

Insights on Church Leadership

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Chapter 6

The Nature of Perfection

Most of us may immediately recall the Lord's commandment: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."¹ We usually interpret this passage of scripture as being a commandment to "do everything right", and I believe that God does not make any mistakes at all; He is perfect in an absolute sense, possessing in fullness all virtues, all knowledge, and all power.

However, since while in this mortal and imperfect stage of existence we do make mistakes, this interpretation may lead us to conclude--erroneously--that the Lord gave us a commandment impossible to be fulfilled while in mortality. In fact, occasionally we may find a few individuals teaching that nobody will ever be perfect on this earth, no matter how hard they try.

Earlier in our discussion² I proposed the idea that "failure" is a subjective concept; that one specific action considered as a failing performance when made by one person, can be considered a major accomplishment when made by another person. In fact, in the Church of Christ it doesn't matter what degree of perfection we have while performing our acts of service; if we employ our best efforts according to the level of knowledge we possess at that point in time, and if our intentions are centered on giving glory to God, our service (or offering) will be accepted by the Lord as perfect.

President Lorenzo Snow taught that European converts who emigrated in the early days of the Church to join the main body of the Saints in the United States were, during their journey across the ocean, perfect:

"... they were as perfect as men could be under the circumstances, and in the sphere in which they were acting; not that they were perfect in knowledge or power, etc., but in their feelings, in their integrity, motives, and determination. And while they were crossing the great deep, providing they did not murmur nor complain, but obeyed the counsels which were given them, and in every way comported themselves in a becoming manner, they were as perfect as God required them to be."³

¹ Matthew 5:48. Notice that in 3 Nephi 12:48, the Lord Jesus Christ, now as a resurrected being, declares that he is also perfect and a model to be emulated.

² See chapter 4 for a discussion on forgiveness.

³ Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, p.32. April 7, 1879.

Perfection Accomplished in Mortality

According to President Brigham Young, there is a better interpretation for the scripture "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect", and this improved interpretation bring us to the conclusion that to become perfect while in this world is an attainable goal:

"It may appear strange to some of you, and it certainly does to the world, to say it is possible for a man or woman to become perfect on this earth. ... If the ... passage ... is not worded to our understanding, we can alter the phraseology of the sentence, and say, "Be ye as perfect as ye can," for that is all we can do, though it is written, be ye perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. He cannot be any more perfect than he knows how, any more than we. When we are doing as well as we know how in the sphere and station which we occupy here, we are justified in the justice, righteousness, mercy, and judgment that go before the Lord of heaven and earth. We are as justified as the angels who are before the throne of God. The sin that will cleave to all the posterity of Adam and Eve is, that they have not done as well as they knew how."⁴

The current canon of scriptures indicates that a few men were considered perfect: Seth⁵, Noah⁶, and Job⁷. It becomes then reasonable to assume that they did the best according to the knowledge available to them, even though they might have made a few mistakes. President Lorenzo Snow taught that we should not get discouraged because our own mistakes:

"A person may be perfect in regard to some things and not others. ... if we could read in detail the life of Abraham, or the lives of other great and holy men, we would doubtless find that their efforts to be righteous were not always crowned with success. Hence we should not be discouraged if we should be overcome in a weak moment; but, on the contrary, straightway repent of the error or the wrong we may have committed, and as far as possible repair it, and then seek to God for renewed strength to go on and do better."⁸

Stages of Perfection

One practical application of this knowledge suggests that we must be sensitive to different degrees of knowledge and different strengths of testimony. Thus, when evaluating each individual performance in the kingdom, we must take into consideration these differences, understanding that one particular task may be performed in different levels of quality by different persons, and both may have achieved excellence, depending on the level of knowledge and skills they had when they performed the task.

One simple but still common example: many of us may avoid participating in church choirs in the fear that our "extraordinary" voices may ruin the choirs' harmony. That's understandable. However, when we consider our participation in the choir as an offering to the Lord by singing praises to his name, then even our singing out of tune will be well received by the Lord, because when he promised a blessing in response to our "song of the heart"⁹ he didn't stipulate that only those who could sing in tune would receive

⁴ Discourses of Brigham Young, p.89. December 18, 1853.

⁵ D&C 107:43

⁶ Genesis 6:9; Moses 8:27

⁷ Job 1:1,8

⁸ Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, p.33

⁹ D&C 25:12

it. Likewise, if we are presiding or conducting a choir, we should not refuse participation to those who do not sing well¹⁰.

Does that sound too simple? Let us then consider these questions: which would be more praiseworthy--an average Sunday lesson¹¹ arduously prepared and presented by a semi-illiterate person, or an average Sunday lesson easily (and perhaps negligibly) prepared and presented by a college graduate? An average lesson arduously prepared and presented by a recent convert who happens to have a college degree or an average lesson easily (and perhaps negligibly) prepared and presented by another college graduate who attended both seminary and institute?

