

Are You a People-Pleaser Instead of a God-Pleaser?

People-pleasers are everywhere. They can parade as successful pastors or as top-of-the-corporate-ladder executives. The most easily identified are the passive, codependent types.

All pleasers are out to prove they are valuable people—trying to quiet the voice within that says they aren't. People-pleasers play a tape that says, "People will love and accept me if I please them." Their myth says, "You are somebody when you please others."

Pleasers believe that a failure to please will result in rejection and the false assumption that they are not valuable. As a result, they go about trying to make everybody but themselves happy.

This frequently requires pleasers to keep their own thoughts, desires and needs locked away in their inner selves. They believe their mission on Earth is to drive themselves into an emotional breakdown, if necessary, to make sure others approve of them. When they fail to please someone, they feel guilty or believe (probably unconsciously) that their world is going to end.

The paradoxical dynamic that takes place is that the very individuals to whom people-pleasers try to prove their worth very often use and abuse them. Instead of gaining respect as a pleaser, you often lose it. So trying to please everyone to feel you are "somebody" is a dead-end street. You will eventually find yourself exhausted, disillusioned and feeling less like somebody than ever.

Instead, resolve with God's help to redirect your life and energy toward becoming a whole and healthy person who does not require the acceptance and affirmation of others to say, "I am

valuable.”

Are You a People-Pleaser?

The first step toward freedom from “people pleasing” is to determine if you are a people-pleaser. You can do this by honestly answering the following questions:

- Do you accept responsibility for the happiness of others?
- Do you believe you can make others happy?
- Do you feel guilty when you think of yourself instead of others?
- Do you feel guilty when you tell someone no?
- Do you believe it is un-Christian to think of yourself and your own health and emotional well-being?
- Do you feel better about yourself when you give in to the desires of others rather than pleasing yourself?
- Are you able to set boundaries when it comes to your own health and emotional well-being?
- Do you understand what it means to set boundaries?

A people-pleaser would answer yes to the first six questions and no to the last two. If you conclude that you are a people-pleaser, then what are you to do?

If you are a people-pleaser, you need to redirect your need to please. Your focus needs to change from horizontal to vertical. In other words, you need to become more concerned with what pleases God than with what pleases others. They are not the same thing, as many people believe.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:1 that we are to “present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” (NKJV). But if we are going to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice (and people-pleasers literally do this), then it must be to God alone. We are to please Him first, and He is the only one we are to worship.

The flip side of this truth is that when we give our all to please others, we are in fact engaging in a type of worship toward those we want to please. Many pleasers believe this kind of behavior is “virtuous,” but it isn’t—because it is done with the unconscious motive of getting approval and acceptance in return.

Are we to please God hoping to get something from Him? No, we please Him by recognizing what we have already received from Him. When God brings us into relationship with Himself, we become somebody. The full realization of this comes with time as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s efforts to “grow us” into the persons we were meant to be.

Once our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit, we begin to see and understand that it is God’s will for us to seek to “be somebody” in His sight rather than in the eyes of others. We can also find an answer to the question I am asked so often: “What am I supposed to do when I am asked to do this or that?”

For the Christian, the answer is simple: Focus on pleasing God by seeking to know His will for each situation as it arises. It is not necessarily God’s will for us to do everything we are asked to do, even in the church! When our heart’s desire is to please God, we will be able to put others’ needs and desires in a healthy perspective.

Weary people-pleaser, ask God to forgive you for trying to please everyone else besides Him. Begin to believe you are now somebody in the kingdom of God because God says so.

We change our beliefs about our personhood by believing the truths of God’s Word rather than by continuing to believe our myths. This is the first step toward positive change. Next come the behavioral changes.

Changing Pleaser Behavior

People-pleasers need to budget their time and energy as they would financial budgets. This means they must prioritize their

lives and determine how much time will be allotted for specific people and activities, including themselves. I suggest the following order (in order of importance): relationship with God; family (marriage, children, parents); employment; personal time (time alone with God, time alone with self); self-care; church; community; other.

