



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 40: Your Divine Potential



Your Divine Potential

Whereas man is often most interested in his temporary comfort and prosperity, God intends something much grander: to transform man into a being after His own likeness, who is not a servant but a friend. This transformation may involve challenges and sacrifices which are different from what man, with his shorter perspective, might desire for himself. Although God can help, the transformation is voluntary and cannot be bestowed or granted to a subject who is not a full participant in the process. It cannot occur passively while one is preoccupied in the pursuit of worldly cares, or with less than one's full and consistent effort.

Difficulty of the Topic

Many theological errors have arisen over the misunderstanding of the relationship between man and god. On one hand, critics are quick to make charges of blasphemy over any discussion of man's divine potential, and often misrepresent or sensationalize the matter to promote a sectarian agenda. On the other hand, some individuals may hold exaggerated views of man's potential to become like God which may extend beyond scriptural teachings into the realm of tradition and folklore. The term deification, which is sometimes used to refer to teachings about man's divine potential, only confuses the matter. This term is nowhere found in scripture, and is often applied simplistically. Scriptural teachings about man's divine potential are more complex, as man can become like God in some ways, yet not in others. We will therefore discuss specific teachings of scripture without attempting to characterize them with semantic labels which may be misunderstood.

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Differences between Man and God

Differences between man and god are manifold. God is the creator; we are the created. Jesus Christ had life in himself: "For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself."^[1] Jesus gave up his life and took it back through the resurrection. Yet we have no power either to give or to restore our own life, and are wholly dependent on the power of the resurrection through Jesus Christ when "the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God, and they that hear shall live."^[2]

Christ lived a sinless life.^[3] He was the Great High Priest who did not need to make sacrifice for His own sins, but offered Himself as the perfect ransom for mankind.^[4] We, having "sinned and come short of the glory of God"^[5] are entirely dependent upon grace and mercy through Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Without Him, even our best efforts would offer no possibility of salvation.

Man will always be in debt to God, both in this life and in the hereafter. Far from meriting salvation through his own efforts, the individual who follows Christ's teachings only becomes increasingly indebted to God as he receives blessings. The Book of Mormon prophet King Benjamin taught:

"If ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. And behold, all

that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you. And now, in the first place, he hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him. And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast? And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you."[\[6\]](#)

All of these differences between man and God are permanent ones. God will always be the Creator, and we the created; He is our Heavenly Father, we are His children. Christ is the Redeemer, and we are (or can be) the redeemed; He is the Lord, and we are His servants; He is the creditor, and we are the indebted. In the last days, man will be humbled and "the Lord alone will be exalted."[\[7\]](#) Whatever reward or gift the disciples of Christ may receive in this life or in the world to come, these fundamental relationships will not change.

Our Divine Heritage

Genesis teaches that, in contrast to other creations, man is made in God's image:

"God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."[\[8\]](#)

God's statement "Let us make man in our own image" implies that he is speaking to other associates. God the Father is on a higher level, even though He addresses them as peers, much in the way that Jesus spoke to His disciples as friends while remaining superior to them. The creation by God and His associates "in our image, after our likeness" of both male and female suggests that gender is a characteristic not only of mortals, but is an eternal trait of the divine. Heavenly Father must be accompanied by a Heavenly Mother, as nothing divine is without purpose or use.

Man's Divine Potential

Notwithstanding these many immutable differences and our everlasting debt to God, God offers mankind divine potential. Christ prayed that his disciples, both contemporary and future, "all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us...that they may be made perfect in one."[\[9\]](#) Christ is praying for believers to achieve unity of spirit and purpose with Him, as mortals obviously cannot become Christ or Heavenly Father. Jesus further taught that his disciples could become not merely servants, but friends who received knowledge of God's will:

"Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you."[\[10\]](#)

Christ is Lord. This elevation of disciples from servants to friends cannot be earned on our own merits, but is given by "grace..through faith...lest any man should boast."[\[11\]](#)

Receiving the Divine Nature

In the dialogue Phaedo, Socrates taught that, through continued striving for purity, man can partake of the divine nature, receive an eternal reward of the light of truth and enter the society of other pure souls:

"We make the nearest approach to knowledge when we ... remain pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and ... converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth...But he who is a [lover of wisdom] or lover of learning, and is entirely pure at departing, is alone permitted to reach the gods. And this is the reason ... why the true votaries of [wisdom] abstain from all fleshly lusts, and endure and refuse to give themselves up to them. Those too who have been pre-eminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth; and of these, such as have duly purified themselves with [the love of wisdom] live henceforth ... in mansions fairer still which may not be described, and of which the time would fail me to tell."