I don't consider myself competent to answer these questions fairly because several other variables might be involved in each case. For example, the college graduate who attended seminary and institute and presented an average lesson might have spent the previous night dealing with an infirmity in the family--in which case there would have been no negligence. However, the point here is to propose that we should always keep questions like these in our minds--with the intent of avoiding hasty judgments based on insufficient information. Whenever we need to make a judgment--and in the event that a judgment is really needed--we should try to gather all the pertinent facts first.

The Problem with Hasty Judgments

In our leadership assignments we will have to make judgments, or to use another term, evaluations. Perhaps one may think that judging is wrong, based on the scripture that says "Judge not, that ye be not judged."¹² However, in the inspired translation of the New Testament, the same passage of scripture says "... Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged: but judge a righteous judgment."¹³ This is in harmony with these words from the Prophet Mormon: "... my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil ..."¹⁴

But before jumping to conclusions when making judgments, we should pay attention to another counsel found in the scriptures: "He [or she] that answereth a matter before he [or she] heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him [or her]."¹⁵ The way to judge a righteous judgment is to avoid hasty conclusions by exploring all facets shown by the facts available, as the Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

"... I preached to the Saints, setting forth the evils that existed, and that would exist, by reason of hasty judgment, or decisions upon any subject given by any people, or in judging before they had heard both sides of a question."¹⁶

¹⁰ Many years ago while serving as a choir director, I would stimulate individuals with a "natural talent for dissonance" to participate actively, although I confess that I would also ask them to avoid singing "too loud." Oh, the paradoxes of an imperfect state ...

¹¹ These questions should be applied to any other type of service in the kingdom: preparation of reports, conduction of meetings or activities, etc. I used a Sunday lesson just as an example.

¹² Matthew 7:1

¹³ JST Matthew 7:1-2

¹⁴ Moroni 7:15

¹⁵ Proverbs 18:13. Brackets added.

¹⁶ TPJS, p.118. May 6, 1838.

Again, we will often be required to make judgments or decisions about issues that most of the time will directly affect the lives of the people. We need to keep in mind the seriousness and the sacredness of the work we are engaged in, and do our best to gather as much information as possible under the circumstances.

A Perfect Heart

There is another dimension of perfection that the Lord considers, and this other dimension is often beyond our natural perception: intention, motive, spirit, or as the scriptures name it, heart and mind. This is the dimension the Lord uses when He makes His judgments:

"And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts ... Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord ... to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments ... ¹⁷"

While evaluating the performance of others, we must remember that this element, intent, will be hidden from us, except when we are under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord. For example, it is easy to superficially judge or evaluate the quality of any act of service (a class, a visit, etc.) by observing the effort of the individual performing it, or the degree of his or her preparation. However, it is more difficult—if not impossible—to measure or quantify the love or the devotion employed either in the preparation or in the performance of that service. Therefore, our main concern must center on making sure that our motives and our intentions and those of the individuals under our responsibility are pure before God, as President Lorenzo Snow taught:

"... we have come to this earth for the special purpose of preparing ourselves to receive a fullness of our Father's glory when we shall return into His presence. Therefore, we must seek the ability to keep this law, to sanctify our motives, desires, feelings, and affections, that they may be pure and holy, and our will in all things be subservient to the will of God, and have no will of our own except to do the will of our Father. Such a man in his sphere is perfect, and commands the blessing of God in all that he does and wherever he goes.¹⁸"

These elements (i.e., motive or intent, and feeling or affection) will be judged by the Lord himself. If our hearts are pure, and our intentions are correct—if our eyes are single to the glory of God, or in other words, if we have no other objective in mind except to serve the Lord¹⁹, He will accept our acts of service and answer them with blessings; otherwise, He will reject our actions and count them as evil doings²⁰.

We Need All Those Who Desire to Serve

Our efforts to develop patience and to forgive others may be increased by our understanding of what it really means to be perfect. In our organizations, quorums, wards and stakes we frequently want to ensure that everything happens according to our own degree—or understanding—of perfection. There is nothing wrong in having a personal idea of how things should be, provided that we remember and accept the fact that our fellowservants might have ideas slightly (or extremely) different than ours, which ideas are also acceptable because they are based on their degree of perfection.

¹⁷ 1 Chronicles 28:9; 1 Kings 8:61

¹⁸ Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, p.33

¹⁹ Joseph Smith-History 1:46

²⁰ 2 Chronicles 25:2; Moroni 7:6-10

How to deal with that? Simple. We must start by comprehending that we cannot assume that our personal understanding of a perfect performance is the right one just because we are serving in a leadership capacity. We must be humble enough to acknowledge that the Lord, who knows all things, will always inspire those who serve him in righteousness²¹, including those who do not serve in leadership callings.

