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‘Perfect’ in Matt 5:48: A Case for Mandatory Retirement

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Abstract:

The English gloss “perfect” is used less and less to translate Heb *tam* and Gk *teleios* in biblical texts referring to human beings (e.g., Noah, Job). Understandably so, since it strikes most readers (and exegetes) as out of place to refer to flawed human beings as “perfect.” In one place, however, this gloss stubbornly persists; namely, in Matt 5:48 (“be ye therefore perfect”). This paper will examine the interpretive background to this translation, possible reasons for its persistence in Matt 5:48, and will suggest alternatives for future translators.

1. The English Bible used to be full of ‘perfect’ people

If you’re a lover of the King James tradition, you may realize there were actually quite a number of “perfect” people in the OT.

Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations . . . (Gen 6:9)

Asa's heart was perfect with the LORD all his days. (1 Kings 15:14; see also 2 Chron 15:17)

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. (Job 1:1; cf. also 1:8; 2:3)¹

And these were not just the few exceptional individuals; ancient Israel was full of such perfect people.

All these men of war [over 200,000!], that could keep rank, came with a perfect heart to Hebron, to make David king over all Israel . . . (1 Chron 12:38)

Such ‘perfect’ people were, in fact, exactly what the God of the OT expected and demanded.

Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God. (Deut 18:13)²

¹ See also 2 Kings 20:3; 1 Chron 29:9; Ps 37:37; 64:4; Prov 11:5

² See also, 1 Kings 8:61; 2 Chron 16:9

And he was prepared to enable such ‘perfection’ in those who followed him.

God is my strength and power: and he maketh my way perfect. (2 Sam 22:33)³

However, a quick look at their often messed-up lives tells us they were far from “perfect” in the sense we normally understand that word. Which is probably why nearly all modern translations have gotten rid of all these “perfect” people.

2. This is no longer the case. We have ‘retired’ these ‘perfect’ people.

Here are just a few select examples of the retirement of the word ‘perfect’ in our English Bible translations.

Noah in Gen 6:9

Asa’s ‘perfect’ heart in 1 Kings 15:14

Job in 1:1

The 200,000 Israelite men of war in 1 Chron 12:38

The call to “be perfect” in Deut 18:13

With only rare exceptions, formerly ‘perfect’ people in the OT have now become ‘blameless,’ ‘loyal,’ ‘committed,’ ‘wholly true,’ ‘wholehearted,’ ‘completely faithful,’ or some other gloss that avoids nuances inherent in the English word ‘perfect.’

The reasons for this are straightforward.

- The English word ‘perfect’ communicates a sense of flawlessness, a lack of any mistake, error or misstep, that is clearly not apropos to the people being described.⁴
- The Hebrew terms underlying these texts do not imply sinless perfection, error-free obedience, or anything of this sort. Instead, *tamim* and *shalem* both highlight the wholeness, completeness and integrity of the person being described.⁵

As the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* summarizes:

The Hebrew notion that an action or way of life is ‘complete’ or ‘integral’ refers in the first instance to a coincidence of thought, word, and deed that itself harmonizes with the norms governing the life of the human community. It suggests neither sinlessness nor

³ See also 1 Chron 29:19

⁴ See the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵ John Irwin Dickson, “The Idea of Perfection in the Old Testament” (Diss., Vanderbilt, 1954).

particularistic obedience to a specific legal system. . . . The word group *tmm* denotes conduct that is right, benign, upstanding, and just, whether expressed in a single act or in a general way of life.⁶

For completeness, allow me to mention that 'perfect' does continue to be used in English OT translations, but no longer in reference to persons. Sacrificial animals are still to be 'perfect' (Lev 22:21), meaning unblemished, lacking in no element required by ritual law. But, as with persons, this does not quite mean 'perfect' in the sense of no hair out of place, and certainly not morally perfect. And, of course, God's Torah as well as his work and ways are 'perfect,' but even here the chief sense is that they are complete, whole, they are everything they should be.

3. The use of 'perfect' as a gloss in the NT has proven more resistant to retirement: Matt 5:48; 19:21.

It comes as a bit of a surprise, then, to discover that modern English translations of the NT have not as consistently followed the lead of OT translators. NT translations present much more of a mixed-bag when it comes to attributing perfection to human beings.

[See charts in Appendix for next points.]

In quite a few cases, post-KJV translators opt for some other term than "perfect/perfection" when speaking of human beings.

