

INFINITE CONTINGENCIES

INSIGHTS ON
LATTER-DAY SAINT
DOCTRINE & PRACTICE



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Paperback ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-4954-4

eBook ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-4955-1

Published by CFI, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.

2373 W. 700 S., Suite 100, Springville, UT 84663

Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

Library of Congress Cataloging Number: 2025938887

Cover design by Shawnda Craig

Cover design © 2025 Cedar Fort, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

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The Problem of Perfection

Perhaps one of the most intimidating and even discouraging scriptures in the standard works is Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” It is stated directly and unequivocally, and it came twice directly from the Savior’s mouth (see also 3 Nephi 12:48). The verse offers no sense of evolving toward eventual perfection, making a noble effort to live as perfectly as we can, or setting perfection as a long-term goal. It is a simple, clear command without qualifications or modifiers.

This is not the only place in the scriptures where the Lord has issued this charge. When making his covenant with Jehovah, Abraham was commanded to “walk before [the Lord], and be . . . perfect” (Genesis 17:1). In Deuteronomy the Lord commanded the children of Israel, “Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God” (18:13). In Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians, he charged the Saints to simply “be perfect” (13:11).

These scriptures are further buttressed by more specific iterations of the same concept. Doctrine and Covenants 1:31 tells us that “the Lord cannot look upon sin [imperfection] with the least degree of allowance.” Alma 45:16 says the same thing. Nephi tells us that no unclean thing can dwell with God (1 Nephi 10:21), and Paul declares that there are none perfect, for every person falls “short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Commentaries and instructors have often attempted to lessen the severity of Matthew 5:48 by fleshing it out with reasonable explanations: perfection is a process, perfection is our goal, perfect effort, eventual perfection, etc.¹ The problem, however, is that these rationales do not seem to enjoy overwhelming scriptural support, but rather are attempts to ameliorate the seemingly impossible commandment.

Perhaps the most common approach to this scripture is to encourage believers to attempt perfection in the small things, then build on a foundation of mastery. At various times over the years, believers have been encouraged to pursue perfection in paying tithes and offerings, observing the Word of Wisdom, keeping the Sabbath holy, attending to daily prayers and scripture study, and so on.²

While certainly worthy goals, in practice these pursuits immediately become problematic when perfection is inserted into the equation. What is a perfect tithe, for example? Gross income is typically a good guide, but should we pay on birthday gifts in cash? Scholarships? Grant stipends? Earned income tax credits? Gift cards? Gifts or donations in kind? Labor swaps? The list of questions continues unabated.

There have also been long-standing debates among the Church members regarding things like Sabbath observance and the Word of Wisdom: No television on Sunday? Remain in church clothes? Only Tabernacle Choir for music? No traveling or vacations on Sunday? How much caffeine? None? Soda, but no Coke? Coke, but no energy drinks? Energy drinks, but no coffee? Is tiramisu all right? Coffee-flavored candy? How much meat is sparing? And on and on it goes.

When struggling through these exercises, the futility of it all becomes immediately apparent. In order to live any law perfectly, we would have to establish absolute guidelines wholly derived from personal interpretation rather than from actual scriptural text—and live them exactly.

The Jewish religious establishment during the time of Christ reached the apex of this approach. Pharisaical interpretations of the law resulted in an exact number of allowable steps on the Sabbath, strictly prescribed prayers and fasts, and the use of ritual clothing.

Jesus repeatedly chastised the Pharisees' hollow reliance on the law and condemned their non-scriptural interpretations of it, which excluded the "weightier matters" of "judgment, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Paul later affirmed this teaching in his letter to the Hebrews, declaring "the law made nothing perfect" (Hebrews 7:19). Lehi similarly taught that "by the law no flesh is justified" (2 Nephi 2:5).

Perhaps more worrisome than futility is that a fixation on perfection may spiral into anxiety, fatigue, or disillusionment with the gospel. As scholar Allen Rau argues, "Perfectionist strivings can become maladaptive and lead to a host of debilitating mental health problems . . . [creating] a cadre of conscientious but despondent Latter-day Saints."³

The dual obsessions of uncovering the minutia of each law, then perfectly adhering to its precepts, are an inevitable formula for feelings of inadequacy. The sheer mental and spiritual energy required to maintain such a constant pursuit might make the gospel a burden rather than a joy, and render void the promises of peace and happiness. Hence, attempts to achieve perfection through strict adherence to the law, however small or well-intentioned, are ironically counterproductive to our overall pursuit of salvation.

Yet despite these difficulties, the problem remains. The scriptures clearly tell us that adherence to the law cannot bring perfection due to the fallibility of human beings. At the same time, the standard works are replete with commandments to fully obey God's laws (Joshua 1:8; Isaiah 42:21; 1 John 3:4; Doctrine and Covenants 41:5; 42:2; 88:35; and many more). Like Jesus's commandment to be perfect, these directives are not mediated or qualified with appeals to try our best, engage in a process, or set obedience as a goal. They are direct and unequivocal. Since God is a perfect being, the "law of the Lord is [also] perfect" (Psalm 19:7). This presents a paradox.

The answer to this problem lies in Moroni 10:32. In his final words to readers, Moroni encourages each of us to "come unto Christ, and be *perfected* in him . . . that by his grace ye may be *perfect* in Christ" (emphasis added). Moroni also includes a charge to deny "all ungodliness," so the route to perfection is clear.

Paul similarly encouraged the Colossians to preach and warn so that all the Saints might be presented as "perfect in Christ Jesus" (Colossians 1:28). And in Joseph Smith's incredible 1832 vision of the degrees of glory, we learn that those who are able to abide the celestial sphere are ultimately those "just" persons who were "made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect Atonement through the shedding of his own blood" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:69). In other words, the only way to perfection is through repentance and the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

We have to realize that we will never be perfect in paying our tithing, observing the Sabbath, keeping the law of chastity,⁴ attending to prayers, or anything else. No matter how hard we try, no matter how committed or determined we are, we will inevitably "come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As King Benjamin explained, "I say, if

ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21).

When the scriptures record that Noah and Job were “perfect” men (Genesis 6:9; Job 1:1), that does not mean that they lived the commandments perfectly or that they even knew how to do such a thing, for that matter. It means that they were penitent men, “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19).

Each week, members of the Church partake of the sacrament as a renewal of a cleansing ordinance. Again and again we covenant to keep God’s commandments with a full knowledge that we will fail to do so. Are we therefore hypocrites when we take the sacrament? Covenant breakers? Liars? Of course not. We are mortals, engaged in a mortal journey through an imperfect world with imperfect knowledge in imperfect bodies, trying our best while constantly making imperfect decisions. Hence, the sacramental ordinance is made continually available because we are continually imperfect. If we approach the sacrament with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, in a true attitude of repentance, then in the moment we partake, we are again made perfect through the atoning blood of Christ, just as we were in that moment when our sins were washed away through baptism.

We don’t have to be perfect; we need to be perfected. We must yoke ourselves to Christ, cast our burdens upon Him, humble ourselves, and recognize the arrogance and futility of attempting perfection through our own efforts. To do any less is to deny the salvation of God. As Paul beautifully stated to the Galatians, “I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Galatians 2:21).

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