

How to be a recovering perfectionist

This essay is a follow-on from the previous one entitled “Signs and symptoms of unhealthy perfectionism”

The first and perhaps the hardest lesson to learn is that there is no quick fix for unhealthy perfectionism. These traits of thought and behaviour have very deep roots and they become hard-wired in our personalities. The process of change may be slow and uneven. But change is possible. We can gradually become transformed by grace and learn new habits of thought and action. We can learn to put aside maladaptive thought patterns and grow in emotional maturity. We will never lose our longings for excellence (indeed as we saw before this is part of our God-likeness and has many positive aspects), but we can learn to redirect these longings into healthier patterns.

So here are some strategies for overcoming unhealthy perfectionism. But before listing the strategies, I want to give a gentle warning. I am not aiming to give a list of imperatives, of ‘you must do this’ and ‘you should try to do that’. The problem is that for people with a tendency to perfectionism this just makes a new series of burdensome targets that have to be achieved! So I become more burdened because I am constantly failing to manage to carry out the strategies I need to deal with my perfectionism!

My aim is not to create any more burdens! We already have enough of those. My aim is to try to point out some more healthy ways of thinking and behaving.

1. Recognising the unhealthy aspects of thinking and behaviour we are prone to.

Most of the time we allow a constant stream of thoughts to go through our minds without paying much attention to them. Instead it is helpful if we start to monitor our own thinking patterns. What are the ‘loops’ and ‘scripts’ which go round and round in our heads? Are there frequent thoughts of self-criticism - ‘you are useless’, ‘you always let yourselves and others down’, ‘you’ll never be good enough’ - together with a constant sense of failure? Or is it black and white thinking that dominates? – ‘I’m only interested in being brilliant, excellent and outstanding. If I can’t achieve that then anything less is hopeless, useless and worthless’. ‘Unless I can be the best at something I refuse to even try’. Or do my thoughts focus on criticism and contempt for others who don’t meet the required standards, in order to bolster my own wobbly sense of self-worth?

Some people find it helpful to keep a journal or diary in order to identify the pattern of thinking that predominates in our minds. But then it is helpful to reflect and critique these thoughts, to subject them to reality. Is it really true that I am completely useless and always let other people down? Is it true that I am an utter failure in everything I have attempted? Is it really true that life is not worth living if I can’t be top of the class? Is it really true that if I don’t constantly press towards perfection then I am going to stop work completely and fall into apathy and laziness?

When we expose these thoughts to the bright light of reality we realise that they are to a large extent unrealistic: they represent fantasies of our own making. Many people find it

very hard to learn to live between the extremes of all or nothing. It's very painful for someone with a poor self-image to give up the dream of being perfect and replace it with the joy of experiencing gradual emotional growth and healing. But the promise of growing as a Christian is that we gradually move from unhealthy idealism towards healthy realism. This means that although we continue to aim high, we are content with less than perfection. The hardest phrase for the perfectionist to accept is '**good enough**' (!), but this acceptance is part of healthy realism. It is part of the acceptance that we live in a fallen and broken world, and that God in his grace and forgiveness accepts us as we are, not how we would long to be.

2. Learning to recognise the internal accusatory voice of evil and refusing to collude with it. Instead we start a process of learning to focus on the true voice of the Holy Spirit and the truth of our identity in Christ.

As mentioned in the previous essay, many of us find it hard to recognise the internal accusatory voice as evil, because it masquerades as the voice of our conscience. In the biblical story of the temptations in the desert, the evil one quoted scriptures in an attempt to induce Christ to disobey his Father. As we saw earlier, evil whispers in our ear that God is very disappointed with us and that we are going to be judged for our failures. That voice brings back past memories of failure, embarrassment, guilt and shame. It nags away in our minds, filling them with negative thoughts hour after hour and we end up agreeing and colluding with its harsh judgements. "Yes, we are useless. Yes, God is very disappointed with us. No, we are not good enough to be followers of Jesus."

