

Healing for Damaged Emotions 6 “Giving Up Perfectionism”

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” Matthew 11: 28-30

Dr. David Seamonds in his book Healing for Damaged Emotions; (which has provided inspiration for this series), states strongly; *“perfectionism is the most disturbing, and most common, emotional problem among evangelical Christians. It is rampant in our society, and unfortunately when many people become Christians they simply spiritualize their perfectionism without really challenging it. Most perfectionists are quick to admit it, as a kind of preemptive strike lest you should expose them; but are slow to seek help and often have lost hope for a cure. Perfectionism is an idolatrous attempt to take control of an uncertain world. It is good to have high standards, and want to do a good job. The problem comes when we define our self-worth based on how good a job we do. When someone does this, “...it is an inevitable script for self defeat and their own personal hell of repeated failure and eternal regret.”*

You will note immediately part of the ‘rub’. We as Christians are called and expected to *“be perfect, even as our father in heaven is perfect”*, right? I’ve preached about that, not that long ago. Well, then what’s going on here; we’re to be perfect, but not perfectionists; what’s the difference between being perfect, and perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a counterfeit for Christian perfection. Instead of making us holy persons and integrated personalities – perfectionism leaves us spiritual Pharisees and emotional, neurotic do - gooders. Perfection is something God does in us, to us, through us, and with us through Jesus Christ. Perfectionism is a personal striving to do and act, and appear perfect. Perfectionism is a constant and all-pervading feeling of never quite measuring up, never quite being or doing enough to please...yourself, others, and God!

Naturally a lot of self-belittling and self-contempt goes along with it, together with a super-sensitivity to the opinions, to the approval, and the disapproval of others. And all of this is accompanied by a cloud of guilt. The perfectionist almost has to feel guilty, if for nothing else, not feeling guilty about something! Perfectionism produces a distorted picture of God with feelings of doubt, rebellion, and eventually anger against a God we can never please. But perhaps the most terrible consequence of perfectionism is alienation from our true selves; created, revealed and “perfected” in Christ Jesus.

Most of us are so far from being perfect we think we can simply dismiss this discussion as another “preacher rambling”; but we dare not. The overzealous claim that “we’re not perfect” is often times just a veiled, backhanded way of giving ourselves subconscious permission to perpetuate the dangerous behavior of practicing perfectionism, which produces a host of damaged emotions that need healing.

On the other hand, some of us are paralyzed by this malady. Having been raised in homes that set unattainable standards of acceptable behavior, we’ve grown up believing that if we just try harder, if we just do one more thing, if we just quit this or that bad habit, if we just add this one, or that good discipline, if we just give a little more, do a little better, or at least appear like we’ve got it together...then mom and dad will love us...and maybe, just maybe...God will too.

As I’ve stated before, there is no simple 3-step process to recovering or receiving healing for this damaged emotion, or any other; but I want to try and weave both the symptoms and solutions into the same discussion. I know that the world of perfectionism can’t be defined or solved in three easy steps; but having said that; I believe there are three basic problems, three basic beliefs; actually 3 foundational lies that underlie the majority of what we define as perfectionism. Here we go.

THE THREE LIES WE BELIEVE THAT CREATE PERFECTIONISM:

1. GOD IS NOT GOOD

God is good, a hiding place in tough times. He recognizes and welcomes anyone looking for help, No matter how desperate the trouble. Nahum 1:7

Wrong theology produces all kinds of bad, negative, emotionally damaged behavior; and this wrong theology (God is not Good) may be the worst. In trying to make sense of this world we are often left to answer the question: Is God all powerful or is God Good? In the midst of tragedy or trauma, or disease or despair, our lives get reduced to trying to answer this question; without having all the information. And when we answer, "God is not good", because we can never admit God is not all powerful...we erect a vacuum that produces a vortex of spinning behavior that creates a tornado of destruction in ourselves, and often in the lives of others.

Such is the case in believing that God is not good. If God is not good all the time, then some other means of approach must be secured besides sheer grace. If God is not good, then we are reduced to relating to God based on our behavior, and when we get to the next lie, we'll see more clearly why this is so damaging.

The Christian church is filled with frustrated people who in trying to rationalize why God doesn't prevent tragedies, (or why God allows disasters or abuse or rape); are left with the fact that if God is all powerful – then God must not be good. Hardly one of you can even verbalize this audibly – but many of us are living this lie as our reality. We are working our way to heaven, relying on our righteousness being better than our neighbors, or relying on our behavior not being as bad as our enemies. We are seeking to wrestle our salvation from a stingy God, by being good, acting right, following orders, giving more, being perfect...all in our own strength, and from this source of wrong theology.

