

Our Goals and Our Weaknesses
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Sisters, it's a delight to be with you. While I am very happy and even honored to be with you this morning, I am acutely aware that most of the assignments that come to us in this Church are largely for our own growth, with the additional hope that whatever we might accomplish under the direction of our leaders would be of benefit to others as well. That certainly seems to be the case with the topic I have been asked to consider with you this morning.

I recognize also that much of what I say will be in remembrance or review rather than in teaching you new concepts, but also understanding that repetition is a great pedagogical device, I will proceed.

Two of the "one-liner" quotes from wonderful leaders of the past who are no longer with us are familiar, and have been repeated often, and I will again today. The first, from Sister Barbara Smith, is perfectly positioned as a key reminder to all of us of our strivings: "Ideals are stars to live by; they are not a stick to beat ourselves with." The second is the wonderful word picture observed by Elder Neal A. Maxwell who said that the Church is not "a well-provisioned rest home for the already perfected." Both of these statements introduce and affirm the counsel and considerations I would like to share with you.

In other words, our clear doctrinal aspiration for eternal progression and ultimate perfection must not be confused with the reality of daily living. This involves not only the external challenges and difficulties we all face, but also our current personal limitations and weaknesses that impact our abilities to deal with our lives in an optimal way. The good news is that this is the way it is supposed to be!

Our Heavenly Father did not send us into our current situations to punish us. He did send us here to gain the experiences, knowledge, and personal characteristics essential for eternal life. He also recognized the need for us to be tested and challenged and wants us to understand this essential dynamic of our personal development as well.

While perhaps understandable in the abstract, dealing with the realities surrounding our circumstances and our own limitations still is not easy when we consider what the expectations of Heaven are for us and what we would like to achieve and accomplish. Over the years, I have come to better understand and more closely relate to the feelings that Nephi expressed during the early years of his family's sojourn here in the Western Hemisphere.

After their arrival, Father Lehi in his aged condition counseled and blessed his growing posterity, and then he died. Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael were not pleased with the role of leadership that Nephi was charged by the Lord (see 1 Nephi 2:22) to assume, and there was tremendous conflict in the large family. Notwithstanding these troubles, Nephi took comfort in the scriptures and what he had learned from the ministrations of the Lord and His angels. Let me share his words. This is a very long passage but worth our careful consideration. I hope you might read it in your own leisure. I believe his lament and reconciliation were important, significant components of the less than "hundredth part" (Words of Mormon 1:5) that Mormon could include in our current text of the Book of Mormon. Therefore, we should carefully ponder the words and "liken" or apply them (1 Nephi 19:23) to ourselves. These are Nephi's feelings.

"Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.

"I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

"And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.

"My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.

"He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh.

"He hath confounded mine enemies, unto the causing of them to quake before me.

"Behold, he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the night-time.

"And by day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high; and angels came down and ministered unto me.

"And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains. And mine eyes have beheld great things, yea, even too great for man; therefore I was bidden that I should not write them.

“O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions?

“And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have placed in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?

“Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

“Do not anger again because of mine enemies. Do not slacken my strength because of mine afflictions.

“Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of my salvation.

“O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin?

“May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

“O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy.”

Nephi continues:

“O Lord, I have trusted in thee and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.

“Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee; yea, I will cry unto thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness. Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up unto thee, my rock and mine everlasting God. Amen (2 Nephi 4:17-35).

Happily, none of us finds ourselves in the exact situation or with the same difficulties as Nephi. It is sobering, however, that each of us has his or her own “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7) and sometimes multiple thorns that are more than a little prickly! Nevertheless, the expressions of Nephi are ones with which we can and should relate. Like all of us, the scriptural record suggests that Nephi came to his understanding and maturation gradually, “line upon line, precept upon precept” (Doctrine and Covenants 98:12), and it was never a completely direct or finished journey. He faced disappointments, sadness, surprises, and occasionally great joy. Likely, in our reflection on our own circumstances, we can relate to this very wide spectrum of experiences, expectations, and finally clarity that in spite of our shortcomings, we are known and loved by Heavenly Father and the Savior, who never give up on us.

Having made these observations, we must also acknowledge that our own goals or the expectations of the Father and the Son are not modest but are very stretching and even considered by some to be impossible to accomplish for real people like ourselves and those we know and love. After all, it was Jesus Himself who summarized the first part of His Sermon on the Mount with the injunction, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Gratefully, through modern revelation and prophetic insights, we are able to understand that the goal, while completely clear, has dimensions and timing that we may not fully understand. For example, the footnote to our LDS scriptures points out that this perfection should be viewed in terms of being complete, finished, or fully developed. (See footnotes to Matthew 5:48.)