See, for example, Luke 6:40: The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master. (KJV)

Instead of envisioning potential perfection, other translators expect the disciple to be "fully qualified" or "trained."

Or take the well-known 1 Cor 2:6: We speak wisdom among them that are perfect. All modern translations opt for "mature" rather than "perfect" here.

Or Eph 4:12: For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Again, all gloss with something other than "to perfect the saints," replacing it with "to equip," "to prepare," or to "train."

As in the OT, the reason for this change is largely lexical. In a number of cases, the KJV used "perfect" for Greek terms which quite clearly do not wish to suggest any sort of flawless or sinless perfection.⁷ Look, for instance, at several verses on the chart using a form of *katartizo*

⁶ B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "Tamam, etc.," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 707.

⁷ See esp. BDAG, sv. *katartizō*, *katartisis*, *katartismos*. In fairness, the KJV probably used "perfect" here not in the more predominant modern sense of flawlessness, but in the then-predominant sense of completing or finishing

for human beings. With only some exceptions, modern English Bibles rightly understand this Greek term to stress something related to completion, qualification, preparation, training, etc., but not to people being made morally “perfect.”

The other chief Greek lemma behind many of these verses is *teleios/teleioō* and derivatives. With this lemma, as well, there is considerable movement away from the “perfect” tradition. Note especially 1 Cor 2:6, where the KJV stands alone in having Paul refer to members of the Corinthian congregation as “perfect.” Or Eph 4:13, where only the KJV and its daughter, the NKJV, retain “perfection.”

However, as you see on this slide, NT translators still show a strong inclination to retain “perfect” in six texts. In fact, very few dare to depart. Since these translation decisions are the result not only of lexical evidence, but also of unique literary-contextual factors, and since this paper has time-constraints, I will focus on one of these, Matt 5:48, as a case-study for the mandatory retirement of the term “perfect.”

4. Why “perfect” should be retired in Matt 5:48.

History of ‘perfect’ in Matt 5:48

Our earliest known attempt to translate Matt 5:48 into English is Wycliffe’s 1384 translation from the Vulgate.

“Therefore be ye parfit, as youre heuenli fadir is parfit.”⁸

Wycliffe’s *parfit* [pron. *par*-fit] was the Middle English adjective (c. 1300) derived from the identical Old French *parfit* meaning “finished, completed, ready” and from Latin *perfectus* meaning “completed, excellent, accomplished, exquisite.”⁹ Wycliffe was translating the Vulgate Latin *perfecti/perfectus* here and not the Greek NT *teleios*. His choice of *parfit* was most likely influenced by two factors:

1. The meaning of the Vulgate’s *perfecti/perfectus* (completed, excellent, accomplished, exquisite) was effectively reproduced in Middle English *parfit* (finished, completed, ready).
2. Tradition of patristic and medieval interpretation of Matt 5:48 which understood this “perfection” as the elimination of human passions in order to enable godlikeness in knowledge and mystical union. One thinks here of the rationale for monastic discipline to perfect the saint through the mortification of the flesh.

something, which is not far from the sense of the Greek original. However, keeping this English word after its predominant connotations have changed leads to a mistranslation.

⁸ From the 1384 edition, accessed online at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu> (on 3/30/16).

⁹ Online Etymological Dictionary; <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=perfect> (accessed 4/15/16)

By the early 1500's Middle English *parfit* has largely been replaced by the newer word *perfect* (spelling varies).¹⁰ The translations of Tyndale (1525) and Coverdale (1535) adopt this newer word.

Tyndale (1525): "ye shall therfore be perfecte eve as youre father which is in heauen is perfecte."¹¹

Coverdale (1535): "Ye shall therfore be perfecte, euen as youre father in heaue is perfecte."¹²

Tyndale's writings make clear what he understood by this translation and that it was not any sort of moral or sinless perfection.

The text saith not, Ye shall be as perfect as God; but perfect after his example. To be perfect, in the scripture, is not to be a monk or a friar, or never to sin. For Christ teacheth not here monks or friars, but his disciples and every Christian man and woman. And to be in this life altogether without sin is impossible. But to be perfect is to have pure doctrine without false opinions, and that thine heart be to follow that learning.¹³

What I find of particular interest is that none of these earliest English translations and translators understood this text to be referring to some sort of sinless or flawless perfection of character and behavior. The King James translators simply followed Tyndale and Coverdale with the gloss *perfect*, and it is hardly likely that they intended thereby to convey a new thought—the expectation of sinless perfection or absolute, godlike moral character. We find during this early period of English translation a constant attempt, such as with Tyndale and with Wesley and many others, to clarify that the choice of this word *does not imply* moral flawlessness, even though the word *could* apparently contain this element within its broader range of meaning.

