

Perfectionism: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

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Beware! There is a wolf on the prowl. He is lurking in churches, workplaces, and families. He seeks to devour self-esteem and destroy relationships. However, he is very difficult to spot because he is dressed in sheep's clothing. His name is Perfectionism.

Perfectionism whispers such lies as "you are not good enough," and "you will never measure up," and "if only you had what you wanted, then everything would be okay." Thus, he affects the view of ourselves and causes insecurities. The root of the insecurities is often fear of loss, fear of abandonment, or fear of rejection. In response to these insecurities, some try harder, pushing themselves farther and ultimately, place unrealistic expectations on themselves. Still others just give up and not even try. Most often, the end result in either scenario is anxiety and depression. Perfectionism is crippling and erodes self-esteem and self worth. Worse yet, perfectionism tries to masquerade as one who strives for excellence. There is a significant difference between perfectionism and striving for excellence. Perfectionism requires there are no mistakes, flaws or mishaps. It is harsh and dictates that you have failed when perfection is not achieved. Whereas, striving for excellence is doing your best and leaving the results to the Lord.

Perfectionism also affects relationships. In the parent-child relationship, perfectionism sets up unrealistic standards of behavior and performance for the child. When the child does not meet these expectations, the child is subtly shamed. The parent views the imperfections as a personal attack and may withhold words of affirmation or touch or may be harsh with discipline. In turn, this causes a rift in the relationship. The child responds by either internalizing the parents' disappointment and begins to think negatively about himself or externalizes the disappointment and lashes out at others when they do not meet arbitrary expectations. Although well meaning, the parents' responses to imperfection stifles growth. The child has a need to be loved unconditionally and accepted regardless of performance and behavior.

Additionally, perfectionism affects spousal relationships and peer relationships. Perfectionism tries to place undue responsibility on the other by telling such lies as "if only he would do thus and such, then I would be happy," or "if only she would do thus and such, then I would perform better." This misplacement of responsibility frequently leads to blaming and shaming the other for not being perfect. In response, there is then a turning away from each other and turning toward someone else or something else, or other times there is a turning inward and focusing on the self. In either case, there is more emotional distance in the relationship, which creates insecurities between the partners and continues the cycle. It is more productive and freeing to extend grace and allow others the freedom to fail. We all fail at times and we all need grace and forgiveness.

Perfectionism is very difficult to detect, because it also tries to masquerade as godliness. This too is a deception. No where in the bible does it say "Thou shalt be perfect." Rather, God's word says, He is the potter and we are the clay. We are still being formed and if God does not expect perfection from us then isn't it unrealistic and self sabotaging to expect perfection from others, and ourselves?

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