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Perfection in Matthew 5:48a as 'wholehearted obedience': An intertextual study

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This article investigated the apparent unattainable ideal of Matthew 5:48 that the addressees should 'be perfect … as your heavenly Father is perfect'. The main hypothesis of the article is that a better understanding of the most likely Old Testament backgrounds to Matthew 5:48, namely Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13, leads to a more nuanced interpretation of the two occurrences of 'perfect' in the verse, and the realisation that the two usages of 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48 are similar but not identical. The article employed an intertextual study, beginning with an investigation of the text and context of Matthew 5:48 for a provisional interpretation of the verse. This was followed by an investigation of Luke 6:36 and its comparison to Matthew 5:48 to determine the unique emphases of the latter. The article then investigated the original context and meaning of both Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13, considering their potential relevance to interpreting Matthew 5:48. Penultimately, the provisional conclusions of the investigation of Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 were tested by investigating the use of perfection language elsewhere in Matthew. The article concluded by drawing the lines together and reflecting on the meaning of Matthew 5:48 within its broader context. The findings suggest that Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 influence the interpretation of Matthew 5:48. Both passages emphasise wholehearted obedience to God, indicating that 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48a should be interpreted as 'wholehearted obedience' to God, rather than moral perfection per se. Furthermore, the twofold use of 'holy' in Leviticus 19:2 implies that 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48b should be interpreted as moral perfection.

Contribution: This article contributed to the meaning and interpretation of Matthew 5:48 by indicating how the most likely Old Testament backgrounds of the verse, namely Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:3, influence its interpretation.

Keywords: Matthew 5:48; perfect; Luke 6:36; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 18:13; Matthew 19:21; wholehearted obedience; intertextual study.

Introduction[1]

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus states:

> ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι ὡς ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειος ἐστιν (NA28)
>
> [Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect] (NRSV).

These words, although striking in their simplicity and high calling, have long troubled scholars, as it appears to set an unattainable ideal. How is it possible for sinful human beings to be morally perfect as God is morally perfect?

In an attempt to determine the meaning of Matthew 5:48, scholars rightly consider its synoptic counterpart, Luke 6:36. In addition, a majority of scholars observe that the formulation of Matthew 5:48 is, in some way, based on or influenced by two Old Testament passages: Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13. Leviticus 19:2 is seen as the inspiration for the shape of the appeal in Matthew 5:48 (cf. Harrington 1991:90; Lioy 2004:32,155; Nolland 2005:270), to which Matthew has assimilated the wording of Deuteronomy 18:13 (Davies & Allison 1988:560; cf. France 2007:228; Keener 2009:205; Osborne 2010:214; Turner 2008:177; Wilson 2022a:192; also see the margin of the NA28 at Mt 5:48, which refers to Dt 18:13 and Lv 19:2). Viljoen (2018:167) likewise notes that Matthew 5:48 'echoes' Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13.

1.This article is warmly dedicated to my close friend and colleague, Francois P. Viljoen, who has a special love for the Sermon on the Mount and has made an in-depth study of its content a significant part of his calling.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the collection titled 'Francois P. Viljoen Festschrift,' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Albert Johannes Coetsee.

Despite the apparent consensus that Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 in some way form the background to Matthew 5:48, not all scholars consider how the former passages influence the interpretation of the latter. This article argues that a better understanding of the most likely Old Testament backgrounds of Matthew 5:48, namely Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13, leads to a more nuanced interpretation of the two occurrences of 'perfect' [τέλειος] in the verse, and the realisation that the two usages of 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48 are similar but not identical. More specifically, the article argues that the most likely Old Testament backgrounds support interpreting 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48a as 'wholehearted obedience' to God, and not moral perfection per se, and 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48b as moral perfection.

To support this hypothesis, this article employs an intertextual study. It begins by investigating the text and context of Matthew 5:48 to reach a provisional interpretation of the passage. This is followed by a study of Luke 6:36 and its comparison to Matthew 5:48 to identify the unique emphases of the latter. Next, the article investigates the original context and meaning of both Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 and explores its possible bearing on the interpretation of Matthew 5:48. Penultimately, the provisional conclusions drawn from the investigation of Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 are tested by investigating perfection language elsewhere in Matthew. The article concludes by drawing the lines together and reflecting on the meaning of the words 'Be perfect … as your heavenly Father is perfect' in Matthew 5:48 within its context.

The text, context and provisional argument of Matthew 5:48

Matthew 5:48 forms part of Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount concerning love for enemies (Mt 5:43–48). This teaching begins with a popular colloquialism, stating that 'you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy' (Mt 5:43). The first part of loving your neighbour is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, while the second part of hating your enemy is not found in the Old Testament. It can be interpreted either as a possible corollary of Leviticus 19:18 or as a popular maxim among Jews in the first century (Wilson 2022a:189). Jesus's teaching is the exact opposite of this colloquialism: his disciples are to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Mt 5:44). In doing so, they will be 'children of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Mt 5:45). A similar argument appears in the final verse of the passage – the verse under investigation in this article: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48). At its core, Matthew 5:43–48 is therefore a call to *imitatio Dei*.