God asks for the No. 1 position in our lives. We commit to that when we make the decision to become a disciple of Jesus Christ (Luke 14:25-33). The problem is that some people-pleasers wrongly believe that being “a good Christian” means pleasing others. They believe they are putting God first when they say yes to a good cause, especially if it is a church-related activity. They have not confronted this myth with reality.

When God reigns at the top of our list of priorities, we can trust Him to show us where to place other people, ourselves and all other involvements. When our vertical relationship with God is right, then our horizontal relationships will naturally fall into their rightful places. The same is true of the commitments we make.

So how do we divide or budget our time commitments according to our priorities? First, we must recognize that God wants us to make our families our No. 1 priority under Him. When over-commitment begins to rob us of time that should be given to our families, it is time to say no.

You may notice that after employment I listed “personal time.” It makes sense to me that if you don’t take some time for yourself, then the time you give to others won’t amount to much! If there ever was a person with a vision, a purpose and a consuming passion, it was Jesus the Son of Man. Yet He was not a people-pleaser. Have you noticed that when He needed time for Himself, He took it?

The Gospel of Luke records, “At daybreak Jesus went out to a

solitary place" (Luke 4:42, NIV). Since the Lord had been up all night healing the sick and casting out demons, He was exhausted. Instead of expecting His heavenly Father to give Him supernatural strength to continue, the Lord recognized His need for rest and rejuvenation.

We need to designate time in our busy schedules for us to nurture our relationships with our heavenly Father. We must be fed from the Word of God and energized by the Holy Spirit to be fruit-bearing Christians.

We also need time to minister to ourselves. This means taking time for reflection, time that is used to get in touch with ourselves to find out where we are, where we want to go and (sometimes) where we have been.

These times of reflection should always be under the direction of the Holy Spirit. We must become still and quiet to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit that is so vital to our spiritual health. The Scriptures tell us He knows all about us, and He knows the mind of God (Rom. 8:27). We need this information to confront our myths with reality.

Quiet times provide the vital opportunities people-pleasers need to get things into perspective. A clear perspective can help pleasers make wise decisions about all the requests and demands put on their time by others. This helps bring order and control to their agitated lives as they sort out their priorities and allocate their time. By spending time with God and with themselves, people-pleasers will be able to put the obligations of home, church, community and other areas in their rightful places in their time budgets.

People-pleasers often experience guilt when it comes to saying "yes" to themselves. But it can prove to be one of the best investments of time you will ever make.

Another vital step needed to break free from people-pleasing is to learn how to set boundaries. Boundaries differentiate us

from other people.

People-pleasers have difficulty erecting fences between themselves and others. They lack the ability to set limits that declare what they will or will not do, or what they will or will not tolerate.

People-pleasers can be unaware that certain things belong to them personally, such as the right to say “no” when they want to say no, and “yes” when they want to say yes. They can also be too afraid to build personal fences for fear of hurting others or of somehow displeasing God.

The truth of the matter is that when we allow others to take advantage of us, we are encouraging and assisting them in their disobedience. God is not pleased with anyone who uses and abuses another!

People-pleasers can gain the respect and sense of personhood they are searching for by setting firm boundaries regarding their involvement in the lives of others. When it is necessary to tell others no to choose what is best for ourselves (according to our God-ordained priorities), or even to submit to our own valid needs or desires, we should do it graciously but steadfastly.

People-pleasers can effectively change their self-defeating behavior once they begin to view themselves as separate from others, sharing equal standing in the kingdom of God with everyone else. Each individual person bears the image of the Creator Himself.

Everyone enters the kingdom “by grace ... through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Grace is “the unmerited favor of God,” and we don’t receive it by our “works” or good deeds (v. 9).

We all enter God’s kingdom through the same gate: Jesus Christ. None of us is good enough to enter on our own merits.

Our real value depends solely on our potential in Christ.

You and I have every reason to accept ourselves once we are convinced that we are children of God and that we are loved, forgiven and accepted by Him. When we are self-accepting, we don't have to seek the approval and acceptance of others to confirm our personhood.

As pleasers accept the truth of their value in Christ and learn to budget their time according to their priorities and limits, they will soon feel positive new feelings about themselves. Their old behavior of looking to others for affirmation will fall away, and they will find themselves seeking out God rather than people for the satisfaction that only He can provide.

Read a companion devotional.

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