

Being a Perfectionist Robs You of Joy

Hello. My name is Mary Amesbury and in this fifth lesson in the series we will be talking about perfectionism and how it can rob you of peace.

Why do you never see perfectionists hiding in trees? Because they are so good at it.

I have a joke about perfectionism, but I can't share it yet. I'm still working on it.

Are you, like me, a perfectionist? Do you have anxiety until whatever you are doing is perfect? Are you displeased when something has flaws? Is 99.9% just not quite good enough?

There was a time in my life that I thought perfectionism was a badge of honor. But I couldn't see that it wasn't a good thing. I was meeting with a mental health counselor, and she gave me some homework about perfectionism. She gave me some worksheets to fill out. I sat down to look at them and they were yellowed, and they weren't copied square. And there were typos and lines that were crooked. And I was so frustrated. And I was like thought "How can I learn anything from these people if they can't even make a decent worksheet!" And then I got it. I was a perfectionist!! I asked my counselor if she'd done it on purpose but she never told me. She never admitted whether it was on purpose or not. But I got the point. And the point was that I was a perfectionist, and it was giving me anxiety and it was making me judgmental.

Perfectionism is not just a desire to perform well, it's a driving need to do things perfectly and to not be satisfied with anything less than perfect. It produces crippling anxiety and self-doubt. Wanting to do quality work is a good thing – especially if the work is truly for the glory of God. Yet we know that a pursuit of quality can cross a line and become destructive. Often the difference is the motivation behind the pursuit of excellence.

The following statements represent the perfectionist mindset even if you might not voice it. It's underneath:

1. If I am perfect no one can judge me.
2. If I can manage to not say or do the wrong thing, I can be worthy of love and acceptance.
3. People will only respect me if I am perfect.
4. I will only respect me if I'm perfect.
5. If I focus on all the little details, I can keep myself from failing.
6. By being a perfectionist, I can control what happens to me and the people I care about.
7. My value and worth are based on my accomplishments and productivity rather than on inherent worth as a creation of God.

The unpleasant truth is that the root of our perfectionistic tendencies is often self-protection and pride. If we can be perfect, the perfectionist thinking goes, other people and even God will have to approve of us.

You are greatly loved and adored by Jesus, but it is not because of your striving, it is despite your striving. God's love can't be earned – it can only be given to those who humbly seek Him.

In the time of Jesus, it was easy to pick out a perfectionist – they were the Pharisees who were such sticklers for the law that they developed an exhausting set of rules that were far more exacting than what God had given Moses for the people of Israel. The Pharisees sought to show devotion to God by fulfilling the law to the letter and beyond. They despised the fallible ordinary Jew. That's the thing about perfectionists – they tend to be judgmental not only of themselves but of others who don't measure up to their standards.

Jesus, on the other hand, was full of grace and truth. *“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).*

Look at the Scriptures. How did Jesus interact with the Pharisees? Did He try to appease them or operate according to their rules? Nope. He seemed to deliberately heal on the Sabbath and He called them whitewashed tombs – beautiful on the outside but filled with dead men's bones on the inside.

Jesus taught that none of us are good enough to merit God's approval. For a diehard perfectionist, that is an affront. Our pride takes a hit. The perfectionist motto is: “I don't need help. I am good enough on my own.”

But what does the gospel say? *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).* The point of the gospel is that we are NOT good enough. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We cannot please God or attain heaven by the sin-encrusted works of the flesh. Our own perfection is insufficient.

God must provide righteousness for us. He did this in Jesus Christ. The perfect Jesus became our sin-bearer. *“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).*

Jesus purchased our perfect righteousness by living a sinless life, shedding His blood and dying to atone for our sin, and then rising from the dead. When God the Father looks at Christians, He sees us in Christ, clothed with the imputed, perfect righteousness of Jesus.

When I strive in my flesh to be perfect in all aspects of my life, I am trying to please the eternal God on my terms, not His. *“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).*

You see perfectionism leaves no room for grace, but grace is essential to be right with God.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage...You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith” (Galatians 5:1, 4-5).

So what can I do to reign in my perfectionism and walk in grace?

1. Determine the truth about your perfectionism. Does your pursuit of perfection draw you closer to God and to other people? Can you truly control your outcomes?
2. Understand your motivations for being a perfectionist. Is your primary motivation to serve or protect self or to glorify God? Does pride have a part in your perfectionism? Are you people pleasing because you want them to approve of you?
3. Seek to understand God’s grace on a deeper level. Strive to be both a giver and a receiver of grace. Commit to your mind such grace passages as Ephesians 2:4-9, Galatians 2:20-3:3, Romans 4:16, Romans 11:5-6, 2 Corinthians 9:8 and Hebrews 4:15-16.
4. Remove the word “perfect” from your vocabulary unless, of course, you are referring to God. Learn to be OK with good enough for less important tasks and learn to move on from your perceived failures. Remember, your worth is in Christ - based on His perfection – not yours. God loves you and He wants you to walk in the freedom of not being chained to your perfectionism. Learn to receive God’s grace. Learn to walk in grace and to enjoy life without being a perfectionist.

Thanks for listening. I hope you found this helpful and that you will share it with someone else. Remember you are loved in Christ.