Matthew 5:48 not only forms the final verse of the passage, it also serves as its conclusion. This is clear from the use of the conjunction οὖν, a logical inferential marker indicating result.

TABLE 1: The symmetry between Matthew 5:48a and b.

Matthew 5:48a	Syntax	Matthew 5:48b
ἔσεσθε	Verb: form of εἰμί	ἐστιν
ὑμεῖς	Subject	ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος
Τέλειοι	Complement: form of τέλειος	τέλειος

Thus, Matthew 5:48 concludes Matthew 5:43–48. Scholars, however, are quick to point out that Matthew 5:48 also functions as the conclusion to the first series of six antithetical statements in Matthew 5:21–48 (e.g. Betz 1995:320, 325; Blomberg 1992:115; France 2007:228; Gibbs 2006:307; Hagner 1993:133; Viljoen 2018:167; Wilson 2022a:192). Matthew 5:48 consequently serves a dual purpose: it concludes both Matthew 5:43–48 and 5:21–48, and its words are thus structurally emphasised.

The text of Matthew 5:48 presents no major textual-critical difficulties. Only two minor variants exist:

- Instead of ὡς [as or like] several witnesses (e.g. D K W Δ Θ 565 579) have ὥσπερ [(just) as] with the latter being a 'marker of similarity between events and states' (Bauer et al. 2000:1106). Since ὥσπερ appears elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew (e.g. Mt 6:2, 7; 12:40; 13:40; 18:17; 20:28; 24:27, 37; 25:14, 32), and since there is no significant difference in meaning between ὡς and ὥσπερ (Betz 1995:320–321 n. 974), both conjunctions are viable options. However, ὡς is found in the earliest witnesses and is therefore preferred.
- Instead of ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος [your heavenly Father], some witnesses (e.g. D* K Δ Θ 565 579 700) have ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς [your Father in heaven]. In the Gospel of Matthew (e.g. Mt 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10, 14, 19), especially in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g. Mt 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11, 21), God is frequently referred to as 'my or (y)our Father in (the) heaven(s)', which explains the origin of this variant. The first reading, however, is preferred based on earlier witnesses.

Syntactically, Matthew 5:48 consists of two symmetrical parts. The use of the conjunction ὡς links Matthew 5:48a and 5:48b, creating a comparison. Omitting the conjunctions οὖν and ὡς, the symmetry between the two parts of Matthew 5:48 can be visually represented in Table 1.

In Matthew 5:48a, the future indicative ἔσεσθε carries the nuance of an imperative (cf. Gibbs 2006:305): 'you shall be' implies 'you must'.[2] The verb ἔσεσθε already includes the subject 'you', making the use of ὑμεῖς superfluous, and therefore emphatic (cf. Hagner 1993:135): 'You must be …'. What the addressees should be, namely the complement of the verb ἔσεσθε, is τέλειοι.

The basic meaning of the adjective τέλειος is to refer to attaining the end [τέλος], aim, or purpose of something, that

2.Betz (1995:321) argues that the verb can be either an imperative ('Be perfect!'), a prediction ('You will be perfect') or an eschatological promise ('You may be perfect'; cf. Morris 1992:133), and that the verse is deliberately ambiguous to combine these various aspects. Considering the exhortations of the antitheses, as well as the possible Old Testament backgrounds of Matthew 5:48 (discussed below), I find the interpretation of ἔσεσθε as imperatival more likely.

is, to be 'complete, perfect' (cf. Bauer et al. 2000:995–996). The LXX uses τέλειος to translate the Hebrew תָּמִים, and the adjective is used to refer to 'perfect' things or persons (Hagner 1993:135; Osborne 2010:214). In terms of the former, τέλειος is used especially to refer to 'perfect' sacrifices, namely animals without blemish (frequently in Leviticus, but also in Numbers and Ezekiel); in terms of the latter, τέλειος is frequently used to refer to ethical uprightness (e.g. Gn 6:9; 17:1; 2 Sm 22:24–27; various Psalms) or complete allegiance to God (e.g. Ps 15:2; 84:11). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, תָּמִים commonly refers to rigorous law-keeping (e.g. 1QS 1:8, 13; 2:2; 3:3; 4:22; Nolland 2005:271 n. 279; Turner 2008:177 n. 38). Notably, '[*n*]owhere in the OT or Dead Sea Scrolls is God called tāmîm or τέλειος' (Davies & Allison 1988:563).[3] In the New Testament, τέλειος refers both to adulthood ('completed growth') (cf. 1 Cor 14:20; Eph 4:13) and moral perfection (Ja 3:2).

How τέλειος should be interpreted in Matthew 5:48a and b is a matter of considerable scholarly debate, and its interpretative history is extensive.[4] From the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount, τέλειος in Matthew 5:48a and b most likely refers to some form of moral perfection (Davies & Allison 1988:561; Osborne 2010:214). Starting from its basic meaning, a foundational interpretation of Matthew 5:48 is that Jesus calls his disciples to attain the end for which God created them (Morris 1992:133–134 n. 172). From the broader context of Matthew 5:43–48, this perfection is directly tied to 'loving enemies': the addressees are to love their enemies in a similar way that God conducts himself. Just as God bestows the benefits of creation upon good and evil (Mt 5:45), without expecting anything in return, the addressees should likewise love their enemies without expecting anything in return (Hagner 1993:135; Luz 1989:346; Turner 2008:117; Witherington 2006:139). In doing so, they will be 'perfect' as God is perfect – their love would attain its God-intended goal.