When we hear a voice which makes us feel heavy, depressed, burdened and hopeless, we can be sure that this is not the voice of the Holy Spirit. The true voice of the Holy Spirit comes with a kind of fragrance, a beauty and an attractiveness which is quite different. Even when the Spirit challenges us and convicts us of sin, in my experience he does it with the gentleness and attractiveness of Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals the fragrance of Christ, the character which is revealed in the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). That's the voice we learn to recognise, just as the sheep learn to recognise the voice of the good shepherd and run from the voice of the thief. 'My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand' (John 10:27-28).

So when we hear that accusatory voice in our heads, instead of passively accepting those thoughts it is helpful if we learn to challenge them. 'That's not true'. 'I refuse to listen'. 'My Father accepts me as I am'. 'Jesus died for my sins and I am forgiven.'

Of course, we all learn that it is not possible to stop thinking something by force of effort. The more we try to stop thinking about something the more we end up preoccupied with it. Instead we can learn a process of gradually replacing the negative thoughts by positive ones. This is where I personally have found the concept of mental hygiene to be helpful.

3. Learn the daily discipline of mental hygiene

We all know that if we wish to remain healthy we need to practise physical hygiene. Hands need washing every day. Just because I washed my hands yesterday does not mean that they don't need a wash today. In fact my hands will need washing every single day of my life until I go to glory. It's part of being human.

Just in the same way it is helpful to practise the discipline of mental hygiene. That means monitoring the content of my thought life and choosing to fill my mind with positive and healthy thoughts rather than negative, damaging and unhealthy thoughts. And just because I did this yesterday, does not mean that my thought life isn't important today and every day to come. There is a daily discipline of keeping my thought life healthy.

The apostle Paul gives a wonderful illustration of mental hygiene in Philippians 4:8. "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things."

It's an interesting list. It starts with **truth**. Mental hygiene starts with focusing on truth and realism, rather than lies and fantasy. Of course, this includes the truth of God's unconditional love and care for us, his acceptance of us in Christ and the limitless forgiveness he offers. Second, Paul refers to the noble, the right and the pure. These are all aspects of **goodness**. We are called to focus our thoughts on everything that is good and morally pure. Third comes everything that is lovely, excellent and attractive. These are all aspects of **beauty**.

Notice the reference to thinking about things that are excellent. It's not wrong to think and reflect about excellence. As we said before, longing for excellence is part of our God-likeness. It's only when this changes into unhealthy perfectionism that these longings go wrong. So, Paul says that our thoughts should be filled with things that represent truth, goodness, and beauty. Consciously redirecting our thoughts will help when our minds have a tendency to be filled with lies, with evil and with ugliness.

It may be helpful to keep a collection of positive material for use when we feel besieged by negative thoughts. This could be verses, poems, songs, and so on that have a special resonance and meaning for us. Words through which God has spoken to us in the past and which we can use as a focus for our thoughts and prayers.

Often the most nourishing portions of scripture are the biblical promises of God's compassion, love and acceptance of us *as we are*. He knew us and loved us before the foundation of the world. He sought us and drew us to himself. He died for us and forgave our sins, past, present and future. He longs to draw us into his arms and to wipe away our tears, to take away our fears and to fill our hearts with joy. This is the plain unvarnished truth – whatever the evil one may say. I've put a selection of biblical material in the Appendix below, but perhaps I can suggest that you might make your own personal selection of positive material for reflection and contemplation. (NB This is NOT a new goal that has to be achieved!!)

My true identity in Christ

One of the central aspects of unhealthy perfectionism is that we focus our identity in the wrong place. We think that we are defined by our achievements, by the grades we get, or the excellence of our standards. This leads to a deep fear of failure, because if we do not achieve the highest grades, or the highest standards, then we are afraid that we will lose our sense of self and value. To be a failure, or even to be mediocre at something, must mean that I am useless, I am worthless.

But from a Christian perspective, this can be a strange and perverted kind of idolatry. My achievements have replaced God himself as the most important thing in my life. I have become preoccupied with myself, with my achievements, my standards, my appearance, how I am perceived by others. It's all very complex. The self-preoccupation and constant desire to achieve excellence may be motivated by a deep sense of shameful unworthiness. In order to drive that deep sense of unworthiness away I have to work harder and harder, and I become increasingly fearful when I fail. So the anxiety, hard-work and constant striving for achievement become forms of idolatry. I'm trusting them for my salvation, to find myself, to be someone valuable.

