

Learn to Escape From the Performance Trap

Many Christians never mature spiritually because they define themselves by what they do instead of who they are.

The constant propensity of the born anew is to fall back to striving by human effort. Our minds and spirits know that salvation is a free gift, but our hearts retain their habit of trying to earn love by performing. Most commonly, we who are “saved” are unaware that motives other than God’s love have begun to corrupt us into striving, tension and fear; or, suspecting, we fail to know what the wrong motives are or why we are driven by them.

“Performance orientation” is a term that refers not to the service we perform but to the false motives that impel us. Having brought performance orientation to death, we may do exactly the same works, in much the same ways, but from an entirely different intent in the heart. In bringing performance to death we are not saying to stop serving and doing but to die to the hidden, wrong motives in the heart.

As little children we all in some degree accept lies and build them into our nature. The most pervasive, destructive lie corroding all our actions is, “If I don’t do right, I won’t be loved.” Sometimes even the conscious mind believes this lie, but more commonly it lodges like a snake hidden in the grass, slithering through all our efforts. For the performance-oriented, the base of all life is not restful acceptance and consequent confidence, but constant anxiety, fear and striving.

The lie becomes part of us through common, daily acts in our childhood. Potty training is a good example. When we did what we were expected to do at the right time and in the right

place, we heard something like, "Oh, you did good. Mommy loves you."

Of course, Mommy would have loved us even if we had missed the mark, but in our childish minds we connected performing with love and soon arrived at the inverse, "If I don't do right [on the potty or anywhere else], Mommy won't love me."

Performing often becomes so intertwined with love that we cannot conceive of being loved unless we have performed rightly. Or worse, we come to believe that not performing earns rejection, so even if someone gives us love, we think we don't deserve it. As a result, either we won't receive love offered, or false guilt assails.

Mothers normally don't intend to teach wrong things. It just happens—again and again. "Oh, you look great in your new dress; Mommy loves you." The child may take home the message that good appearances earn love (and sloppiness or ugliness lose it). "You slept all night and didn't cry once. I'm proud of you, son; I love you."

Right away we may slip the hand of love into the prickly glove of striving to please. So simply and easily our hearts laminate what ought to be separated—behaving well and being loved. We learn to ?sh for love, every action a lure. No action, no ?sh (equals no love), and to our minds deservedly so. It all becomes a delusion.

Now let us add the many mistaken forms of correction most of us have endured. We hear: "Where did my little boy go? He was here a moment ago. This can't be my little boy who acts like this." Thus we are directly told that what we actually are is unacceptable.

Our identity must become the doll image, the picture someone else has created for us to act out. Fear of failing to be that identity strikes at the heart. We dread becoming lost from ourselves and from others, and so we lock ourselves into

performing. Ironically, to the degree that we succeed in acting out what is wanted, we do in fact become lost from what would have been us.

Characteristics of Performance Orientation

Performance orientation does not define one who works hard, but one who works hard for the wrong reasons. A free person may actually work harder doing the same works—impelled only by love.

Performance-oriented people require constant affirmation (unconsciously demanding it, sometimes verbally). They cannot handle criticism well. Their security is not first in God and themselves but in what people think of them.

They are dependent upon the reactions of others. They have little center of decision in themselves. They must become whatever it takes to gain approval from others. They have become what Erich Fromm calls “market-oriented personalities” who sell themselves to be or do whatever purchases for them signs of acceptance. Reproofs are taken defensively, not as signs of acceptance and love, but as rejection. Guilt cannot easily be admitted because that is translated into, “I didn’t try,” “I don’t belong,” and “I must keep trying to belong or I am lost.”

Give a rebuke to a performance-oriented person, and you may be astonished to hear, “You’re telling me you don’t love me.” Secure persons living with performance-oriented people often marvel, “How did you get that out of what I said?”

Emotional outbursts can erupt from the smallest or even unintended slights, and we are amazed to hear, “How could you ever doubt that I love you?” usually followed by, “After all I’ve done for you,” or: “You don’t appreciate me. You never do.”

Performance-oriented people dole out affection by measure

according to how well the primary people around them have behaved. Love is not given when others haven't done well. Having been dealt with that way, they do it to others.

Christian love ought to be the opposite of performance-oriented behavior. The Word-become-flesh is love given unconditionally, unvaried by the good or bad behavior of the other. Christian love is born in the unfailing heart of Christ in us for the other.

How we act out that love may vary according to the other's behavior, to be appropriate to the needs of the moment. Rebuke may be the action love requires. Or tenderness. Or withdrawal. We are governed not by insecurity but by the flow of Christ's love in wisdom.