The questions that remain are: Can the two occurrences of τέλειος be distinguished from one another? And if so, can their respective meanings be defined more precisely? To answer these questions, the investigation first turns to the synoptic counterpart of Matthew 5:48, namely Luke 6:36, to identify the unique emphases of Matthew 5:48.

The Lukan parallel: Luke 6:36

The Lukan parallel to Matthew 5:48 is Luke 6:36. This verse is part of Jesus's so-called Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:17–49),[5] and like its Matthean counterpart, forms part of Jesus' teaching on love for enemies (Lk 6:27–36). While there are some differences between Matthew 5:43–48 and Luke 6:27–36, the main exhortation and its accompanying motivation are the same: The addressees are exhorted to love their enemies and to pray for those who abuse or persecute them (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27–28). This is followed by a twofold motivation: (1) If the addressees only love those who love them, what good ('credit'/'reward') is there in that (Mt 5:46; Lk 6:32)? Sinners (Lk 6:33) and tax collectors (Mt 5:46) do the same; (2) Acting in this way indicates that the addressees are children of God ('the Most High' [Lk 6:35] or 'your Father in heaven' [Mt 5:45]), who bestows his blessings on both the righteous and unrighteous (Mt 5:45; Lk 6:35). The Lukan version captures the gist of Jesus' teaching with the explanation that the addressees should love their enemies 'expecting nothing in return' (Lk 6:35).

Like Matthew 5:48, Luke 6:36 serves as the conclusion to Jesus's teaching on love for enemies. The verse states:

> Γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες καθὼς [*καὶ*] ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν οἰκτίρμων ἐστίν (NA28) [Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful] (NRSV).

The only text-critical question in Luke 6:36 concerns whether the conjunction καί should be included or not (see the critical apparatus in NA28). The conjunction is absent in early witnesses such as Codex Sinaiticus (א) and Codex Vaticanus (B) but appears in slightly later witnesses such as Codex Alexandrinus (A) and Codex Bezae (D). Its omission may reflect assimilation to the text of Matthew 5:48 (Marshall 1978:265). While the inclusion or omission of καί does not alter the central message of Luke 6:36, it may lead to subtle differences in interpretation: if included, the comparative nature of the verse is highlighted ('just as'); if omitted, the imperative ('be') is emphasised. The editors of NA28 have chosen to omit the conjunction in the main text but indicate its possible inclusion by placing καί in square brackets.

Similar to Matthew 5:48, Luke 6:36 has two symmetrical parts, joined by the conjunction καθώς, which forms a comparison. The symmetry between the two parts of Luke 6:36 is shown in Table 2.

The verb γίνεσθε is a present imperative; the addressees are explicitly exhorted to 'be' something. Here, they are to be 'merciful' or 'compassionate' (from οἰκτίρμων). The adjective refers to 'being concerned about another's unfortunate state or misery' (Bauer et al. 2000:700), particularly by showing mercy or compassion (Louw & Nida 1996:§88.81). In the LXX, this adjective is frequently used to describe God's character (i.a. Ex 34:6; Dt 4:31; Ps 78:38 [77:38 LXX]; 86:15 [85:15 LXX]; 103:8 [102:8 LXX]; 111:4 [110:4 LXX]; 145:8 [144:8 LXX]; Sir 2:11; Is 63:15; Jl 2:13; Jnh 4:2), often in combination with the synonymous term ἐλεήμων ['merciful', 'sympathetic' or 'compassionate'].

TABLE 2: The symmetry between Luke 6:36a and b.

Luke 6:36a	Syntax	Luke 6:36b
Γίνεσθε	Verb: form of γίνομαι or εἰμί	ἐστιν
– [ὑμεῖς]	Subject	ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν
οἰκτίρμονες	Complement: form of οἰκτίρμων	οἰκτίρμων

3.Nolland (2005:271 n. 279) does, however, point out that the cognate verb τελειόω is applied to God in 2 Kingdoms 22:26b (2 Sm 22:26b): 'with a perfect man you will be deemed perfect [τελειωθήσῃ]' (NETS).

4.See Betz (1995:322 n. 980) for a list of bibliographical entries on the use of τέλειος in Matthew 5:48 and the rest of the New Testament. For a detailed discussion of the possible influences on Matthew's use of the adjective, see Davies and Allison (1988:561–563). Two rather unique interpretations of adjective in Matthew 5:48 is the interpretation of τέλειος as 'true' (Albright & Mann 1971:71) or 'whole' (Blomberg 1992:115; this interpretation is viewed as 'odd' by France [2007:228 n. 168]).

5.For discussion of the relationship between the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:17–49), see Betz (1995:44–70) and Bock (1994:931–944).