In a November 1831 conference of the Church, the Prophet Joseph Smith received clarifying revelation for a group of early saints which likely describes and should enlighten most of us today as well.

“Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now, neither the ministering of angels; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected” (Doctrine and Covenants 67:13).

Some of you have already experienced the blessing of ministering angels and are acquainted with the instructions and inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but even for those so blessed, the instruction to “continue in patience” is most appropriate because as of yet, none of us is fully perfected.

The scriptures have dealt with the ideas and notions of perfection in various ways. Most deal with the ideal of eventual perfection through living the gospel and experiencing the blessings of the Savior’s Atonement. In addition, references are made to certain stalwarts and prophets as being perfect. General Moroni is described as “a man of perfect understanding” (Alma 48:11). Adam, Seth (Doctrine and Covenants 107:43), Noah (Moses 8:27) and even Job (Job 1:1) are described in various ways as being perfect men in their own times and places. While we understand that the Savior Jesus Christ is the only mortal ever born who was completely without sin or blemish, others, including ourselves, can rightly aspire and become perfect in at least some things.

Because the law of tithing, for example, is clear and the standard is well understood, all of us can be perfect in living this commandment. It may not be easy and requires sacrifice and often adjustment in our attitudes and priorities, but it is possible, as many of you have personally experienced. The Word of Wisdom, fulfilling certain assignments and the like are areas where it

is reasonable for us to expect achieving perfection even while we continue to struggle with what Jesus described as the “weightier matters of the law” (Matthew 23:23). However, and this is a critical point, we must also acknowledge that for various reasons it is not at all likely we will achieve full and actual perfection in every area of our lives, no matter how long we live in mortality. Thank goodness for the Atonement of Jesus Christ that provides the rescue we all will need and welcome to reach our eventual goals.

It is part of the human condition and Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation for us to be required to make decisions constantly. Many of them are not obviously easy, especially at the outset. Most of our choices, in fact, are not between absolutely “rights” and “wrongs,” but between various shades of options that have multiple positive and negative components and implications. What should we make of all of this? Should we just give up? Should we just acknowledge our imperfections and “go with the flow,” as so many in society seem to be doing? The answer to each of these queries is obviously no, but then what are we to do?

The answer is deceptively simple and you know it: we must do the best we can and then depend upon the Lord to help us make up the difference. While this statement is intellectually and even spiritually acceptable, for many of us it creates some practical problems or issues. Let me raise one that perhaps does not receive adequate attention. We often discuss the challenge of dealing with those who have low expectations for themselves, who seem to strive to just get by or are casual in keeping their commitments and covenants. These are real problems and deserve attention and consideration. I am not an advocate for mediocrity, nor do I think our Heavenly Father and the Savior are happy when they see us as satisfied with less than our best efforts.

The matter I do wish to raise is what mental health professionals describe as “perfectionism.” In most ways, perfectionism is the opposite of carelessness, casualness, or any form of low expectations. In fact, it is a condition where anything less than perfect is unacceptable to the person so disposed. For those so oriented or afflicted, life is mostly miserable because people and the world are usually imperfect, even in the face of being largely good.

One of the tragedies of perfectionism is that those so oriented are often among the most accomplished and talented among us. Frequently they were precocious children, superior students, and model young adults who have done everything asked of them very well and yet sadly are not satisfied because they have developed unrealistic and even extreme views of what is expected or even required of them. Some become obsessed with their every thought, behavior, action, or perceived mistake, and so make their lives miserable and distressing for those who love them and wish to help them.

A characteristic of those trying to deal with perfectionism is common to all people. That is, self-perceptions frequently differ from those of others. Many of the casually focused folk mentioned before seem to feel whatever they do or do not do is just fine. Those suffering from perfectionism tend to be wonderful, contributing, and effective people, and yet may feel that no matter what they do, it is never enough. Although very good people, they often suffer from exaggerating their minor errors or mistakes, weaknesses, shortcomings, or perceived failures to the

point that they are not only miserable but may become dysfunctional and unable to cope with the activities of daily living.

One of the unintended consequences of our efforts to help or challenge those whose standards for themselves may be too low is that it is possible to exacerbate the distress of those suffering from perfectionism. When they hear or observe the admonitions given to those who need the encouragement to do better, they often feel they are the intended audience. They are not!

Those dealing with perfectionism need encouragement to be realistic and to find joy in their earnest but imperfect efforts. In our desires to encourage and motivate, we must understand that people are unique, and one size never fits all.

