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BECOMING

Perfect in Christ

We sing with our children, “I feel my Savior’s love, the love he freely gives me.”¹

His atoning love, freely given, is as “milk and honey, without money and without price” (2 Nephi 26:25). Infinite and eternal (see Alma 34:10), the Atonement invites us to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32).

Understanding the Savior’s freely given atoning love can free us from self-imposed, incorrect, and unrealistic expectations of what perfection is. Such understanding allows us to let go of fears that we are imperfect—fears that we make mistakes, fears that we are not good enough, fears that we are a failure compared to others, fears that we are not doing enough to merit His love.

The Savior’s freely given atoning love helps us become more forgiving and less judgmental of others and of

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ourselves. This love heals our relationships and gives us opportunities to love, understand, and serve as our Savior would.

His atoning love changes our concept of perfection. We can put our trust in Him, diligently keep His commandments, and continue in the faith (see Mosiah 4:6)—even as we also feel greater humility, gratitude, and dependence on His merits, mercy, and grace (see 2 Nephi 2:8).

In a broader sense, coming unto Christ and being perfected in Him

places perfection within the eternal journey of our spirit and body—in essence, the eternal journey of our soul (see D&C 88:15). Becoming perfect results from our journey through physical life, death, and resurrection, when all things are restored “to their proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:23). It includes the process of spiritual birth, which brings “a mighty change” to our hearts and dispositions (Mosiah 5:2). It reflects our lifelong refinement through Christlike service and obedience to the Savior’s commandments and our covenants. And it recognizes the perfecting relationship between the living and the dead (see D&C 128:18).

The word *perfection*, however, is sometimes misunderstood to mean never making a mistake. Perhaps you or someone you know is trying hard to be perfect in this way. Because such perfection always seems out of reach, even our best efforts can leave



us anxious, discouraged, or exhausted. We unsuccessfully try to control our circumstances and the people around us. We fret over weaknesses and mistakes. In fact, the harder we try, the further we may feel from the perfection we seek.

In what follows, I seek to deepen our appreciation for the doctrine of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and for the love and mercy the Savior freely gives us. I invite you to apply your understanding of the doctrine of the Atonement to help yourself and others, including missionaries, students, young single adults, fathers, mothers, single heads of households, and others who may feel pressure to find perfection or to be perfect.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Prepared from the foundation of the world (see Mosiah 4:6–7), our Savior’s Atonement allows us to learn, repent, and grow by our own experiences and choices.

In this mortal probation, both gradual “line upon line” (D&C 98:12) spiritual growth and transformative “mighty change” of heart (Alma 5:12, 13; Mosiah 5:2) spiritual experiences help us come unto Christ and be perfected in Him. The familiar term “endure to the end” reminds us that eternal growth often involves both time and process.

In the concluding chapter of the Book of Mormon, the great prophet



Moroni teaches us how to come unto and be perfected in Christ. We “deny [our]selves of all ungodliness.” We “love God with all [our] might, mind and strength.” Then His grace is sufficient for us, “that by his grace [we] may be perfect in Christ.” If we “deny not” the power of God, we can be “sanctified in Christ by the grace of God,” which “is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of [our] sins,” that we can “become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:32, 33).

Ultimately, it is the Savior’s “great and last sacrifice” that brings about “mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance” (Alma 34:14, 15). Indeed, our “faith unto repentance” is essential for us to come unto Christ, be perfected in Him, and enjoy the blessings of “the

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great and eternal plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16).

Fully accepting our Savior’s Atonement can increase our faith and give us courage to let go of constraining expectations that we are somehow required to be or to make things perfect. Black-and-white thinking says everything is either absolutely perfect or hopelessly flawed. But we can gratefully accept, as God’s sons and daughters, that we are His greatest handiwork (see Psalm 8:3–6; Hebrews 2:7), even though we are still a work in progress.