A comparison of Luke 6:36 with Matthew 5:48 reveals several differences:

- Luke uses the present imperative γίνεσθε, while Matthew uses the future indicative ἔσεσθε (with an imperative nuance). Although these texts use different verb roots (γίνομαι in Luke; εἰμί in Matthew), both basically have the same meaning: 'to be'.
- Matthew includes the logical inferential οὖν, while Luke does not.
- Matthew uses the personal pronoun ὑμεῖς, adding emphasis to the subject of the sentence, whereas Luke omits it.
- The complement of the verb 'to be' in Luke is οἰκτίρμονες, whereas in Matthew it is τέλειοι. These adjectives are also used to describe God's character: in Luke God is called οἰκτίρμων, in Matthew, τέλειος. This is arguably the most notable distinction between Luke and Matthew.
- Luke refers to God as ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ['your Father'], whereas Matthew has the more elaborate phrase ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος ['your heavenly Father'].
- In Luke the comparison between the addressees and God is introduced by καθὼς, and by ὡς in Matthew.

The similarities between Luke 6:36 and Matthew 5:48 suggest some form of relationship between the two verses. The exact nature of this relationship, however, is complex and difficult to determine (Bock 1994:553, 604–605). It may be that Matthew and Luke 'present two distinct summaries of the same message' (Bock 1994:553),[6] but the question remains: Which of the two versions represents (or is closer to) the original wording?

Opinions differ. On the one hand, the use of οἰκτίρμων in Luke 6:36 fits the immediate context very well, connecting with χρηστός ['kind' or 'benevolent'] in Luke 6:35 and with the concepts 'judge not' and 'condemn not' in Luke 6:37–42 (Marshall 1978:265). The term οἰκτίρμων is also unique to Luke, appearing only in Luke 6:36, and nowhere else in the Gospels. On the other hand, τέλειος in Matthew 5:48 fits the context of both Matthew 5:43–48 and 5:21–48 very well (Bock 1994:604–605; Stein 1992:209). The adjective τέλειος is also unique to Matthew, appearing only in 5:48 (twice) and in 19:21. Thus, both views, whether οἰκτίρμων or τέλειος represents the original wording, have merit.

Special arguments in favour of viewing Matthew 5:48 as the original wording is the possible wordplay created in a reconstructed Aramaic version of Matthew 5:47–48. Black (1967:181) argues that 'greet' in Matthew 5:47, which in Semitic usage would be to ask for someone's 'peace' [*shelam*], forms a paronomasia with 'perfect' [*shelim*] in Matthew 5:48. Furthermore, Luke's use of οἰκτίρμων rather than τέλειος may reflect a deliberate 'simplification of a difficult expression' for his Gentile audience (Marshall 1978:265). Arguments in favour of viewing Luke 6:36 as the original wording include the hypothesis that τέλειος in Matthew 19:21 is a redactional addition by the author (Davies & Allison 1988:560–561; cf. the wording of Mk 10:21||Lk 18:22), which increases the likelihood that τέλειος in Matthew 5:48 is also the author's own addition. Moreover, the only other use of οἰκτίρμων in the New Testament is found in James 5:11. As there are various parallels between the sermon material in Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6:17–49 and the book of James (Bock 1994:605, 938 n. 11), the use of this adjective in James may suggest that Luke's version of 6:36 reflects the original wording of the saying.

Based on the evidence, especially the redactional nature of τέλειος in Matthew 19:21, the scale tips in favour of viewing Luke 6:36 as reflecting the original wording of the saying, and this is also the view of several prominent scholars (among others, Bock 1994:604–605; Davies & Allison 1988:560, 563; Marshall 1978:265; Nolland 1989:300). If this is correct, Matthew 5:48 was influenced by Luke 6:36; Matthew changed 'merciful' [οἰκτίρμων] to 'perfect' [τέλειος] and added 'heavenly' in the description of 'your Father'. The reason for Matthew's change is that Matthew 5:48 forms the conclusion not only of Matthew 5:43–48's teaching on loving enemies, but of Matthew 5:21–48 as a whole. Being 'perfect' captures the gist of Matthew 5:21–48 better than being 'merciful' (Luz 1989:346–347; Nolland 2005:271; cf. Stein 1992:209). Matthew consequently chose a more comprehensive synonym of 'merciful' for the purposes of his argument.

Having determined the unique emphases of Matthew 5:48 considering its synoptic counterpart in Luke 6:36, the article turns to investigating the most likely Old Testament backgrounds of Matthew 5:48 to reach a more nuanced interpretation of the verse.

Possible Old Testament backgrounds

The introduction of the article noted that a majority of scholars point out that the formulation of Matthew 5:48 is, in some way, based on or influenced by Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13.[7] What follows investigates these Old Testament verses and their possible influence on Matthew 5:48 in more detail by: (1) exploring traces of Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 in Matthew 5:48; (2) examining the original context and meaning of the Old Testament verses; and (3) reflecting on the possible bearing of these verses on the interpretation of Matthew 5:48.

Leviticus 19:2

Leviticus 19:2 states:

> Λάλησον τῇ συναγωγῇ τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἐρεῖς πρὸς αὐτούς Ἅγιοι ἔσεσθε, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἅγιος, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν (LXX Gottingensis editum = Wevers 1986:210) [Speak to the congregation of the sons of

6.Keener (2009:205) is of the opinion that 'to be perfect' (Mt 5:48) and 'to be merciful' (Lk 6:36) 'probably represent two ways to translate a single Aramaic term that Jesus used meaning "whole" or "complete"'.