Christ offers this divine nature to his disciples, along with the accompanying eternal reward. We must accept this gift by keeping His commandments and fostering the development of divine attributes. Christ commanded His disciples: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."[\[12\]](#) Although this perfection is not achievable for man alone, imperfect humans can perfect themselves with Christ's help by following His example and teachings: "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."[\[13\]](#) The Apostle Peter wrote:

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."[\[14\]](#)

As Peter observed, it is lust, covetousness, and misplaced desires which give rise to the spiritual corruption and separate us from God. We must learn to control our impulses and desires to replace carnal nature with divine nature. The Greek philosopher Epictetus expounded in the Enchiridion:

"Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party. Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take your share with moderation. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you. Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches, and you will eventually be a worthy partner of the feasts of the gods. And if you don't even take the things which are set before you, but are able even to reject them, then you will not only be a partner at the feasts of the gods, but also of their empire. For, by doing this, Diogenes, Heraclitus and others like them, deservedly became, and were called, divine."

Epictetus observed that through discipline, patience, and humility, men can become worthy of the feast of the gods; by bridling our passions and increasing our self-mastery still further, we can become like them.

The greatest praise rendered to ancient saints was that their desires were after the heart of God. Genesis records that "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God."^[15] I have often contemplated the greatness of the patriarch Abraham, revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, and perhaps the world's most influential religious figure after Jesus alone. Yet we have no record of any miracle performed by Abraham, nor of any prophecy other than his record of covenant promises. For what cause is he revered as father of the faithful? Perhaps the most significant is that "he was called the friend of God,"^[16] having partaken of the divine nature such that his heart was one with God.

The gospel covenant centers on achieving divine nature by internalizing Christ's teachings and principles so that they become part of us: "This is the covenant that I will make with them... saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them."^[17] As they become part of us, we are also transformed. Just as Christ overcame the world,^[18] His faithful followers can also overcome and replace carnal nature with divine nature.^[19] John wrote: "whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."^[20] Those that overcome will partake of the bread of life,^[21] "shall be clothed in white raiment," "shall not be hurt of the second death,"^[22] shall not be blotted out of the book of life, shall be confessed before the father and his angels,^[23] and shall receive an eternal abode in the new Jerusalem.^[24] Christ promises: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me on my throne"^[25] ... "He that overcometh shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he will be my son."^[26]

What Lack I Yet?

We should frequently ask ourselves the scriptural question "what lack I yet?"^[27] to understand and remedy any flaws that may be holding us back from partaking of the divine nature and receiving salvation. Confucius observed the need for continued striving for self-improvement: "The superior man will watch over himself when he is alone. He examines his heart that there may be nothing wrong there, and that he may have no cause of dissatisfaction with himself." He described his own spiritual journey:

"At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At Fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right."

Jesus declared: "blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled;"^[28] Christ's teachings to his disciples in ancient America after His resurrection complete the thought: "they shall be filled with the holy spirit."^[29] King Lamoni's promise to God that "I will give away all my sins to know thee"^[30] reflects the terms on which individuals come to know God and receive the divine nature. Those who experience true conversion attest that "their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil."^[31] Those who God knew "shalt not ask that which is contrary to [His] will"^[32] could be blessed and trusted by God to do His work.

Love of God, Love of Neighbor

Love is key to unlocking our divine potential. Jesus taught that love of God – not with words or occasional acts, but with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and love of others, are the two great commandments upon which all others are based.^[33] Christ taught that His disciples would be known not by esoteric doctrinal distinctions, but by the love manifested in their conduct: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."^[34]

Jesus taught: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven"^[35] and partakers of His divine nature. The apostle John taught:

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"^[36] "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes."^[37]

One may say, "it is easy to love God because He is perfect; my brother is not." Yet such an attitude misses the point. It is precisely by putting aside strife, pettiness, and real or perceived offenses that we demonstrate our love for our Heavenly Father, who commands us to forgive all men.^[38] Only as we extend mercy and forgiveness to others do we receive it for ourselves.

The Worth of Souls

Understanding mankind's divine potential helps us to appreciate that those around us are of great worth, and should be treated with respect and consideration benefiting fellow children of our Heavenly Father. Confucius taught: "The nobler sort of man emphasizes the good qualities in others, and does not accentuate the bad. The inferior does the reverse." He further admonished: "Behave toward everyone as if receiving a great guest." The Doctrine and Covenants declares:

"Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance. And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!"^[39]

Earthly Sacrifices, Eternal Blessings

Knowledge of our divine potential and faith in God's justice and mercy help us to understand that receiving the divine nature is more important than worldly successes or personal sacrifices. Epictetus recommended that all people keep before them daily this maxim of Plato from the Crito: "if it thus pleases the gods, thus let it be. Anytus and Melitus may kill me indeed, but hurt me they cannot."