Knowing *why* they chose to gloss with this potentially confusing word, "perfect," rather than some more appropriate term necessitates a bit of speculation, but three possible reasons jump to the fore.

1. There was as yet little careful Hebrew and Greek lexical work to guide these translators in the choice of some other gloss.
2. The Latin and Old French antecedents readily suggested it.
3. This English gloss at this point in the development of English, still carried a primary sense of something complete, whole, finished or accomplished.

The final fateful step in cementing the place of *perfect* in Matt 5:48 came when the Reformation established the requirement of *perfect obedience* as an integral element in the proper understanding of justification by faith alone. Sinful human beings cannot produce the

¹⁰ See OED² (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), vol. 11, 535-37. Middle English *parfit* was latinized into *perfit*, *perfect*.

¹¹ From the earliest edition (1525), accessed online at: <http://www.studylight.org> (on 3/30/16).

¹² From the 1535 edition, accessed online at: <https://www.studylight.org> (on 3/30/16).

¹³ "Exposition on the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh chapters of Matthew" in William Tyndale, *Expositions and Notes on Sundry Portions of the Holy Scriptures: Together with the Practice of Prelates*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge: University Press, 1849), 71.

sinless righteous law-keeping that God demands, but God in his grace offers to credit their account with the perfect and flawless obedience of Christ himself. “Be ye perfect” means that even a single transgression brings the verdict of “sinner,” and necessitates that God’s grace alone can redeem the sinner. Now this gloss had a strong theological underpinning.

This is not the place for a full-scale exegesis of Matt 5:48, so allow me to summarize a few key and generally non-controversial points.¹⁴

- Nearly all are agreed that Matthew’s use of *teleios* reflects Jewish and OT use of Hebrew *tamim* and *shalem*.¹⁵
- These Hebrew terms did not imply the sinless perfection or flawless obedience which our English gloss suggests, but spoke of the wholeness, completeness and integrity which the creator intended for his human creation.
- Verse 48 functions as a concluding statement to the six antitheses which lay out Jesus’s program of an “exceeding righteousness” (5:20).
- Jesus’s exhortation, “be perfect [ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι],” as a summing up of the expected righteous behavior in his teaching, reflects long-standing Jewish tradition and is mostly likely echoing texts like Gen 17:1 [When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. [LXX: ἄμωμτος; Heb. תָּמִים]” and Deut 18:13 [You must remain completely loyal [LXX: τέλειος; Heb. תָּמִים] to the LORD your God.].

Thus, Jesus is reiterating some of the central ethical vision of his Jewish tradition, namely, that those who belong to Yahweh are to imitate God (“as your father in heaven is perfect”) in their behavior. As Jesus has emphasized throughout the antitheses, what differentiates his understanding of Torah from the Pharisees is the centrality of mercy in its application over the concern for obeying the divine commands in a letter-of-the-law fashion. “No adultery” means, first of all and most fundamentally, seeking the good of the woman. Thus, looking at a woman to use her sexually is already a breaking of this command. Or, just as God blesses both friends and enemies with sunshine and rain, so human wholeness consists in such unbounded other-centeredness.

This is no impossible ethic of sinless perfection, but the realistic vision of a community of lovingkindness. And our nearly unanimous English Bible tradition of inserting “perfect” here short-circuits our hearing of this central call.

¹⁴ See the standard commentaries by Betz, Davies & Allison, Hagner, Nolland, etc.

¹⁵ For example, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1.561; Paul Johannes Du Plessis, *Teleios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 170.

5. Suggestions for alternatives.

So, what am I suggesting as a better English word in Matt 5:48?

Our lexica offer glosses such as mature, complete, whole, wholehearted, blameless, or full. Some of these would not be appropriate in Matt 5:48, since they must work equally to describe God himself ("as your father in heaven is XX"). Thus, it seems to me, "mature" and "wholehearted" do not work well. What exactly would it mean, for instance, to say "God is mature"? Could he be "immature" or "undeveloped"?

Some of the others, like "complete" or "whole," seem to work best, but, as so often in translating between languages, they still don't quite capture the full nuance. Thus, let me depart for a moment from considering alternate glosses and seek a richer definition of these underlying terms.