When the Lord instructed Moses to build the tabernacle of the congregation, he described in detail the dimensions and the materials to be used in the building and in its furniture. Later, he told Moses that he had inspired certain men from among the people to execute that work:

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, See, I have called by name Bezaleel ... And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, behold, I have given with him Aholiab ... and in the hearts of all that are wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee; The tabernacle of the congregation, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is thereupon, and all the furniture of the tabernacle²²"

For this example we may conclude that specifically the members of presidencies may receive inspiration regarding all aspects of their organizations, quorums, wards or stakes; and yet, those called to work under their direction will also receive inspiration—frequently in greater detail than the instructions given to the presidency.

Therefore, in all assignments that will involve many individuals we should discuss our ideas and compose a combined opinion²³ about how the details of a particular task (or program, or meeting) should be executed to be considered perfect. This opinion, or perception of perfection cannot be imposed by anyone, but will belong to the group and will guide all later evaluations. In the end, this exchange of ideas, if—and only if—conducted under the Spirit of the Lord, will become a valuable learning experience for all those involved²⁴.

The Lord judges the desires of our hearts²⁵ and our diligence. If we do our best, the Lord will accept and consecrate our service²⁶, so that even if things do not happen as we would like them to (because of the differences of performance among the members of our group), that service will still produce the results intended. How does that happen? The Apostle Paul said: "... God [gives] the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.²⁷" In addition, the Lord himself indicated that the participation of all is needed to achieve perfection:

²¹ D&C 76:5-10

²² Exodus 31:1-7

²³ See chapter 13 for a discussion on the blessings of good counseling.

²⁴ D&C 50:21-22,24

²⁵ D&C 137:9

²⁶ 2 Nephi 32:9

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:6-7; brackets added.

"Therefore, let every man stand in his own office, and labor in his own calling; and let not the head say unto the feet it hath no need of the feet; for without the feet how shall the body be able to stand? Also the body hath need of every member, that all may be edified together, that the system may be kept perfect.²⁸"

In the Parable of the Sower, the Lord stated that those converted to the kingdom would "[bring] forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold."²⁹ From this statement we learn that we will have different levels of performance in our service in the kingdom. The Lord stated clearly that those who would accept the gospel and bear fruit would not accomplish (or grow) in the same degree. It is also important to remember that we are not alone in this search for the best performance. President Lorenzo Snow taught the following:

"When we once get it into our minds that we really have the power within ourselves through the gospel we have received to conquer our passions, our appetites, and in all things submit our will to the will of our Heavenly Father, ... then the battle may be said to be half won. ... One of the chief difficulties that many suffer from is, that we are too apt to forget the great object of life, the motive of our Heavenly Father in sending us here to put on mortality, as well as the holy calling with which we have been called; and hence, instead of rising above the little transitory things of time, we too often allow ourselves to come down to the level of the world without availing ourselves of the divine help which God has instituted, which alone can enable us to overcome them. We are no better than the rest of the world if we do not cultivate the feeling to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect."³⁰

Let us explore one more aspect of this subject. We should not presume that we will receive eternal rewards based solely on the quality of our performance. Since "God [gives] the increase" the results of our work happen because of him, not because of us. Any blessings and glory we receive will be based on what is in our hearts—our righteousness, desires, and sense of diligence. But diligence is not dependent on our individual skills, abilities or level of knowledge; two persons can be equally diligent and yet perform quite differently from each other.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard³¹ suggests that the Lord will bless and reward us according to our diligence, and not the amount of results from our performance or the amount of time we spent serving³². From this parable we can also conclude that the Lord knows what our individual capacities allow us to do, and that he expects us to perform according to that measure³³. In review, let us consider these words from the Prophet Joseph Smith:

²⁸ D&C 84:109-110; note that the term "head" is sometimes used by the Lord as a symbol for presidencies. See also D&C 28:6; 50:30; 107:55.

²⁹ Matthew 13:8; brackets added.

³⁰ Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, p.36-37

³¹ Matthew 20:1-16. In chapter 9 I will propose another idea based on this passage.

³² Note that in this same parable the Lord indicated that some would complain because of this arrangement. To us, who live in these latter days, this is a warning that the faithful "latecomers" in the gospel who will receive the same honors as the faithful early workers.

³³ This statement should not be interpreted as a suggestion that we should not seek improvement of our current level of performance. The doctrine of eternal progression suggests that we must increase our knowledge, skills and abilities (see D&C 93:12-14, 20,28,32).

"... while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard ... We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family ...³⁴"

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.