7.Other literary parallels and possible influences have been noted by scholars. The influence of these sources on Matthew 5:48 is less likely than Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13, and due to space limitations, it is not discussed here. This includes the words of Abba Shaul in Tractate Shabbat 133b, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's interpretation of and elaboration on Leviticus 22:28, Did 1:4 and 6:2, and Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 15.13.

Israel, and you shall say to them: You shall be holy, for I am holy, the Lord your God] (NETS).

There are no major text-critical issues in Leviticus 19:2 that should be noted (see Wevers 1986:210 for the critical apparatus). Comparing the text of Leviticus 19:2 in the LXX with that of the MT reveals only one difference: in the MT, Moses is commanded to speak 'to all the congregation' [אֶל־כָּל־עֲדָה], while the LXX reads simply 'to the congregation' (τῇ συναγωγῇ). This omission of 'all' in the LXX may be due to haplography (Milgrom 2000:1602). The Hebrew word קָדוֹשׁ [holy] is translated as ἅγιος in the LXX.

Focusing on the form of Leviticus 19:2, clear parallels exist with both Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36: The addressees are exhorted to be something, and this is motivated by or compared to the character of God. A visual representation of this is found in Table 3.

Consequently, scholars conclude that the form of both Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36 is based on Leviticus 19:2 (Fitzmyer 2009:641). The form parallel between Leviticus 19:2 and Matthew 5:48 is even more striking than that of Leviticus 19:2 and Luke 6:36, as the exhortation in both verses is formed by the future indicative ἔσεσθε ([you shall be] – the equivalent to the imperative 'be'). Luke does, however, have the verb ending -εσθε that forms a parallel with ἔσεσθε. All three versions refer to God as 'your' [ὑμῶν] God, Father or heavenly Father. One difference in form is that Leviticus 19:2 refers to God in the first person ('I'), while both Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36 refer to him in the third person ('[heavenly] Father').

If the hypothesis is correct that Luke 6:36 reflects the original wording of the saying in Luke 6:36 and Matthew 5:48, then Luke 6:36 was likely influenced by the form of Leviticus 19:2 (Fitzmyer 2009:640–641; Stein 1992:209) and consequently, that the form of Matthew 5:48 was influenced by the form of Leviticus 19:2 via the form of Luke 6:36. The closer form resemblance of Matthew 5:48 to Leviticus 19:2 suggests that Matthew deliberately modified the form of the saying to resemble Leviticus 19:2 more closely. This possibility is strengthened by the number of references to Leviticus 19 in Matthew 5: Davies and Allison (1988:560) point out Leviticus 19:12 in Matthew 5:33, Leviticus 19:18 in Matthew 5:43 (quotation), and Leviticus 19:34 in Matthew 5:44. Even if Matthew's change was not intentional, the form of Matthew 5:48 echoes that of Leviticus 19:2.

In its original context, Leviticus 19 is a chapter consisting of a 'remarkably diverse miscellany of apodictic and casuistic laws' (Gane 2004:335). Its content is as variegated as its style (Kiuchi 2007:345), covering an assortment of moral and cultic laws. Leviticus 19 has various parallels with the Decalogue; in fact, several scholars view it as a reformulation or elucidation of the Decalogue (Kiuchi 2007:347; Milgrom 2000:1600–1601). Despite its diversity in content and style, Leviticus 19 is unified by 'the repetition of the formula for divine self-introduction' (Kleinig 2003:403; cf. Wenham 1983:263), namely a form of the phrase 'I am the Lord' (cf. Lv 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37).

TABLE 3: The form parallels between Leviticus 19:2, Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36.

Passage	Exhortation	Motivation and/or comparison	Character of God
Lv 19:2	Be holy	for	I am holy, the Lord your God
Mt 5:48	Be perfect	as	your heavenly Father is perfect
Lk 6:36	Be merciful	just as	your Father is merciful

Overall, Leviticus 19 teaches ritual and moral holiness. This is clear from the opening words of the chapter in which the Lord commands Moses to transmit the subsequent laws to the people of Israel (Lv 19:1–2a). The very first exhortation is that the people should be holy, for the Lord their God is holy (Lv 19:2b). This exhortation is the 'unifying, organizing principle' (Gane 2004:335) of the whole chapter, its 'primary superscription' (Gerstenberger 1996:261), or 'central thesis' (Hartley 1992:307). The call to holiness introduces the chapter, and all the statutes and laws found in the chapter are related to being holy (Kiuchi 2007:347; Milgrom 2000:1596). The remainder of Leviticus 19 explains how holiness is translated into everyday living (Wenham 1983:264). Consequently, Leviticus 19:2 makes an opening, comprehensive statement: the people are called to be holy because God is holy.

The call to holiness in Leviticus 19:2 also appears elsewhere in Leviticus (e.g. Lv 20:26; 21:8), most prominently in 11:44–45 [ἅγιοι ἔσεσθε, ὅτι ἅγιός εἰμι ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν … ἔσεσθε ἅγιοι, ὅτι ἅγιός εἰμι ἐγὼ κύριο]. However, the latter appears in the context of dietary laws, whereas Leviticus 19:2 relates directly to human conduct (Kiuchi 2007:345, 348).