But the wonderful good news of the Gospel of Christ is that I don't need to be trapped in the desperate struggle to find my identity, to be someone. What really matters is what God thinks of me. I do not define myself. Instead I am defined as someone who was known and loved before the foundation of the world, as someone who was created in God's image as a unique and wonderful human being, as someone whom God thinks is worthy of love, as beautiful and to be cherished, as worth being sought out by Christ who gave his life for me, as someone has been given the right to be called a son or daughter of the Most High, and as someone whose name is written in the Lamb's book of life. As the words of the Christian song puts it, "*I am who you say I am*".

Yes, it is true that I am fallen, broken and contaminated by evil. It's true that so many aspects of my life are touched by failure and mediocrity; but this cannot touch the amazing reality that I am valued and *accepted unconditionally* by my Father. This is the scandalous message of grace. I cannot earn the acceptance of God through my efforts. I have to receive it as a free gift.

Perfectionists often find it very hard to accept grace because it seems *unfair*. They often identify with the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, feeling resentful and bitter about the unreasonable grace and forgiveness which was poured out on the returning reprobate who had squandered his inheritance. But that's the point of the whole story. Grace *is* unfair and unreasonable but it's what God pours out on us, if only we will receive it. The shame of the prodigal was replaced by royal robes, celebration, acceptance and unconditional welcome. The older brother slunk away in bitterness, despite the Father's attempt to welcome him too.

I am worth precisely what God thinks of me. He accepts us for who we are, in Christ, and for the person we are one day going to become, transformed from one degree of glory to another. All I need to do is to say thank you.

4. Think about small, specific and realistic goals, which will give a sense of achievement.

The fourth practical strategy for recovering perfectionists is to break down the tasks and goals of everyday life into small achievable segments. This can be applied to breaking down work tasks like revising for an exam or completing a work project. But it can also be applied to changing the patterns of our daily living. So, I might take one aspect of my life in which I want to break down some negative perfectionist patterns and make some small achievable goals.

Psychiatrist Richard Winter suggests that if the general goal is to be less perfectionist about my physical appearance, I might have the goals a) take no more than 30 minutes getting ready in the morning, b) be able to miss a trip to the gym without feeling anxious, c) be willing to gain x pounds of weight without getting upset. If the general goal was to be less perfectionist in my relationships with my flat-mates, some specific goals might be a) stop caring how my flat-mate washes the dishes as long as it is 'good enough', b) stop worrying about how untidy my bedroom is provided I tidy once a week, c) don't criticise my flat-mate for being late for a meal, and so on. If the general goal was to be less perfectionist about my studies, some specific goals might be a) don't spend more than x hours a day or week on revision, b) since I can't excel in every subject, work out what would be a 'good enough' mark in subjects I don't like, c) don't participate in anxious gossip and negative talk about a coming exam.

When you have achieved one of your small goals, give yourself a reward that you enjoy. Each small goal achieved is a step on the way to overcoming maladaptive ways of thinking and being and a step towards the ultimate goal of healthy emotional maturity. We continue to aim high, but we are learning to be content with the reality of our less than perfect lives. Yes, the journey to emotional maturity may take many years, but you are travelling in the right direction. And that, if I may say so, is 'good enough'.

5. Cultivate healthy relationships, which are filled with grace, forgiveness and acceptance.

We thought previously about the wonderful and scandalous grace which our Father wishes to pour out on us, if only we will receive it. I am worth precisely what God thinks of me. He accepts me for who I am, in Christ, and for the person I am one day going to become.

But God's ultimate acceptance of me needs to be made physical in the human relationships in which I am embedded. It's not enough for me to know it as a theological truth. I need to experience it, to catch a glimpse of God's acceptance in how I am loved by other human beings. All of us are called to show, to embody God's acceptance and grace to one another. It is in our relationships with family and close friends that we are meant to learn about trust, grace, forgiveness and love.

Sadly, for many of us, our families are places where we learnt that parental love seemed to be conditional on our achievements. Perhaps our parents seemed to be never satisfied, always demanding more discipline, better behaviour, harder work. For many perfectionists the voice they hear in their head is the voice of a critical and even abusive parent. And it's not surprising that when we become Christians we transfer the voice of the critical parent to

God himself, whose image we distort (and turn into an idol) as a punitive, critical and always dissatisfied father whom I cannot approach until I have made myself acceptable.

