

# Perfectionism

A TOXIC GAME  
OF  
"SPOT-THE-  
DIFFERENCE"

There are times when we all feel we don't measure up. But we need to make sure we're measuring ourselves correctly.



By Nathan Read

When I was younger, I enjoyed playing “Spot-the-Difference” in our local newspaper. Two almost identical images, side by side, presented a challenge to find the minor differences between the pictures. If you focused close enough to the individual elements of the image, you could successfully find most, if not all, the differences. The purpose of this activity was not to appreciate the images nor to complete the second picture; the purpose was to identify every imperfection in the incomplete copy of the first picture.

A common challenge for young adults is the feeling that we fail to measure up to the standard that we envision we should be at. Increasingly, we compare ourselves to each other and see one person beginning a successful career, another who achieves perfect grades in their studies, another with a larger circle of friends, and another whom we perceive as kinder, wiser, more generous and gracious than us. And they’re probably younger than us too! It is certainly easy to play “Spot-the-Difference” between ourselves and the people around us and invariably we are able to produce a long list of reasons that other people are “better” than we are.

This way of thinking is particularly dangerous if we believe our self-worth is determined by our achievements, our attributes, or our accumulation of worldly wealth. Furthermore, our game of “Spot-the-Difference” rarely identifies the strengths and Christlike qualities we have developed in our lives and

omits the fundamental truth that we all have the potential to be perfect like Christ . . . one day. When the Savior pronounced, “Be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48), I believe He sought to raise our vision and give us hope—after all, His invitations are both a call to repentance and an expression of His confidence in us that we can achieve what He asks us to do. The great challenge for us is to rise above the tendencies of the natural man to be jealous, resentful, despairing, and doubting, and to choose humility, repentance, faith, and hope.

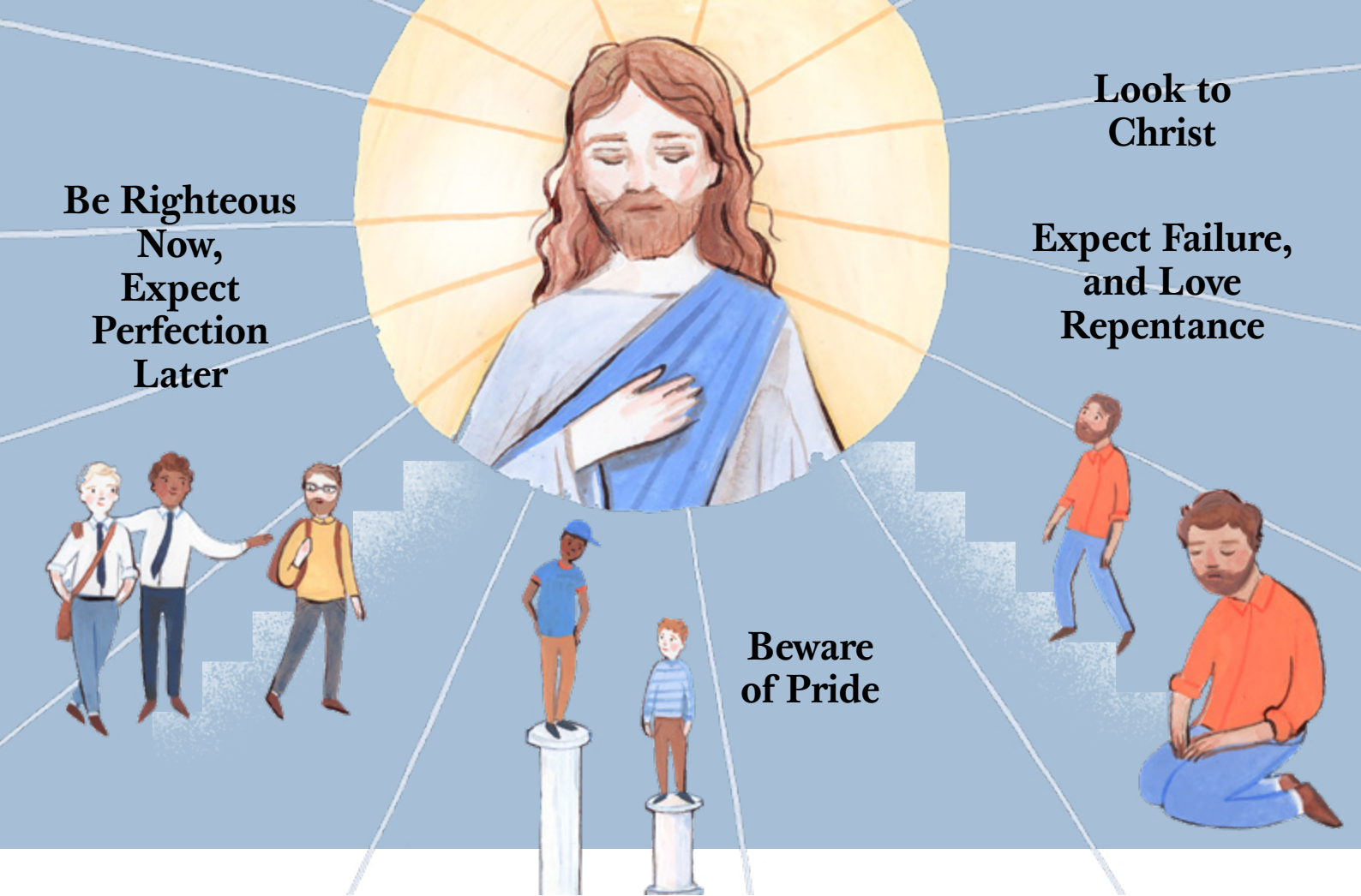
### Righteous Now, Perfect Later

Part of overcoming the negative “perfectionism” peddled by the adversary is understanding what perfection really is. In a talk by President Russell M. Nelson on the topic of perfection, he explained that the original Greek word for *perfect* in Matthew 5:48 means “complete.”<sup>1</sup> None of us will be “complete” in this mortal life; completeness will come in the eternities.