The interpretation of Leviticus 19:2 has received considerable scholarly attention. The reference to God as holy indicates his exalted and glorious nature (Hartley 1992:312), while the command to be holy indicates that God is the source of holiness, and that Israel derives its holiness from him (Kleinig 2003:407). At a basic level, the verse calls the people of Israel to be different from other nations because the Lord their God is different (Rooker 2000:252). From the remainder of Leviticus 19, holiness is directly related to obedience to the Lord's laws and statutes, and obeying it wholeheartedly (Kiuchi 2007:347). Holiness is not merely outward observance of the law; it refers to wholehearted obedience to God based on the inner disposition and will to obey (cf. Milgrom 2004:220). Thus, the call to holiness is a call to strive for wholehearted obedience to God.

It is important to note that the word 'holy' is employed in two different ways in Leviticus 19:2. Defining 'holy' as wholehearted obedience fits the first occurrence of 'holy' in Leviticus 19:2a. However, it does not apply to the second occurrence of the adjective in the verse. The reference to God as 'holy' in Leviticus 19:2b does not suggest that he is 'wholeheartedly obedient' (Milgrom 2000:1604). He, and he alone, is 'holy' in the true sense of the word. Rather, by

obeying the law wholeheartedly, the people will be like God in the sense that they are set apart and reflect his ethical qualities.

Milgrom (2000:1598, 1602; 2004:215, 219) identifies two key emphases in Leviticus 19: (1) Holiness is not restricted to the priests – it applies to all of Israel; and (2) holiness is not limited to cultic rituals, but extends to ethical behaviour.

In light of these findings, several parallels can be drawn between Leviticus 19:2 and Matthew 5:48:

- Structurally, Leviticus 19:2 is an opening, comprehensive statement; Matthew 5:48, on the other hand, is a concluding, comprehensive statement.
- Leviticus 19:2 addresses all the people of Israel, not just the priests; the call to perfection in Matthew 5:48 is not aimed at an elite group of disciples, but at all followers of Jesus.
- Leviticus 19:2 concerns ethical and moral holiness; Matthew 5:48 concerns moral perfection.
- In Leviticus 19:2, God calls his people via Moses to be different; in Matthew 5:48 – and from the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus calls his followers to be different.
- Both verses call the addressees to imitate God (cf. Milgrom 2004:212, 219).

In summary, the call to holiness in Leviticus 19:2a is a call to wholehearted obedience to God. If the exhortation in Leviticus 19:2 influenced the form of the exhortation in Matthew 5:48, the question arises whether it also influences the meaning of Matthew 5:48. More specifically, should 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48a be understood as 'wholehearted obedience'? While this seems like a possibility, the hypothesis can be further tested by investigating the second Old Testament verse considered as a background to Matthew 5:48, namely Deuteronomy 18:13.

Deuteronomy 18:13

Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX) states:

> τέλειος ἔσῃ ἔναντι κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου (LXX Gottingensis editum = Wevers 2006:224) [You shall be perfect before the Lord your God] (NETS).

There are no major text-critical matters in Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX) (see Wevers [2006:224] for the apparatus). The only question concerns whether the text should contain the preposition ἐναντίον or the adverb ἔναντι (which functions as a preposition with the genitive). The text of Rahlfs' Septuagint reads ἐναντίον, while Wevers' critical edition reads ἔναντι. This article adopts the latter.

The grammar of Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX) is straightforward: the verb ἔσῃ is a future indicative form of εἰμί, implying a command: 'you shall be' = 'be'. Τέλειος serves as the complement of the verb, indicating that the addressees should be 'perfect'. The sentence is qualified by the prepositional clause ἔναντι κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου, indicating that the people's 'perfect' disposition or conduct should be before the Lord their God.

Deuteronomy 18:13 (LXX) and Matthew 5:48 share two notable features: both contain the adjective τέλειος and a future indicative form of the verb εἰμί with the nuance of an imperative, τέλειος ἔσῃ (Dt 18:13) versus ἔσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι (Mt 5:48). This combination of τέλειος with a future indicative form of εἰμί is found nowhere else in the LXX,[8] which suggests that Matthew is echoing Deuteronomy 18:13 in Matthew 5:48. It appears that Matthew has assimilated Deuteronomy 18:13 to the form of Leviticus 19:2 in his version of the wording found in Luke 6:36 (Davies & Allison 1988:560).[9]

If this is so, the following question arises: How does Deuteronomy 18:13 influence the interpretation of Matthew 5:48? To answer this, a brief analysis of Deuteronomy 18:13 in the MT is required as well as a closer look at its original context.

A literal translation of Deuteronomy 18:13 from the MT renders the following: 'Complete or Sound [תָּמִים] you shall be with the Lord your God'. As previously discussed in relation to Matthew 5:48, it was found that the Hebrew adjective תָּמִים typically refers to 'perfect' things or persons, and in terms of the latter, it is used, among others, to refer to ethical uprightness or absolute allegiance to God. This interpretation fits well within the context of Deuteronomy 18:13 (MT), where the people are exhorted to a specific disposition or conduct before the Lord their God.