In theory the local Christian community is the place where we can rediscover grace, forgiveness, acceptance and love. Our Christian sisters and brothers can be those who show God's acceptance to us, they mediate God's love in human form. Many Christian believers who have come from broken and abusive human families have rediscovered true acceptance and healing in the Christian community, the new family. But sadly the local Christian community or church may also be places in which there are harsh, unloving and critical attitudes, which only reinforce our inbuilt, unhealthy perfectionist tendencies. Sometimes it is the church itself which seems to preach a false gospel of works - we need to try harder, pray more, read our Bibles more, and strive to achieve the approval of a never-satisfied critical God.

So, it seems to me that it is important for recovering perfectionists to seek out a local church that both *teaches* the wonderful true Gospel of grace, but that also *models* it in acceptance, forgiveness and warmth to those who are feeling broken and consumed by a sense of failure.

There is also a place for professional counselling and talking therapies. Many people, including many Christian believers are wary about this avenue. They may worry that excessive reflection and self-examination may only make the negative emotions worse. Or they may be concerned about being labelled as 'weak' or mentally unhealthy. But in reality counselling may be very valuable in helping us to identify unhealthy, but previously unconscious thought and behaviour patterns and in helping to develop practical strategies for positive change and growth towards emotional maturity. Obviously, it will be important to seek a counsellor whose approach is compatible with our Christian values and who does not see faith as purely negative or problematic.

Conclusion

At its heart, perfectionism represents *a longing for excellence* and this is a wonderful and positive aspect of being made in God's image. The desire of our heavenly Father is not that we should lose our longing for excellence but that we should learn to orientate our deepest longings in the right direction. God's desire for us is that we should grow to emotional maturity, being transformed little by little into the glorious likeness of Christ. I don't need to rely on my own efforts to be transformed. I can learn to trust in God's promises. He takes responsibility for transforming me. He will bring the good work he has started in me to completion. That's what Paul says in Philippians 1:6 "...begin confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ". All that is required of me is that I cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the work that he is doing in me. It is in Christ and our growing relationship with him, and in the glorious life that we will experience in the new creation that our deepest longings will be fulfilled.

As we slowly grow in maturity and into the image of Christ we can learn to celebrate the healthy aspects of our perfectionism and the positive motivation we have to be the best in our professional work and in our Christian lives. If we can release our perfectionist

tendencies from constant criticism, recrimination and fear of failure we can be liberated to use our gifts and labour creatively and positively for the good of others, for the good of the Kingdom and in praise of God.

But emotional maturity recognises that we live at present in a broken and imperfect world. So, whilst we continue to set our sights high, we recognise that perfection will never be reached this side of the grave, and we increasingly learn to accept our own limitations, brokenness and failures, as well as the limitations and brokenness of others. Above all, as we grow in maturity we learn to celebrate and internalise the grace of God which accepts us as we are, the grace of God revealed in human relationships of trust, love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Appendix

Some Scripture passages for reflection

Jeremiah 31:3, I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.

Jeremiah 1:5, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.

Psalms 139, O Lord, you have searched me and you know me...You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb, I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...

Ephesians 1:11, In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Matthew 10:30, Even the very hairs of your head are numbered. So don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows...

1 John 3:1, How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Jeremiah 29:11, For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Zephaniah 3:17, The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

Psalms 37:4, Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Philippians 1:6, ...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:13, For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

2 Corinthians 1: 3-4, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Psalms 34:18, The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Isaiah 42:3,6, A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out....I the Lord have called you in righteousness, I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.

Isaiah 40:11, He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Hosea 2:19, I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.

Song of Songs 2:10 My beloved spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me."

Further reading

Perfecting ourselves to death, Richard Winter, IVP

The Perfectionism Book, Walking the Path to Freedom, Will van der Hart and Rob Waller, IVP

A New Day: Moving on from Hunger, Anxiety, Control, Shame, Anger and Despair, Emma Scrivener, IVP

A New Name, Grace and Healing For Anorexia, Emma Scrivener, IVP