

Break Out of the Prison of Your Body Image

Having the shape of your dreams isn't your ticket to happiness. It's learning to love the skin you're in.

Imagine a world where everyone looks like Barbie and Ken. Try to imagine yourself as a Barbie, talking to the other Barbies and Kens.

Would you like yourself? Would you think you were as pretty as the other Barbies? Would you be envious of them?

Would everyone in the group be happy with how they look? Or would some be depressed, struggling with a negative body image? Would others feel better than everyone else based on how they look?

It wouldn't take long for the individuals to find a way to look different from the rest of the group. The girls who needed to think of themselves as better than the others would do their hair in a different way to try to validate their importance.

People would pierce and tattoo, cut and shave—anything to look unique and different from one another. Even if we all looked exactly the same, our inner faults would reveal our imperfection.

Perfection isn't achieved through having flat abs or firm breasts. In fact, we can never achieve perfection when it comes to our bodies. So why do we strive so hard to attain it?

Measuring Up

If you want to know to what extent perfectionism influences your thinking about your body image, consider the following statements. Which ones do you think are true?

- Beautiful people have the best lives.
- I know that if people see me before I get myself fixed up, they won't like me.
- How people look reflects how valuable they are to society.
- The way I look is a big reason I haven't achieved what I've wanted to in life.
- The only way I could ever be happy with the way I look is if I could change several of my physical characteristics.
- If I can get my looks right, then I can have the relationships, job, joy and peace I want.
- I am ashamed of how I look.

Actually, all these statements represent wrong assumptions that affect our body images negatively. If you buy into any of them, perhaps it's time to think about what fuels your perfectionism about your body.

The quest for perfection goes back to the time before the first man and woman were created. The true roots of a poor body image are found in the same source as misinformation and self-deception: Satan.

Satan is not called the father of perfectionism in the Bible, but he tempts us to strive for this goal regarding our bodies. According to Ezekiel 28, God made Satan in awesome beauty and splendor. He was the model of perfection—the measuring stick for what is beautiful in God's creation (vv. 11-15).

God didn't make Satan only beautiful, though; He also made him wise. But Satan did not use his wisdom to glorify God (Ezek. 28:17). The pride he took in his own beauty corrupted his wisdom and caused him to think he could glorify himself and become more important than he already was by completely taking over God's kingdom (Is. 14:13-14).

Evidently, after Satan was cast down to Earth, he still

desired to use wisdom and beauty for influence. When he came in the form of an animal to tempt the man and woman, he chose the serpent (Gen. 3:1-15).

The serpent was the craftiest of all the wild animals. When God judged the serpent, He consigned him to crawling on his belly and eating dust throughout his existence on Earth (v. 14).

Although he can disguise himself as an angel of light, he has lost all the beauty that once adorned his being. He was originally a bright and morning star in heaven, but he will eventually be cast down to the grave with maggots and worms (see Is. 14:11-12).

I believe that poor body image is closely related to original sin by way of the originator of sin, Satan himself. The spiritual root of all body image struggles is disapproving of the way God made you.

I don't know anyone who struggles with a poor body image who would say that she desires to be beautiful so she can worship God more fully. However, in our flesh, each of us desires to be accepted, to be better than others and to stand out.

Our striving for acceptance and recognition—and resulting failure—is the cause of body loathing. We see where we fall short in the “looks department” and blame God for making us the way we are.

There is nothing Satan would enjoy more than getting women to feel ugly and useless in God's kingdom. But we need to see that there is only one way to authentic perfection, and that is through Jesus Christ.

The perfection He brings is not the same kind we are seeking in our physical bodies. The essence of perfection is sinlessness, which we will ultimately experience in heaven.

When you feel defeated and ugly, it holds you back spiritually. That is why it is important to see how your negative body image developed. Then you can allow God to reveal the beauty He created in you.

If you don't realize God's beauty in you, you will remain at your level of self-loathing. You'll keep trying endless ways to fix your body flaws or continue to build up new reasons to hate your body. This may lead to a deeper trap of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and the like.

Taking Inventory

What is body image, and how does it develop? Body image, which changes from day to day, is what you think you look like on the outside.

Physical comparisons go through your mind every day, but you aren't always aware of them and how they affect you. You've developed your opinions about your body based on various sense information you have received and experiences you have had through the years. The data you've gathered, which consists of visual information (what you see); mental information (what you think about what you see); kinetic information (how your body functions and moves); and historical information (what you remember about how others have reacted to your body), sums up your body image.

The following exercise will help you evaluate what your body image is right now:

- 1. Visual.** List your top five positive and negative physical characteristics.
- 2. Mental.** On a scale of 1-10, 10 being "I am very satisfied with how I look," write down how you evaluate your looks right now.
- 3. Emotional.** Write down the following sentence and the

feeling or feelings that best describe you: "When I look at myself in the mirror, I feel ... "

4. Kinetic. Name at least one activity you enjoy participating in with your body. "I appreciate that with my body I can ... "

5. Historical. Write the statement below that is most true of your experiences:

- I remember very few times when I felt a great deal of shame about my body either because of what others said about me or because I wanted to do something I couldn't do.
- I can recall at least five significant times that I felt ashamed about my body because of others' comments or actions toward me.
- I have had considerably more negative comments about or actions toward my body than positive comments or actions.

It's critical for you to acknowledge how often your negative body image has been reinforced during your lifetime. When a statement is reinforced over and over, it takes on a sense of truth, even if it is not true.

Negative feelings, experiences and comments together act as blinders to prevent you from seeing who you really are. But you are not bound to the wrong image you have of yourself.

End the Cycle

As you look back over your responses, the impact of your experiences on your body image will become more obvious to you.

For example, Susan, a 16-year-old bulimic, said her most positive feature was her brown eyes, and the most negative, her big bottom.

Susan remembered that her dad used to sing to her about her

big brown eyes and that the guys in the cafeteria often put girls down about their backsides. The more negative the experiences related to your body have been, the more self- and body-rejecting you are.

But you do not have to be imprisoned by these experiences. In fact, just bringing them into your conscious awareness gives you power over them and the negative influence they have on how you see yourself.

We are fooling ourselves if we believe having the perfect looks will make us happy inside. Some of the world's most beautiful people are the ones most torn by heartache, broken relationships and even poor body image. The secret to true beauty is being at peace with who you are.

I must admit that as a mother of a teen myself, I still feel the pressure to look good. When I find myself succumbing, I remember that the secret to overcoming a negative body image is letting God show me my true beauty.

It's great to know the pressure to look good doesn't have to rule my life. Celebrating rather than debasing my body is a wonderful way to live.

Prayer is a powerful tool in getting free from the trap of negative body image. Right now, commit your heart through prayer to finding and doing what God says is best. Pray this prayer from your heart:

Dear heavenly Father and Creator of my body, I recognize that I struggle to know and live out what is truly perfect. I can see how my heart is drawn to Satan's message that perfectionism is the answer.

I can easily get focused on wanting perfect beauty rather than wanting You. In the name of Jesus Christ I stand against the world of advertising, diet, the beauty industry, my vanity and

Satan himself.

I resist every force that would seek to distract me from who I really am and what You desire for me to do in and through this body You gave me. I reject the distorted concepts and ideas that make body perfection sound plausible and desirable.

I oppose every attempt to keep me from knowing full fellowship with You. I open my heart to be transformed into true perfection through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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