For many dealing with perfectionism issues, there may be sincere confusion about the relationship between the notions of worthiness on one hand and perfection on the other. These are not synonyms! One does not need to be perfect in every dimension to be worthy of a temple recommend, for example. All of us, including the best among us and those we hold up as wonderful models and examples, are “works in process.” Even when we are fully worthy, we can still improve. We must strive to be completely worthy now but must be realistically patient in recognizing that full perfection in every dimension of our lives and aspirations is yet to come for every one of us.

The scriptures describe the straight and narrow path. (See 2 Nephi 31:9.) This should help us remember that we are on a journey and the correctness of our direction is most fundamental, wherever we find ourselves positioned on the road of life today. While we must not disregard the Savior’s expectations for us or the standards of the commandments, we also must not dishonor them by establishing requirements or obligations that reach “beyond the mark,” as Jacob described (Jacob 4:14). Just as Jesus demonstrated approval of the early progress of newly repentant imperfect sinners (see John 8:3-11), we need to be sure we find satisfaction in the progress of tiny positive steps while acknowledging that perfection may still be quite distant.

As I have discussed this topic on other occasions, I have tried to be clear that we should not be against humility, modesty, or honest recognition of our shortcomings. These are cardinal and important virtues. Jesus taught that we should be meek but He never suggested we should be masochistic. The problem with becoming obsessed with our deficiencies and weaknesses is that of the necessity we neglect virtually everything else. Our lives lose balance and our quest toward eventual perfection is thwarted. We must never let the bad or the imperfect overwhelm the good we do and the places where we are on track.

The Lord has a pattern of success for us, and it is that we follow Him with devotion and also with understanding. Think of this inspiring counsel and promise:

“And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

While we need to recognize our weaknesses, we must not glory in them, magnify them or find excuse for less than our best because of them. And for some of our challenges, including perfectionism, we may need to get early help from both priesthood leaders and skilled professionals.

King Benjamin, in his great benedictory address (see Mosiah 2-4), was clear and direct in his high expectations for his people and in his explanations of the requirements of the Lord to achieve the full benefits of the Atonement. Recognizing this relationship, we must also gratefully appreciate the concluding comments of this very wise and loyal servant of the Lord:

“And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

Likewise, the Prophet Joseph Smith was not perfect by his own admission, but may have had some perfectionist tendencies in his absolute desire and commitment to fulfill his prophetic calling with excellence.

You will recall the sad saga that occurred in the summer of 1828. One hundred sixteen pages of the early translation of the manuscript of the book of Lehi had been lost by Martin Harris, and the Lord severely chastised Joseph for this lapse in care and judgment. In fact, the gift of translation was temporarily removed from him. After very serious repentance, the gift and the charge to translate the Book of Mormon were restored, and Joseph was extremely anxious to move forward. Now, in this context, listen to the Lord’s counsel:

“Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength and means . . . but be diligent unto the end” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:4).

We can and must always be diligent, but we also must be realistic about our strength and our resources. I also take comfort and find instructive insight in the words of the Lord when He was teaching the saints of this hemisphere shortly after His resurrection. In speaking to the people, He described them as “weak” (see 3 Nephi 17:2) and yet he also said to them, “I see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you” (3 Nephi 17:8). He didn’t say, “Because you are weak, you cannot be healed.” He also did not say that their faith was perfect so that they could be healed. He described their faith as “sufficient” and such faith is attainable by all of us. The scripture then goes on to offer this description of the Savior’s actions.

“And it came to pass that when he had thus spoken, all the multitude, with one accord, did go forth with their sick and their afflicted, and their lame, and with their blind, and with their dumb, and with all them that were afflicted *in any manner*; and he did heal them every one as they were brought forth unto him” (3 Nephi 17:9, emphasis added).

Jesus healed all of them without restriction to their condition or their difficulty, and the same blessings can be available to us. We need to recognize that the timing and the manner will be in

the Lord's way and not dictated by our wishes. Our sufficient faith appears to be an important prerequisite that everyone can achieve.

Thus, I return to where we began. We must have ideals to guide us and lead us but not to distract or punish ourselves. Likewise, the Savior's Church which we represent is not a repository of perfect people but His organization is designed to help us along the road to continuous improvement and qualification for every blessing possible, including eventual perfection, through the perfect Atonement of Jesus Christ and the perfect graciousness of our loving Heavenly Father.

That we all might be wise, thoughtful, careful, patient, and realistic in all that we do and try to do as we struggle with the challenges of life is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.