As we understand our Savior’s freely given atoning love, we cease fearing that He may be a harsh, faultfinding judge. Instead, we feel assurance, “for God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17). And we understand that time and process are needed for growth (see Moses 7:21).

Our Perfect Example

Only our Savior lived a perfect life, and even He learned and grew in mortal experience. Indeed, “he received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13).

He learned through mortal experience to “take upon him [our] infirmities . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12). He did not succumb to temptations, sins, or daily

pressures, but He descended below all of mortality’s trials and challenges (see D&C 122:8).

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior commands us: “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48). The Greek word for *perfect* can be translated as “complete, finished, fully developed” (in Matthew 5:48, footnote b). Our Savior asks us to become complete, finished, fully developed—to be perfected in the virtues and attributes He and our Father in Heaven exemplify.²

Let us see how applying the doctrine of the Atonement may help those who feel they need to find perfection or to be perfect.

Perfectionism

A misunderstanding of what it means to be perfect can result in *perfectionism*—an attitude or behavior that takes an admirable desire to be good and turns it into an unrealistic expectation to be perfect *now*. Perfectionism sometimes arises from the feeling that only those who are perfect deserve to be loved or that we do not deserve to be happy unless we are perfect.

Perfectionism can cause sleeplessness, anxiety, procrastination, discouragement, self-justification, and depression. These feelings can crowd out the peace, joy, and assurance our Savior wants us to have.

Missionaries who want to be perfect now may become anxious or

discouraged if learning their mission language, seeing people baptized, or receiving mission leadership assignments do not happen fast enough. For capable young people accustomed to accomplishment, a mission may be life’s first great challenge. But missionaries can be exactly obedient without being perfect. They can measure their success primarily by their commitment to help individuals and families “become faithful members of the Church who enjoy the presence of the Holy Ghost.”³

Students beginning a new school year, especially those leaving home for college, face both excitement and concerns. Student scholars, athletes, artists, and so forth go from being a “big fish in a little pond” to feeling like a minnow in an ocean with unfamiliar tides and swift, unpredictable currents. It is easy for students with perfectionist tendencies to feel that, no matter how hard they try, they have failed if they are not first in all things.

Given life’s demands, students can learn that it is sometimes perfectly fine to do all they can and that it is not always possible to be the very best.

We also impose expectations of perfection in our own homes. A father or mother may feel compelled to be the perfect spouse, parent, homemaker, breadwinner, or part of a perfect Latter-day Saint family—now.

What helps those who battle perfectionist tendencies? Open-ended, supportive inquiries communicate

acceptance and love. They invite others to focus on the positive. They allow us to define what we feel is going well. Family and friends can avoid competitive comparisons and instead offer sincere encouragement.

Another serious dimension of perfectionism is to hold others to our unrealistic, judgmental, or unforgiving standards. Such behavior may, in fact, deny or limit the blessings of the Savior's Atonement in our lives and in the lives of others. For example, young single adults may make a list of desired qualities in a potential spouse and yet be unable to marry because of unrealistic expectations for the perfect companion.

Thus, a sister may be unwilling to consider dating a wonderful, worthy brother who falls short on her perfectionist scale—he does not dance well, is not planning to be wealthy, did not serve a mission, or admits to a past problem with pornography since resolved through repentance and counseling.

Similarly, a brother may not consider dating a wonderful, worthy sister who doesn't fit his unrealistic profile—she is not a sports enthusiast, a Relief Society president, a beauty queen, a sophisticated budgeter, or she admits to an earlier, now-resolved weakness with the Word of Wisdom.

Of course, we should consider qualities we desire in ourselves and in a potential spouse. We should

maintain our highest hopes and standards. But if we are humble, we will be surprised by goodness in unexpected places, and we may create opportunities to grow closer to someone who, like us, is not perfect.

Faith acknowledges that, through repentance and the power of the Atonement, weakness can be made strong and repented sins can truly be forgiven.