I have already cited the article on תָּמִים in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* to the effect that it denotes primarily praiseworthy actions or attitudes, a complete or integral way of life, a coincidence of thought-word-deed . . . and that it does not suggest perfection as we normally think of that word.¹⁶

Another author puts it similarly, "in reference to conduct, the word group describes acts that are coherent and consistent in relation to some foundational value. . . . the characteristic conduct of those whose motives and choices and acts are consistent with their dependence on the Lord. They are the faithful (to the Lord) in the land."¹⁷

Shalem and cognates, the other main Hebrew lemma in this discussion, have a semantic range which overlaps substantially with *tamam*, with perhaps a bit more of the sense that something or someone is *intact* and *undivided* and thus in a state of peace or harmony.¹⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, Greek *teleios* overlaps to a very large degree with this Hebrew semantic field; that is, this is not necessarily a case of Hellenistic language and thought "corrupting" Hebraic ways of thinking and speaking. It, too, refers to "attaining completeness" and "the goal (*telos*) for which one was striving,"¹⁹ though it does not include the Jewish covenantal notions of harmony with a divine design.

Unfortunately, no single English word seems to cover efficiently this semantic range. We are looking for a word that indicates someone who attains to the vision of human persons contained in the creation and in Torah, someone who is a complete human being, the whole package. "Complete" comes about as close as any, but doesn't by itself convey the nuance of harmony, integrity, or alignment with a norm.

¹⁶ Kedar-Kopfstein, "Tamam, etc.," 707.

¹⁷ James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 321, on Ps 101:6.

¹⁸ K.-J. Illman, "Sh-L-M," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 97-105.

¹⁹ P. J. Hartin, *A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 22. See esp. Du Plessis, *Teleios*, 73-94.

The sense just described seems to be confirmed by the only other use of this terminology in the gospels, Matt 19:16-22. Here a young Jewish man asks Jesus about doing good and having eternal life. Jesus responds in a typically Jewish way, "keep the commandments." The young man affirms his commitment, "I have kept all these," but asks "what do I still lack?" Jesus answers, "If you wish to be *teleios/tamim*, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (19:21). Jesus and the young man agree he is a righteous and upstanding person according to Torah, his life is lived in wholehearted commitment to the God of Israel and his ways.²⁰ Yet, he still "lacks" something, he is not quite the "whole package" God desires, not quite complete or finished. "Sell all and follow me." Following Jesus with undivided commitment will complete what he lacks.²¹ He will then not be "perfect," but he will be whole; he will be what God summons Israel and humanity to in this new era inaugurated by Messiah's coming.²²

In precisely the same sense, Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount summons disciples to eschatological wholeness, a rich, realistic and captivating vision of a community of mercy, not to an impossible dream of moral perfection. It's high time we put that troublesome gloss to bed.

²⁰ Christian interpretation usually assumes that Jesus disagrees with the young man as to his "keeping the commandment." It assumes he is 1) either secretly greedy (thus the command to sell possessions), 2) is a hypocrite and self-deceived, or 3) doesn't realize Torah demands flawless obedience, which no human can bring. None of these arise naturally from the text itself or from our understanding of Jewish tradition, and Jesus's answer gives no indication that he disputes the man's assertion.

²¹ Determining exactly what he lacks is not crucial to this paper. I would suggest that prior to Jesus's coming as the new Moses, as the definitive and final interpreter of the divine will in Torah (so the Sermon on the Mount), he was *tamim*, as he claims and as Jesus seems to accept. With the coming of Christ, however, the parameters for being *tamim* have changed; being a whole person in the sight of God must also include following Christ. "In the final analysis, then, *what barred the ruler from entering the kingdom was not the demands of the Mosaic Law, but his reluctance to part with his wealth—and thus to love the poor—and follow Jesus* (cf. Matt. 6:24)." Alan P. Stanley, "The Rich Young Ruler and Salvation," *Bibliotheca sacra* 163, no. 649 (2006): 55, italics in original. Or, "In practice, the salvation of the [rich] young man is not endangered by his failure to keep the commandments but by his improper understanding of the person of Jesus as well as his unwillingness to join the band of Jesus' followers." Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View of Salvation*, WUNT (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1998), 155.

²² One sees exactly the same combination of *teleios* as "complete" and "not lacking" in Jas 1:4: "and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature [*teleios*] and complete [*holoklēroi*], lacking in nothing."