Within its original context, Deuteronomy 18:13 forms part of a broader section, Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22, which outlines Israel's civil and religious administration (Coetsee 2023:7). This passage discusses four types of leadership and their responsibilities, namely judges and officials (Dt 16:18–17:13); the king (Dt 17:14–20); priests (Dt 18:1–8); and prophets (Dt 18:9–22). Deuteronomy 18:13 is part of the latter. It forms part of Deuteronomy 18:9–14, which prohibits certain practices used to determine the divine will such as child sacrifice, divination, soothsaying, magic practices, and consulting the dead (see Tigay 1996:172–173 for discussion).

The structure of these verses is straightforward: When the people of Israel enters the promised land, they must not imitate the abominable practices of the nations living there (Dt 18:9). This is followed by a list of forbidden practices (Dt 18:10–11), and the explanation that the Lord is driving the people out because of these practices (Dt 18:12). Israel, by

8. Note the combination of τέλειος with the present participle ὢν in Genesis 6:9 (LXX), and τέλειος with the present subjunctive ᾖ in Wis of Sol 9:6.

9. Davies and Allison (1988:560) posit the striking argument: 'If, as we have tentatively suggested, the first three paragraphs in 5.21–48 take up teaching from Deuteronomy while the second three paragraphs cite texts from Leviticus, it is satisfying to discover in the final verse of 5.21–48 the influence of both Leviticus and Deuteronomy.'

contrast, must be 'perfect' before the Lord their God (Dt 18:13) and they are not allowed to consult fortune-tellers or diviners (Dt 18:14).

Within this structure, Deuteronomy 18:13 is the positive counterpart to the abominable practices that Israel should avoid. More specifically, the shift from the list of prohibited practices to the single positive exhortation in Deuteronomy 18:13 implies that Israel should 'remain completely with the Lord' [*ganz und gar bei JHWH zu bleiben*] (Otto 2016:1496), that is, to be completely loyal and committed to him (Block 2012:438; Brueggemann 2001:194; Christensen 2001:409; Tigay 1996:174; cf. McConville 2002:301). To the Lord their God alone Israel is to be wholeheartedly committed. This is how the NRSV translates Deuteronomy 18:13: 'You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God'. Israel will be true to this exhortation if they follow his statutes and laws – in this case those outlined in Deuteronomy 18:9–14.

Consequently, 'perfect' [τέλειος] in Deuteronomy 18:13 is best understood as a reference to wholehearted obedience to God, rather than moral perfection per se (Lundbom 2013:553). If Matthew 5:48a alludes to Deuteronomy 18:13, as appears likely, 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48a may likewise be understood as wholehearted obedience (Brueggemann 2001:194). This interpretation aligns well with the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus calls for wholehearted obedience to the laws of God as interpreted by him.

Preliminary conclusion

Based on the influence of Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13 on Matthew 5:48, the reference to 'perfect' [τέλειος] in Matthew 5:48a likely refers to wholehearted obedience, and not moral perfection per se. This preliminary conclusion can be assessed by investigating how the language of perfection is employed elsewhere in Matthew.

Perfection language elsewhere in Matthew: Matthew 19:21

The only other occurrence of τέλειος in the Gospel, apart from Matthew 5:48, is found in Matthew 19:21. In fact, this is the only other instance of τέλειος in the Gospels (cf. Bock 1994:605; Davies 1964:210).

Matthew 19:16–30 contains the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man (Mt 19:16–22) and his subsequent discussion with his disciples (Mt 19:23–30). The rich young man's initial question was, 'What good deed must I do to have eternal life?' (Mt 19:16). After Jesus replies to that, 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments' (Mt 19:17), the young man responds, 'Which ones?' (Mt 19:18b), to which Jesus responds by referring to several moral laws pertaining to human conduct towards one another (Mt 19:18b–19).[10] The young man then says, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' (Mt 19:20), to which Jesus replies in Matthew 19:21:

> ἔφη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Εἰ θέλεις τέλειος εἶναι, ὕπαγε πώλησόν σου τὰ ὑπάρχοντα καὶ δὸς [*τοῖς*] πτωχοῖς, καὶ ἕξεις θησαυρὸν ἐν οὐρανοῖς, καὶ δεῦρο ἀκολούθει μοι. (NA28) [Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'] (NRSV).

Matthew 19:21 consists of five parts: (1) an introductory clause ('Jesus said to him'); (2) a protasis ('if […]'); (3) an apodosis ('go, sell […] and give […]' [syntactically: three imperatives]); (4) a promise ('and you will have […]'); and (5) a concluding exhortation ('then come, follow me' [syntactically: an adverb of place functioning as an interjection followed by an imperative]).