The belief that God accepts me based on my performance is not just a type of bondage, not just a symptom of damaged emotions; it is sin. And as Martin Luther once said: *“Bad theology is a cruel taskmaster”*. Actually, it is the utmost in arrogance – because it refuses to accept what God offers, instead reinventing a more manageable way to be saved...or so we think. The second lie that creates perfectionism:

2. I’M NOT GOOD ENOUGH

It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. 1 Thess. 1:4

Most of us have been raised in good homes that instill healthy images, esteem and worth in us as children; but some of us have been raised to believe that we are not good...or not good enough. We have come to believe (again, possibly subconsciously) that we are not good enough for dad and mom to love; therefore we are hardly able to be loved by God. I see it in parents always finding the negative; 4 A’s and 1 B, and what gets noticed? 15 points and 3 rebounds, and what gets mentioned...always as a means to helping them become better, do better...but what does that say to the psyche of a young impressionable child?

Many of us fall victim to this tragedy. I know that many in my profession don’t believe we are good enough, so we trade approval from our parishioners for the responsibility to occasionally be prophetic. Don’t want to tick off those who are paying our salary!

I think many who claim or accept the label “workaholic” may in fact be trying to mask perfectionism. I think in some ways that the rampant love of rehearsing with each other how terribly busy we all seem always to be...might in fact be a backhanded means of feeding our innate propensity to perfectionism! I’m tired of hearing from my own lips how busy I am!

Why are we so much busier today, with all these time saving modern conveniences, and appliances; than were our grandparents who actually had to “work” to make a living? I think many of us are convinced we are just not good enough; so we’ll work harder in the hopes we can overcome. Silly? Maybe.

And there is one more factor alive in this lie. Perfectionism sometimes tries to cover for the reality that we are limited people in an uncertain world. We know that we are limited...but we don’t like it. So we try to overcome our weaknesses and imperfections, by doing things perfectly, and we fail. We love the illusion of control and the possibility of making life predictable. We might call this working hard, but it might just be a lust for omnipotence: a desire to be God, or at least God-like.

Perfectionism is a type of self-protection; it is a way to either control our emotions to avoid feeling relational pain, or a way to control other people (and their reaction to us) so as to not face our own emptiness. It is a way of looking to ourselves to meet our own needs. It’s a flight from being exposed as flawed. Instead we create an "impostor" to offer to the world and even to God. As Chris Rock says, “*When you first meet me, you don’t meet me, you meet my representative.*” The third lie we often believe is:

3. GRACE IS NOT SUFFICIENT

Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, “My grace is sufficient; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.”

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. 2 Cor. 12:7-10

The antidote to perfectionism is grace. There may be no other. Coming to terms with the fact that God's love for us is unconditional; doesn't fit in with our perfectionist tendencies. To consider that there is nothing that we can do to ever make God love us more...or less than He does at this moment...doesn't compute in our 'earn it' culture. Coming to terms with the fact that God's forgiveness of us is past, present and future effective; doesn't fit with our attempts to be good, make good, and do good. Coming to terms with the fact that God's grace is not a disconnected, theological concept...it is GOD'S GRACE, and it cannot be separated from its source, its giver. It cannot be earned, it must simply be received...and that goes against our sense of self.

You can't "perform" your way out of perfectionism. And beware of pseudo cures. Perfectionists love to analyze themselves but they hate to change! They often start out with enthusiasm and bail out when it gets tough. It's easier to revert to old established patterns of perfectionism, than do the hard work of admitting we missed the boat. And relearning right attitudes, behaviors and actions...is hard, emotional work. Don't settle for false encouragement that says everything will be OK, we must accept the fact that we are limited people in a dangerous world.

Sometimes rationally seeing the ridiculousness of our own thoughts, can help us get past the tipping point of resisting change. Thinking that we can really control our world is rather comical, when you honestly consider it.

And we need the Church...to be the church. Not a white-washed tomb, but a real-world place where hurting people can find honest others, wrestling with their own flaws, and willing to help one another. If this church has become anything in my tenure it has moved beyond the illusion that we have it all together; and embraced the fact that we are all sinners, that we all have issues, that we all need grace...I've made sure of that!

We've covered a lot of ground today, so let's end where we began:

"Are you tired... of always being tired? Are you worn out from your constant running and working attempts to be perfect? Are you burned out on life-less religion that offers rules and rituals and no real hope? Then come to Jesus. Get away with Him and you'll recover your life. He'll show you how to take a real rest. He'll show you how to be perfect and overcome perfectionism. Walk with Him and work with Him—watch how he does it. Watch how He balances work and rest and play and worship. Learn the unforced rhythms of God's grace. He won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Him and you'll learn to live freely and lightly...and maybe even find some healing for your damaged emotions." An adaptation of Matthew 11: 28-30

Healing for Damaged Emotions 6

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