

Straining to Be Perfect

I love nice clothes, so I noticed her right away. Her clothes were casual but beautiful: crisply ironed khaki slacks, a print shirt and a light sweater. Everything, even her belt and shoes, was perfectly coordinated—just right for watching an afternoon soccer game.

At that moment, our sons were racing down the field in mad pursuit of the ball, trying to score a goal for Faith Christian School. As they neared the goal, the other team sent the ball back up the field.

“Oh, Ben!” I heard her sigh in disgust. I turned to look at her. Were we watching the same game? I hadn’t seen her son do anything wrong.

From what I could see, he was a great soccer player, but every few minutes she let out a disappointed sigh. Even when her son scored a goal, she never called out any words of praise.

Uh oh! Another perfectionist, I thought, feeling sorry for her son. No matter what he did, it was never good enough. Then I remembered. I used to be just like that.

Suddenly, I was overcome with compassion for this woman I had never met. It had taken me years to climb out of the pit of perfectionism.

Perfectionism is a world view—a way of looking at life—that is hard to overcome because our society values people who look and act perfect. “Perfectionism is contagious in a society that emphasizes what you do more than who you are,” says Kelly Boyle, assistant director of the Student Development and Counseling Center at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Paradise Lost

I believe that perfectionism is a natural outcome of the fall. The garden of Eden was perfect until Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit.

Neil T. Anderson, in his book, *Victory Over the Darkness*, talks about the dramatic change that occurred when Adam and Eve sinned against God: "Innocence was replaced by guilt and shame. Therefore, we have a need for self-worth to be restored. Authority was replaced by weakness and helplessness; therefore we have a need for strength and self-control."

It is true. We all crave self-worth, strength and self-control. It is how we meet those needs that makes a difference.

When our lives are yielded to God, He gives us value, because He loved us enough to die for us. Then we can exchange our weakness for His strength and surrender our need for self-control to the power of His Spirit.

Or, we can try to meet those needs in our own strength by trying to perfect and control ourselves, our children and our environment.

Perfectionism is a poor substitute for holiness. It is striving in the flesh to make yourself and others faultless, whereas holiness is something that God does as He covers our sins by the blood of Jesus and makes us into new creatures.

We all struggle with this tendency to some degree, but true perfectionists set impossibly high standards for themselves. They feel they must perform because their self-worth is tied to their accomplishments. When you are a perfectionist, it isn't enough to do a great job—it must be flawless.

Underneath the extreme drive to succeed is a deep-seated fear of failure. This stems from the terrible shame a perfectionist feels whenever he does anything wrong.

The perfectionist is likely to procrastinate due to the overwhelming fear of failure. He is afraid to start something that may not be perfect.

He also tends to become obsessive about the details of life because the little things are much easier to control. "It's a lot easier," says syndicated columnist Mike Bellah, "to maintain an immaculate house than to maintain warm and nurturing relationships with those who live in the house."

Steps to Freedom

At one time, I could identify with Bellah's assessment. The good news is, God set me free! Here are the steps I had to take for the Lord to bring me out of the pit of perfectionism:

I had to want to be free. For many years I thought my perfectionism was an asset. I was proud of the way I did everything *right*. I was hard-working, conscientious, dependable—and incredibly annoying!

Once, while arguing with me, my husband told me, "You think everything should be done a certain way—*your* way. You think your way is right with a capital 'R.' But it isn't like that. There isn't only one way to do things."

My perfectionism was eating away at my marriage and making it hard for my children to accept themselves. But it wasn't until I saw how my demands were affecting my oldest daughter, Anna, that I realized that perfectionism was a trap, not an asset.

By the time Anna was in second grade she was incredibly hard on herself. She was never satisfied with anything less than an "A" and never able to accept her own mistakes or her friends' flaws. It was a joyless existence—and I felt responsible for it.

I realized that we are precious to God despite our weaknesses. I used to think that God was standing over me waiting for me

to fail so He could say, "See, I knew you'd blow it!" But God is not like that.

One day He showed me that He is like the proud parent watching his toddler learn to walk. When she stumbles, He doesn't say, "Well, you've really blown it this time! I'm never letting you walk again!" Of course not! He gently scoops up His little girl, wipes away her tears and says, "It's OK, you'll learn. I know you will."

I stopped blaming others for my pain. Perfectionists "feel a tremendous amount of shame when they are wrong," says Carol Golz, a clinical therapist in Littleton, Colorado. Often the shame is so intense "they find someone else to blame." I had to learn to bring my mistakes to God and let Him cover my shame.

At times, when someone criticizes me, I am still tempted to lash back, to blame someone else. During those moments, I cry out to God and ask Him to give me the courage to face my mistakes and to take away the burning shame.

When you struggle with guilt and shame, remind yourself that the blood of Jesus covers your sins and takes away your shame. Let God forgive and cleanse you.

I ceased striving. I thought that I was the only one who could do the job right. I saw life as a series of tasks to be conquered. I was pushing myself so hard that I rarely enjoyed what I was doing and didn't know how to stop.

Keeping the Sabbath became crucial. I had to learn to stop striving and rest. Those times of quiet rest helped me gain perspective on my life and helped me see that I am not the only one who can do the job.

Rather than seeing each day as a list of tasks to be tackled, I am learning to enjoy what I am doing—even the interruptions—as He and I journey through life together.

I refrained from taking responsibility for problems that were not mine. Not only was I wearing myself out, but I was judging others because I thought they should pitch in and help.

I am still concerned when a friend or loved one is in pain, but I now ask God, "Do you want me to do something, Lord? Or have you shown me this problem so I can pray about it?" More often than not, God is calling me to pray fervently, then stay out of His way!

I had to learn to be honest with people about my struggles and my pain. My perfectionistic ways made me very competitive and judgmental and were a barrier to friendship with other women. God had to teach me to let go of my pride, stop hiding behind my accomplishments and be the person He made me to be.

I believed that I would find happiness and fulfillment through status and success. I was deceived. God has so much more for us—a deep lasting relationship with the King of kings that brings true fulfillment and hope.

I still long for perfection. I think I always will until the day I see Jesus face to face.

But I have learned to give my longings to God. I have learned to ask Him to change the things He wants to change and give me the grace to die to my agenda. It is a sweet surrender.

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