Unfortunately, however, we have developed sinful structures in a pre-Christian life. Performance orientation has been built in. It is the warp and woof of us. The Holy Spirit must find ways to pour love out from the center of that tangled bramble bush we have become—and many people get stuck on the not-yet-dead thorny points of us. We still use love to control until death of self proceeds to deliverance.

Performance-oriented people are sometimes afraid to try new things. It isn't OK to fail. Not that they don't sometimes try new things. Performance orientation may drive them to venture wildly, or it may cause them to be strong enough to prevent innate creature drives.

But the point is fear. All normal people fear, but in performance-oriented people, fear of failure rises more out of what loved ones and others will think of them than how failure may hurt another. Security that makes fun of trial and error is gone.

The performance-oriented person wants to know what the rules are beforehand. The subliminal messages are: "Tell me how to do it so I can feel secure." "I want to know before I venture

so I can feel good about myself." "I need to be in control."

Therefore, performance-oriented people cannot be spontaneous—unless they can playact it as a part of filling a role acceptable to those around them. Self-control is a virtue for them to the point of idolatry and rigidity. They are always poised and correct—in public.

Sometimes the burden becomes too heavy. The more people and new circumstances such a person encounters, the more subliminally he must work to discover the rules and roles. Thrown under too much pressure, he may crack up or fall into depression. He cannot conceive that he is accepted just because he exists; he believes acceptance will come only if he conforms to prevailing patterns.

Getting Free

How does one get free from performance-oriented living? It is not easy. The evil practices of the flesh are stubborn. We are not accustomed to thinking of performance orientation, by which we strive to do so many good things, as sin, but it is.

You must begin by making every attempt to recognize that you are performance-oriented. Allow others to speak into your life about it. Read over and over biblical illustrations that define it. Listen to sermon tapes that teach about it. Read our book *Transforming the Inner Man* (Charisma House) and others that discuss the problem.

Then you must come to see performance orientation not as a tiny, peculiar segment of your character, but as a metastatic cancer extending tentacles into everything you are and do. Recognize it not as some isolated little flaw, but as the very warp and woof of your entire life, and come to hate it. "Hate what is evil," the apostle Paul tells us (Rom. 12:9, NIV). Performance orientation is the central structure of your kingdom of self!

“Repentance”—metanoia in Greek—means “change, to turn around and go the other way.” All structures such as performance orientation have a life of their own in us. We are created in God’s image, and whatever we create within us has a life of its own and does not want to die. That evil practice within will throw smoke screens and alibis: “Oh, yeah, well, you do the same thing,” or “You’re not so neat yourself.”

Every sin, including performance orientation, carries a reward system with it. As long as we prefer the rewards, we will not change. One time I (John) kept trying and trying not to do a particular sin, praying about it over and over, only to do it again. Finally I got mad at God and cried out, “Why don’t You help me with this?”

He answered quickly and succinctly, “You aren’t disgusted with it yet!” Hate had not yet become fully ripe. God then told me, “You are still enjoying that thing.”

“I do not. I hate it,” I protested.

“Son, if you hated it enough, you’d quit it. You enjoy it.”

That led me to ask myself in what hidden ways I might in fact be enjoying sin. The Lord began to reveal the hidden delights. If the sin was, for example, to turn silent, cold and inattentive around Paula, behind that single, simple happening were these roots: the delights of punishing a critical mother; feelings of power in getting another’s goat; the wicked fascination of making another suffer; fantasies of being the noble martyr keeping his cool while Paula—poor thing—blows her control and becomes furious, not as able to be as “Christian and controlled” as I am; inadmissible feelings of getting even with Paula; dominance and control; male superiority—and so we could catalog a nearly endless list of delights behind one simple sin.

I am not likely to give up such rewards so long as they mean more to the hidden control centers of my heart than Paula or

God mean to me. To come to a proper and sufficiently intense hatred of the self we have built in opposition to God is a distinct gift from the Lord.

I soon discovered I couldn't hate sin enough by the power of my fleshly will to come to a true repentance. I stood helpless in corruption.

Repentance is born of a gift of love that reaches an unrepentant, unconverted segment of our hearts. Until true love is allowed, or somehow finally touches that guarded area, we cannot change. We may set the sails of our wills determinedly again and again, but usually the first change in the winds of life finds us unable to tack—and so we attack.

Pray that God will help you to hate the sin of performance orientation so that you can receive His grace to repent and change. You might also want to seek the help of a Christian prayer minister or small-group leader who has experience in inner healing. God does not want you to wear yourself out trying to earn what He has already given you as a free gift—His unconditional acceptance and love.

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