



Perfectionism

PERFECTIONISM

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(Hebrews 10:1)

Few ways of thinking are as harmful as perfectionism. Perfectionists believe that they should never make mistakes and that it is a catastrophe when they do. They tend to become quite upset when people or situations are out of their control and don't go the way they "should." They expect more from themselves and others than is reasonable and often become angry and bitter as a result. Though perfectionism in people is fairly common, it carries a high price tag in terms of causing emotional problems, relationship difficulties, and spiritual burnout.

WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

Two perspectives are helpful to consider when defining perfectionism.

Theologically, perfectionism is the destructive belief that people can be equal to God. Specifically, perfectionistic people think they should be all-knowing (omniscient), all-powerful (omnipotent), and everywhere at once (omnipresent). When people think they should know everything, they beat themselves up for mistakes. When they think they should be totally powerful, they become upset when things are out of their control. When they believe that they should accomplish the work of ten people in a given day, they become depressed and discouraged over what "little" they did accomplish. While God calls us to be "perfect," it is an ideal that He is asking us to move in the direction of, not something we can literally be. Only God knows it all, controls it all, and fills up the universe with His presence. Finite human beings know very little, can't control others, and can only accomplish the work of one person on a given day. God accepts that about us, and we need to as well.

Psychologically, perfectionism has several facets as well. Perfectionists are *idealistic* in that they frequently think about how things "should" be, not how they really are. Perfectionists set *impossibly high goals* which lead to discouragement, fail-

ure, and ultimately quitting. They are *product-minded*, believing that contentment, happiness, and a sense of accomplishment are not permissible until their current project or activity has been completed. The "process" is overlooked because the end result has not been reached, thus there is no "joy in the journey." Perfectionists often feel that they have to *be the best* at what they do. To simply do one's best is not good enough. Perfectionists also *equate their worth with their performance*. They only feel worthwhile as people if they perform well. Since day-to-day performance in various areas of life fluctuates, a perfectionist's sense of worth fluctuates as well.

The theological and psychological components of perfectionism destroy any chance people have at an emotionally and spiritually healthy life. So what can be done to help the perfectionist?

HOW TO DEFEAT PERFECTIONISM

Several steps can be taken to help perfectionists become more realistic in their view of life and personal abilities.

> *Be humble*—Perfectionists must humble themselves before God and repent of being prideful enough to think they can be His equal.

> *Be reality-focused*—Perfectionists need to face life as it really is, not focus on how it "should" be.

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➤ *Set attainable goals*—Perfectionists need to set goals that are small, realistic, and achievable in the here and now. Long-term goals need to be broken into short-term, tangible goals.

➤ *Set reasonable time limits*—Spending too much time on an activity in order to do it perfectly needs to be replaced with prioritizing activities so that each is given a reasonable amount of time.

➤ *Accept doing “good enough” on certain tasks*—Given the number of tasks people must complete each day, not every one of those tasks has to be, or can be, done exceptionally well. In areas of less importance, perfectionists need to allow themselves to do “good enough” and move on to the next task.

➤ *Stop black-white thinking*—Thinking in all-or-nothing terms often makes perfectionists miss the shade of gray in a given situation. By not thinking in extremes, perfectionists can have a more accurate perspective.

➤ *Learn from mistakes*—Everyone makes mistakes. The key is to learn from the mistakes.

➤ *Confess sin to others*—Acknowledging imperfections to others (rather than keeping them secret) can help release people from the pull of perfectionism. By sharing moral imperfections and personality flaws, perfectionists invite others to see them as they really are. Living a more transparent life builds healthy relationships and is critical for personal growth.

➤ *Find joy in the journey*—Becoming more like Christ is a process. Each step people take toward being more mature is pleasing to God and is a step further than where they were before. Perfectionists need to take time to stop and enjoy where they are in life.

➤ *Find worth in God*—Perfectionists need to find their worth not in what they do or

how well they do it, but in being God’s creation.

Knowing the theological and psychological aspects of perfectionism is only the beginning. Perfectionists must continue to grow in their knowledge of and love for Christ. Perfectionists must remember Paul’s words, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on” (Phil. 3:12). God will bless them as they seek to live for Him every day.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of perfectionism include:

- Proverbs 16:18
- 2 Corinthians 12:9
- Galatians 3:3; 5:16
- Philippians 1:6; 2:12; 3:1–9
- Colossians 2:16–23

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on perfectionism at Hebrews 10:12–14 on page 1628. See also the personality profile of Paul on page 1454.

THE MEDIATOR'S DEATH NECESSARY

¹⁶For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. ¹⁷For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. ¹⁸Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. ¹⁹For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you."^a ²¹Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. ²²And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

GREATNESS OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

²³Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; ²⁵not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the

Most Holy Place every year with blood of another—²⁶He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. ²⁷And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, ²⁸so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.

ANIMAL SACRIFICES INSUFFICIENT

10 For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. ²For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. ³But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

CHRIST'S DEATH FULFILLS GOD'S WILL

⁵Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:

9:20 ^aExodus 24:8

KEY PASSAGE



Perfectionism

GOD'S WORK

(10:12-14)

Everyone would like to look perfect, act perfect, and do perfect work. Aside from a few people receiving "perfect" scores at the Olympics, most of us will find perfection elusive in every area of life. No matter how much we try, we fail. If we seek to live the perfect Christian life, our thoughts or attitudes will trip us up before we even get out of bed in the morning!