Appendix

Chart #1: “Perfect” largely retired²³

NT text	Greek	ET’s using ‘perfect’	Other transl’s
Luke 6:40	<i>katartismenos</i>	KJV “perfectly trained: NKJV	“fully qualified/trained”: NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, CEV, HCSB “fully prepared”: CEB “completed training”: GNT
1 Cor 2:6	<i>teleios</i>	KJV	“mature”: NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, CEV, HCSB, CEB, GNT, NKJV
Eph 4:12	<i>katartismon</i>	KJV	“equip”: NRSV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, NKJV, CEB “prepare”: NIV, GNT “training”: HCSB
2 Tim 3:17	<i>artios</i>	KJV	“proficient”: NRSV “thoroughly equipped”: NIV, CEB “competent”: ESV, NAB “adequate”: NAS “dedicated”: NET “complete”: NKJV, HCSB “fully qualified”: GNT
Heb 13:21	<i>katartisai</i>	KJV	“make complete”: NRSV, NKJV “equip”: NIV, NLT, ESV, NAS, NET, CEB, HCSB “furnish”: NAB “make ready”: CEV “provide”: GNT
Eph 4:13	<i>teleion</i>	KJV, NKJV	“maturity/mature manhood”: NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, CEB, CEV, GNT, HCSB

²³ Other KJV texts using “perfection” of less relevance for my project:

- Luke 13:32: And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected (Gk: *teleioumai*).
- John 17:23: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect (Gk: *teteleiomenoι*) in one
- Hebrews 2:10: For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (cf. also 5:9; 7:11, 19; 11:40; 12:23) [mostly forms of *teleioo/teleios*]

(Chart #1: “Perfect” largely retired, continued)

Gal 3:3	<i>epiteleisthe</i>	KJV, NLT, ESV, NAS, NKJV	“ending”: NRSV, NAB “attain your goal”: NIV “finish”: NET, CEB, GNT “complete”: CEV, HCSB
2 Cor 13:9	<i>katartisin</i>	KJV, NRSV, NIV, GNT	“mature”: NLT “restoration”: ESV “improvement”: NAB “made complete”: NAS, NKJV, CEB “fully qualified”: NET “do even better”: CEV
2 Cor 13:11	<i>katartizesthe</i>	KJV, NIV, GNT	“put things in order”: NRSV, CEB “grow to maturity”: NLT “aim for restoration”: ESV “mend your ways”: NAB “be made complete”: NAS, NKJV “set things right”: NET
Phil 3:15	<i>teleioi</i>	KJV, NAS, NET (in quotes),	“mature”: NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NKJV, CEB, CEV, GNT, HCSB “perfectly mature”: NAB
Col 1:28	<i>teleion</i>	KJV, NIV, NLT, NAB, NKJV	“mature”: NRSV, ESV, NET, CEB, CEV, GNT, HCSB “complete”: NAS
Col 4:12	<i>teleioi</i>	KJV, NLT, NAB, NAS, NKJV	“mature”: NRSV, NIV, ESV, NET, CEB, GNT, HCSB
Heb 6:1	<i>teleioteta</i>	KJV, NRSV, NKJV	“maturity”: NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, CEB, CEV, HCSB
1 Pet 5:10	<i>katartisei</i>	KJV, NAS, NKJV, GNT	“restore”: NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NET, CEB, HCSB “make complete”: CEV

Chart #2: “Perfect” still retained

NT text	Greek	ET’s using ‘perfect’	Other transl’s
Matt 5:48	<i>teleios</i>	NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, KJV, NAB, NAS, NET, NKJV, GNT, HCSB	“complete”: CEB “always acts like your Father in heaven”: CEV
Matt 19:21	<i>teleios</i>	NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, KJV, NAB, NET, NKJV, GNT, HCSB	“complete”: NAS, CEB
Phil 3:12	<i>teteleiomai</i>	KJV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAS, NET, NKJV, CEB, CEV, GNT	“reached the goal”: NRSV, “perfect maturity”: NAB “fully mature”: HCSB
Heb 10:1	<i>teleiosai</i>	KJV, NRSV, NIV, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, NKJV, CEB, GNT, HCSB	“provide perfect cleansing”: NLT “free from sin”: CEV
Heb 10:14	<i>teteleioken</i>	KJV, NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, NKJV, CEB, GNT, HCSB	“set free from sin”: CEV
Jas 3:2	<i>teleios</i>	KJV, NRSV, NIV, NLT, ESV, NAB, NAS, NET, NKJV, GNT	“full maturity”: CEB “mature”: CEV, HCSB