Christ declared: "whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."^[40] ... "Fear

not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." [\[41\]](#) He further taught of eternal rewards when mortal sacrifices are made for the right reasons: "And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." [\[42\]](#) The greatest reward of righteousness is not in external blessings, but in the internal transformation which supplants carnal nature with divine nature, and allows us through Christ's grace to receive eternal life. The Book of Mormon prophet Moroni exhorted: "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you." [\[43\]](#)

The best this earth has to offer is a mere shadow compared to the greater and more beautiful possibilities of eternity. The Apostle Paul declared: "it is written, eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." [\[44\]](#) He observed: "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." [\[45\]](#) Christ taught His disciples: "In my Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you." [\[46\]](#) As beings with divine heritage and eternal potential, why should we "spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy?" [\[47\]](#) Christ freely offers us the bread and water of life so that "he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" [\[48\]](#)... "the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." [\[49\]](#) Is anything less worthy of being sought with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength?

The Call to Sanctification

The name of Christ's church today, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlights Christ's central role as savior and head of the Church and the restoration of the Church in the last days following centuries of apostasy and confusion. The inclusion of the word "saints" signifies the daily striving for holiness which is and must be the primary distinction between members of the true Church of Jesus Christ and members of other faiths. The power and purpose of the Church consists not only in gospel teaching, the fellowship of the faithful, and the performance of essential gospel ordinances through priesthood authority, although all of these things are important. These elements are necessary, yet not sufficient, for us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord. We must make affirmative choices to implement the Savior's teachings in our lives and accept the divine nature which He offers us.

The Book of Mormon prophet Alma asked key questions that members of the Lord's Church should regularly ponder in assessing personal spiritual progress: "I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" [\[50\]](#) The great purpose of our faith is to develop gospel attributes through following the example of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, to put off the carnal man and to be made anew after His image and likeness, to be sanctified and redeemed through the power of His atonement, and to become His instruments bringing others to Him so that they may also partake of the salvation He offers, so that "when he appears, we shall be like Him." [\[51\]](#) May we never forget these central purposes of our faith as we strive to always remember Him and thus fulfill our divine potential.

[\[1\]](#) John 5:26
[\[2\]](#) John 5:25
[\[3\]](#) Hebrews 4:15
[\[4\]](#) Hebrews 7:27
[\[5\]](#) Romans 3:23
[\[6\]](#) Mosiah 2:21-25
[\[7\]](#) Isaiah 2:11
[\[8\]](#) Genesis 1:26-27
[\[9\]](#) John 17:21,23
[\[10\]](#) John 15:14-15
[\[11\]](#) Ephesians 2:8-9
[\[12\]](#) Matthew 5:48
[\[13\]](#) John 13:1
[\[14\]](#) 2 Peter 1:4
[\[15\]](#) Genesis 6:9
[\[16\]](#) James 2:23, 2 Chronicles 20:7
[\[17\]](#) Hebrews 10:16
[\[18\]](#) John 16:33
[\[19\]](#) 1 John 4:4, 1 John 5:4-5 D&C 63:47
[\[20\]](#) 1 John 5:4
[\[21\]](#) Revelation 2:17
[\[22\]](#) Revelation 2:11
[\[23\]](#) Revelation 3:5
[\[24\]](#) Revelation 3:12
[\[25\]](#) Revelation 3:21
[\[26\]](#) Revelation 21:7
[\[27\]](#) Matthew 19:20
[\[28\]](#) Matthew 5:6
[\[29\]](#) 3 Nephi 12:6
[\[30\]](#) Alma 22:18
[\[31\]](#) Alma 19:33
[\[32\]](#) Helaman 10:5
[\[33\]](#) Matthew 22:37-40
[\[34\]](#) John 13:35
[\[35\]](#) Matthew 5:44-45
[\[36\]](#) 1 John 4:20
[\[37\]](#) 1 John 2:9-11
[\[38\]](#) Matthew 6:14-15, D&C 64:10
[\[39\]](#) D&C 18:10-13
[\[40\]](#) Matthew 16:25
[\[41\]](#) Matthew 10:28
[\[42\]](#) Matthew 19:29
[\[43\]](#) Moroni 10:32
[\[44\]](#) 1 Corinthians 2:9
[\[45\]](#) Romans 8:18
[\[46\]](#) John 14:2
[\[47\]](#) 2 Nephi 9:51
[\[48\]](#) John 6:35
[\[49\]](#) John 4:14
[\[50\]](#) Alma 5:14
[\[51\]](#) 1 John 3:2