So what does it mean for believers that Christ's sacrifice "perfected forever those who are being sanctified"? Believers have been made perfect in God's eyes because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the same time, however, we are "being sanctified," being made perfect and holy progressively through our walk with Him. We are considered perfect, even though we have a long way to go. As we let God work in us, He perfects us. Instead of measuring perfection by worldly standards, we should seek to obey God, looking forward to the day when He will finally make us perfect for life with Him in our perfect eternal home.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about perfectionism on pages 1630, 1631. See also the personality profile of Paul on page 1454.

in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. ²⁰And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death,^a and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' ²¹Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' "

PAUL'S ROMAN CITIZENSHIP

²²And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" ²³Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, ²⁴the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. ²⁵And as they bound him with thongs,

Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?"

²⁶When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman."

²⁷Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?"

He said, "Yes."

²⁸The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship."

And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen."

²⁹Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

^{22:20} ^aNU-Text omits *to his death*.



Perfectionism

PERSONALITY PROFILE

PAUL'S IMPERFECT PERFECTION

(ACTS 22:3, 4)

Paul could have been considered a "perfect" Jew. He had the right pedigree, the right training, the right desires, the right enthusiasm. But being "perfect" in one's own eyes doesn't make somebody saved before God.

When God got hold of him, Paul understood two very important facts. First, he realized that God could use every part of a person's background and upbringing for His glory. Nothing is wasted with God. As God fashioned his future servant, the events of Paul's life would be brought together into a perfect "package" that could accomplish God's great purposes. Paul's training under Gamaliel gave him command of the Old Testament Scriptures. When Christ revealed Himself, Paul, unlike many of his fellow Pharisees, saw how Christ had fulfilled every prophecy regarding the Messiah. Paul's logical mind saw the truth, and there was no turning back. In addition, Paul's Roman citizenship allowed him free travel across the empire, and spared him at least one beating at the hands of Roman soldiers.

Second, Paul realized that his perfect pedigree was ultimately worthless for salvation. He wrote to the Philippian church: "If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ" (Phil. 3:4-7).

Paul's Jewish "perfection" counted for nothing. No one's pedigree, training, background, wealth, abilities, gifts, appearance, or anything else can be perfect enough to earn salvation. We must not be enslaved to the "perfectionism" of this world that is ultimately worthless. Only when we cast ourselves before God and allow Him to use our backgrounds, training, and gifts for His glory will we find complete fulfillment. Only when we repent of our sins and accept Him as our Savior does He do His perfect work in us.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about perfectionism on pages 1630, 1631. See also the key passage note at Hebrews 10:12-14 on page 1628.

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DO GOOD TO PLEASE GOD

6 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ³But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.^a

THE MODEL PRAYER

⁵"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.^a ⁷And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

⁸"Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. ⁹In this manner, therefore, pray:

- Our Father in heaven,
 Hallowed be Your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done
 On earth as *it is* in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,

As we forgive our debtors.

- ¹³ And do not lead us into temptation,
 But deliver us from the evil one.
 For Yours is the kingdom and the power
 and the glory forever. Amen.^a

¹⁴"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

FASTING TO BE SEEN ONLY BY GOD

¹⁶"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face. ¹⁸so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.^a

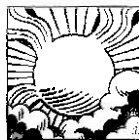
LAY UP TREASURES IN HEAVEN

¹⁹"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

THE LAMP OF THE BODY

²²"The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eye is bad, your

6:4 ^aNU-Text omits *openly*. 6:6 ^aNU-Text omits *openly*. 6:13 ^aNU-Text omits *For Yours* through *Amen*. 6:18 ^aNU-Text and M-Text omit *openly*.



SOUL NOTE

Perfect? (5:48) Jesus says, "You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Jesus was not commanding His people to be perfectionists. People who constantly strive for perfection in every area of life usually find themselves frustrated because they *cannot* be perfect. One day Christ will make us perfect; during our time on earth we should be striving for Christlikeness, always realizing that we have much room to grow. Believers should never settle for mediocrity in their walk with Christ, but should seek to deepen their faith and maturity in every area of life.

Topic: Perfectionism

²²And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, ²³which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

2 And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ²in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

BROUGHT NEAR BY HIS BLOOD

¹¹Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—¹²that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ

Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

CHRIST OUR PEACE

¹⁴For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, ¹⁵having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus making peace*, ¹⁶and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. ¹⁷And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

CHRIST OUR CORNERSTONE

¹⁹Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—²if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed

SOUL NOTE



Nobody's Perfect (2:8, 9) God is perfect; people are sinful. Fortunately, God does not require people to reach a certain level of perfection before He will accept them. Otherwise, no one could ever be saved! God provided a perfect way of salvation—grace. No one is saved by his or her good works; otherwise, people might be tempted to boast about how they had earned their salvation. Instead, no one can boast; they can only accept by faith this gift of God. One day God will make us perfect; until then, we continue to grow more and more like Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. **Topic: Perfectionism**