For the current investigation, the key issue is how the adjective τέλειος in the protasis should be interpreted. From the wording of Matthew 19:21, perfection is associated with selling one's possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor. From the preceding verses, however, more is in view. On the young man's reference to 'what good deed' he must 'do' (ἀγαθὸν ποιήσω – Mt 19:16), Jesus responds that he 'should keep the commandments' (τήρησον τὰς ἐντολάς – Mt 19:17) and the young man replies, 'I have kept all these' (Πάντα ταῦτα ἐφύλαξα – Mt 19:20). This shows that perfection is directly tied to obedience to God's laws. Yet, given the flow of the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man, as well as the man's reaction of going away 'sorrowful' (from λυπέω – Mt 19:22) after hearing Jesus' response in Matthew 19:21, it is evident that perfection involves more than obedience to God's laws. The young man clearly kept God's laws – up to the point where he wondered what else remains to be done. This leads to the preliminary conclusion that perfection in Matthew 19:21 includes obedience to all of God's laws, along with their broader application in mind.

This interpretation is confirmed when Matthew 19:21 is compared to its synoptic counterparts, namely Mark 10:21 and Luke 18:22. In Mark 10:21, Jesus replies to the young man: 'You lack one thing' [Ἓν σε ὑστερεῖ]; in Luke 18:22, the response is 'There is still one thing lacking' [Ἔτι ἕν σοι λείπει]. The verbs employed in these verses are synonymous: both ὑστερέω and λείπω refer to the act of being deficient in something (cf. Bauer et al. 2000:590, 1044). To be 'perfect' (Mt 19:21) is therefore the opposite of 'lacking' something (Gibbs 2010:966; Nolland 2005:792); it is to lack nothing (Mk 10:21 || Lk 18:22); thus, to be 'perfect' is to keep all of God's laws.

This understanding of Matthew 19:21 is further supported by Didache 6:2. The wording and content of the Didache indicates that it was influenced by and follows the Matthean tradition. It states: 'For if you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you cannot, do as much as you can'. 'Perfect' here is 'to bear the whole yoke of the Lord';

10.Strikingly, Matthew 19:19 contains another reference to Leviticus 19, which is prevalent in Matthew 5, by alluding to Leviticus 19:18, 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

that is, to keep all his commandments, and to keep them 'without any reduction' (Luz 1989:346, 347 n. 59).

Consequently, perfection in Matthew 19:21 refers to complete obedience to God; that is, the keeping of all of God's commandments in their entirety (Luz 2001:513; Nolland 2005:792). This amounts to total commitment to God (Hagner 1995:558; Turner 2008:470; Wilson 2022b:149), grounded in an inner disposition and a will to obey God wholeheartedly (Davies & Allison 1997:48; cf. Keener 2009:475; Morris 1992:491).[11]

In summary, perfection in Matthew 19:21 is best interpreted as wholehearted obedience to God. This strongly suggests that τέλειος in Matthew 5:48a should be understood in the same way.

Conclusion

This article examined the exhortation in Matthew 5:48 that the addressees should 'be perfect […] as your heavenly Father is perfect'. It was found that reading Matthew 5:48 considering its most likely Old Testament backgrounds leads to a more nuanced interpretation of the verse. Based on Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13, the reference to the perfection expected of the addressees in Matthew 5:48a does not refer to moral perfection per se, but to wholehearted obedience. This view was further supported by how the language of perfection is used in Matthew 19:21.

This interpretation of Matthew 5:48a is also affirmed by its immediate context. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to complete loyalty to God, not merely complying to the letter of the law (see the six antitheses in Mt 5:21–48). If Matthew 5:48 is the conclusion not only of 5:43–48 but of all six antitheses, then the interpretation of 'perfect' as wholehearted obedience in Matthew 5:48a fits very well. In the immediate context, Jesus exhorts his followers to wholehearted obedience to God by loving their enemies (Mt 5:43–48), motivated by the character of God himself (Mt 5:45). He also calls them to obedience in matters of anger (Mt 5:21–26), adultery (Mt 5:27–30), divorce (Mt 5:31–32), oaths (Mt 5:33–37), and retaliation (Mt 5:38–42).

However, interpreting 'perfect' in Matthew 5:48b as 'wholehearted obedience' does not make sense. God is not obedient to anyone; he is God. Nor does he require instruction in morality; he is morally perfect. This confirms that τέλειος in Matthew 5:48a and τέλειος in Matthew 5:48b are used in similar but not identical ways. In the former, it refers to wholehearted obedience; in the latter, it refers to the morally perfect character of God (cf. the two entries for τέλειος in Bauer et al. 2000:996 [§4]).

11.Throughout the history of interpretation, scholars have debated whether this passage refers to two kinds of believers, namely (standard) believers and those who are 'perfect'. Davies and Allison (1997:47–48) provide six convincing reasons why Matthew 19:21 does not refer to two groups of believers. Also see discussion in Luz (2001:514).

The key to understanding Matthew 5:48 lies in recognising that in Matthew 5:48b God is used as a comparative; he is the ideal set before the addressees. The words of Matthew 5:48 exhorts the addressees to the most intensive form of *imitatio Dei* by pointing to God's character as the ideal to pursue. By obeying their Father in heaven wholeheartedly, that is, by being fully obedient to the laws of God as interpreted by Jesus, they will reflect his character. As they grow in wholehearted obedience, they will reflect his character increasingly. Ultimately, then, Matthew 5:48 is a call to sanctification.

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