When we find perfection overwhelming, we can take steps along the path to perfection: for example, as we pay a full tithe,







**Be Righteous  
Now,  
Expect  
Perfection  
Later**

**Look to  
Christ**

**Expect Failure,  
and Love  
Repentance**

**Beware  
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we can keep the commandment of tithing *completely*. As we pray daily, we may find we are *perfect* at choosing to pray each day. Each step on the path to perfection (also known as the covenant path) is designed to bring us joy. Regular personal inventories will reaffirm to us that we are progressing and that our Father is pleased with the spiritual momentum of our life.

Righteousness and perfection are not synonymous. While perfection is an outcome, righteousness is a pattern of faith and repentance which we choose every day. If perfection is a destination, then our covenants are our passport and righteousness is the steps on the journey. If this is our perspective on perfection, we can hope in good things

to come as we patiently and persistently develop righteous patterns.

### **Expect Failure, Love Repentance**

Recently, I have reflected on a statement by Elder Lynn G. Robbins of the Seventy: “Repentance isn’t [God’s] backup plan in the event that we might fail. Repentance *is* His plan, knowing that we will.”<sup>2</sup> This life is a probationary period given to us to prepare for eternity. Repentance prepares us by changing the way we see ourselves and brings us closer to God and to the Savior. We should expect to fail or make mistakes, probably daily; that shouldn’t be unexpected, nor should it lead us to despair. In fact, we should be happy when we recognize

our shortcomings or mistakes as we have the opportunity to partner with Christ in changing our weaknesses into strengths.

So, while perfection is the goal, the path we take involves repenting and moving forward every day with a smile on our face and gratitude in our hearts.

### **Look to Christ**

It was Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who said, “What we insistently desire, over time, is what we will eventually become and what we will receive in eternity.”<sup>3</sup> Our daily choices determine who we become. If our heartfelt desire is to become like



the Savior and our motivation is love for Him, our choices will reflect that desire and we will change.

When we hit roadblocks, when we make mistakes, and when we fall to temptation, we can respond by looking away from Christ, or we can look to Christ with faith, hope, patience, a broken heart, and a contrite spirit. The solution or answer to our difficult circumstances is always found in Christ and His gospel. As we look to Christ, He will teach us and transform us.

Many of life's challenges fall into two categories: those we will overcome in this life and those we will overcome in the next, perhaps a disability, depression and anxiety, or a constant temptation. Christ has the power to make us

whole. He has the power to transform us. As we choose humility, we accept the Lord's timing and His will and if we actively seek for His help and guidance, we find strength, divine encouragement, and peace.

### **Beware of Pride**

The adversary never offers good solutions to our challenges. When we discover our failures and weaknesses, he encourages us to hide them from others because we want to appear as flawless as possible. This is a form of pride. Christ always offers good solutions to our challenges, however, that does not make His solutions easy. For example, the Lord invites us to trust Him as we share the gospel while Satan tells us that we shouldn't share the gospel because we are not eloquent. But the Lord promises that He will give us what to say "in the very moment" (Doctrine and Covenants 100:6). Indeed, the adversary feeds our doubts while the Lord feeds our faith.

Rather than occupying ourselves with playing "Spot-the-Difference" and "Hide-the-Weakness," Christ would have us look to Him and engage in "Change-the-Weakness." Pride is fundamentally competitive; however, life was never designed as a competition. As we choose Christ as our exemplar, friend, and supporter, we can put away our damaging comparisons and find peace on the path to perfection.

Remember, in life we all face the challenge of imperfection and its attendant weaknesses. If we see others struggling, we can be a positive force lifting them higher. If we see others succeeding, we can offer genuine praise. But at no point will we benefit from trying to determine whether our righteousness or success compares favorably or otherwise with another person. Others may not see our value, but God does: to Him we are of infinite worth. We will always be His children. He loves us unconditionally, and He is pleased with our righteous efforts to become like Him.

Jesus Christ is not an absent spectator of our lives. He is present, aware, and working to save us and lead us back to a celestial home. It's in His strength that we can do all things and through Him that nothing is impossible. In this life defined by imperfection, the Lord is our hope and exemplar and will not judge us by comparing us to our brothers and sisters. He sees our heart and will put the wind in our sails on our ongoing journey to completeness. Let us act in faith, repenting and looking to Christ with hope in His promise that ultimately, we can "be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32). ■

*The author lives in Tasmania, Australia.*

### **NOTES**

1. See Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 86.
2. Lynn G. Robbins, "Until Seventy Times Seven," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 22.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, "According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts," *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 21.