2002; available online at [www.meridianmagazine.com](http://www.meridianmagazine.com).

2 Cecil O. Samuelson, Missionary Training Center Devotional, Provo, Utah, 19 March 2002; copy in possession of author; used by permission.

3 Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, January 2001, 2–11.

4 Bruce D. Porter to Carol B. Thomas; letter in possession of the author; used by permission.

5 See, for example, Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 3.

6 Bruce R. McConkie, *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, comp. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 352.

7 McConkie, *Sermons and Writings*, 53.

8 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954–56), 2:18.

9 Samuelson, Missionary Training Center Devotional address; used by permission.

10 Robert E. Hales, conversation with author; used by permission.

11 Melvin J. Ballard, quoted in David B. Haight, “The Sacrament,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 14; also Melvin J. Ballard, *Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 133.

12 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 25.

13 Joseph B. Wirthlin, “One Step after Another,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 25.

14 Samuelson, MTC Devotional address; used by permission.

15 Marsh, “Handling Obsessions.”

16 Harold B. Lee, [vol. 3 of] Teachings of the Presidents of the Church series (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 55.

17 Mary Jane Knights, “After Divorce: Clearing the Hurdles,” Ensign, August 1985, 50.

18 Boyd K. Packer, “The Touch of the Master’s Hand,” Ensign, May 2001, 24.

19 Letter on file in the Young Women office.

20 Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 42; emphasis in original.

21 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982) 233–34, cited in Patricia T. Holland, “Becoming ‘Meek and Lowly in Heart,’” *Brigham Young University Devotional and Fireside Speeches, 1985–86* (Provo: Brigham Young University Publications, 1986), 58.

22 Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 727.

23 M. Russell Ballard, CES fireside, Brigham Young University, 3 March 2002; quoted in Sarah Jane Weaver, ““His Purposes Cannot Be Frustrated,” *Church News*, 9 March 2002.