Happy marriages are not the result of two perfect people saying vows. Rather, devotion and love grow as two imperfect people build, bless, help, encourage, and forgive along the way. The wife of a modern prophet was once asked what it was like being married to a prophet. She wisely replied that she had not married a prophet; she had simply married a man who was completely dedicated to the Church no matter what calling he received.⁴ In other words, in process of time, husbands and wives grow together—individually and as a couple.

The wait for a perfect spouse, perfect education, perfect job, or perfect house will be long and lonely. We are wise to follow the Spirit in life's important decisions and not let doubts spawned by perfectionist demands hinder our progress.

For those who may feel chronically burdened or anxious, sincerely ask yourself, "Do I define *perfection* and *success* by the doctrines of the Savior's atoning love or by the world's

standards? Do I measure *success* or *failure* by the Holy Ghost confirming my righteous desires or by some worldly standard?"

For those who feel physically or emotionally exhausted, start getting regular sleep and rest, and make time to eat and relax. Recognize that being busy is not the same as being worthy, and being worthy does not require perfection.⁵

For those prone to see their own weaknesses or shortcomings, celebrate with gratitude the things you do well, however large or small.

For those who fear failure and who procrastinate, sometimes by over-preparing, be assured and encouraged that there is no need to withdraw from challenging activities that may bring great growth!

Where needed and appropriate, seek spiritual counsel or competent medical attention to help you relax, develop positive ways to think and structure your life, reduce self-defeating behaviors, and experience and express more gratitude.⁶

Impatience impedes faith. Faith and patience will help missionaries understand a new language or culture, students to master new subjects, and young single adults to begin building relationships rather than waiting for everything to be perfect. Faith and patience will also help those waiting for temple sealing clearances or restoration of priesthood blessings.



For those prone to see their own weaknesses or shortcomings, celebrate with gratitude the things you do well, however large or small.

As we act and are not acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:14), we can navigate between complementary virtues and achieve much of life's growth. These can appear in "an opposition," being "a compound in one" (2 Nephi 2:11).

For example, we can cease to be idle (see D&C 88:124) without running faster than we have strength (see Mosiah 4:27).

We can be "anxiously engaged in a good cause" (D&C 58:27) while also periodically pausing to "be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10; see also D&C 101:16).

We can find our lives by losing our lives for the Savior's sake (see Matthew 10:39; 16:25).

We can be "not weary in well-doing" (D&C 64:33; see also Galatians 6:9) while taking appropriate time to refresh spiritually and physically.

We can be lighthearted without being light-minded.

We can laugh heartily with but not haughtily at.

Our Savior and His Atonement invite us to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him." As we do so, He promises that His grace is "sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ" (Moroni 10:32).

For those burdened by cares to find perfection or to be perfect now, our Savior's freely given atoning love assures us:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

". . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28, 30).⁷ ■

NOTES

1. "I Feel My Savior's Love," *Children's Songbook*, 75.
2. See also Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 86–88.
3. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 10.
4. See Lavina Fielding, "Camilla Kimball: Lady of Constant Learning," *Ensign*, Oct. 1975, 62.
5. See, for example, Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Four Titles," *Ensign*, May 2013, 58–61. President Uchtdorf also cautions, "Some might even think that their self-worth depends on the length of their to-do list" ("Of Things That Matter Most," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 20).
6. This insight comes from Carlos F. and Alane Kae Watkins, mental health advisers in the Asia Area, assigned in Hong Kong. Other insights for this article came from Susan Gong, Larry Y. and Lynda Wilson, Randy D. and Andrea Funk, Janet S. Scharman, and missionaries in the Indonesia Jakarta Mission.
7. See also Cecil O. Samuelson, "What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?" *New Era*, Jan. 2006, 10–13; Janet S. Scharman, "Seeking Perfection without Being a Perfectionist," in *Virtue and the Abundant Life: Talks from the BYU Religious Education and Wheatley Institution Symposium*, ed. Lloyd D. Newell and others (2012), 280–302.