

## “Perfectionism: A Spiritual Malady” A FD Convo Sponsored by Belmont RUF

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**Introduction:** David Seamands said that 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 of a cure. We think that our temperaments are beyond the reach of God's work of sanctification. But perfectionism goes beyond being a personality quirk. It 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 of a job we do. When someone does this, as Richard Winter says, *"...it is an inevitable script for self defeat and their own personal hell of repeated failure and eternal regret."* (“Perfecting Ourselves To Death” by Dr. Richard Winter)

### I. Some Common Symptoms Of Perfectionism

- 1. All or nothing type of thinking:** I must do everything just right or not at all. (Some people have spoken of driven perfectionists and defeated perfectionists. One might be trying hard to achieve perfection in some areas of life but have given up in others and so they oscillate between drivenness and defeat.)
- 2. An intolerance of ambiguity:** They have a real problem living in tension or in balance with the inevitable uncertainties of life. Perfectionism is an attempt to control your world. But Ecclesiastes teaches us that life after the fall (“under the sun”) is full of frustration (a better translation than vanity or meaningless for “hevel”)
- 3. A tyranny of the shoulds and oughts in life:** As Gibson explains, *"The grandiose illusion that the [perfectionist] fails to see is that "should", "ought", "must", and "I have to" all imply "can". "I must never make mistakes", implies "I can, by diligent enough effort and alertness, absolutely guarantee that I will never make any mistake in anything I ever undertake."* A perfectionist is driven by guilt, a deep fear of failure, and under that, a fear of rejection (Winter)
- 4. Procrastination and indecision:** The motto of the perfectionist is "nothing ventured, nothing lost." Paul Tournier says, *"[The perfectionist] wants to do everything but chooses nothing and so never gets started. Living means choosing one rather than another but these people will give up nothing and so lose everything."* Often in Christian circles this gets spiritualized as "I'm waiting on the Lord" which is usually a cliché that tries to justify indecision. As Winter says, "It is easier to say we are waiting on the Lord than to complete the hard work of making a decision that has costs as well as benefits. Our obsessive tendencies shrink from commitments. Our religious language often offers a sacred sounding smokescreen for cowardice... In order to get on with life we must take a stand letting go of some of the alternatives available to us. Our obsessive desire to be master of our fate insists on keeping all options open lest we make a mistake. In this process we sacrifice joy on the altar of control."
- 5. Depression:** Not all depression is related to perfectionism but much of it is. We get depressed when we can't reach our goals. If our goals are impossible, we are headed for despair.
- 6. Fear of deep intimacy in relationships:** There is a fear of opening up and being seen as flawed. Thus there is little real intimacy in relationships. Also the obsessive nature of perfectionists can make them difficult to be around, almost all of them conceal deep rage.
- 7. A dependence on rituals:** Often Christians treat things like prayer and scripture as magic devices and look to "rules" to order our lives.

### II. Types of Perfectionists (from Winter pg. 37 ff.)

- 1. Performance Perfectionist:** Their sense of value is highly dependant on how they perform in sports, music, or some field of expertise. Their life motto is “I achieve therefore I am” but pay a price in anxiety and worry.
- 2. Appearance Perfectionist:** Their motto is “I am how I look” and often their standard is based on media images. Impression management dominates their lives.
- 3. Interpersonal Perfectionist:** These people have very set ideas about the way things should be done and this makes relationships difficult. If they have an outward focus they are critical of others. With an inward focus they may be very self-critical and avoid relationships for fear of their flaws being exposed.
- 4. Moral Perfectionist:** They are concerned that they and all those around them should keep the rules perfectly.
- 5. All-round Perfectionist:** Performance, appearance, and morality are all very important to them. This often obsessive personality. Their motto is “I am perfectly in control, therefore I am.”
- 6. Defeated Perfectionist:** Their motto is “If I can’t do it perfectly, why bother?” and often will be revealed by a sloppy car or room. But they are defining their self-worth by their performance – even though they feel like a failure.

### **III. The Roots Of Perfectionism**

- 1. Genetic:** Some people seem more disposed to a controlling temperament.
- 2. Cultural:** Some cultures are toward this like Japan and Switzerland.
- 3. Family Influence:** Perfectionist parents usually raise perfectionist kids. Demanding, critical parents can drive a kid towards perfectionism. And so can traumatic events

### **IV. Spiritual Roots:**

**1. A Biblical perspective will argue that it's a reaction to a fallen world.** We were perfect, and one day we will be again. So many of our longings reflect this fact. We know that we were made to bask in the approval of Another and it is not enough to just try to tell ourselves to not worry about what we do or how well.

**2. Dennis Gibson (drawing on the work of Salzman) says there are two main themes to perfectionism:**

A. Its hatred for the reality of being a limited person in an uncertain world

B. Its love for the illusion of control and the possibility of making life predictable. We might call this a lust for omnipotence. As Christians we recognize this lust for omnipotence is sin, it is the desire to be God.

**3. But also we are broken people who have been hurt by a fallen world full of other broken people.**

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 needs (like Jesus describes in Mt 6:28-32.) 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."*

### **IV. Toward A Cure For Perfectionism**

**1. It is a slow cure not a quick fix:** You can't "perform" your way out of perfectionism. And beware of pseudo-cures. Perfectionists love to analyze themselves but hate to change! They often start out with enthusiasm and bail out when it gets tough. Don't settle for false encouragement that says everything will be OK. Rather we must accept the fact that we are limited people in a dangerous world.

**2. False ideas about God must be challenged:** The belief that God accepts me based on my performance is not just a type of bondage, it is sin. *"Bad theology is a cruel taskmaster"* (Luther) And it is actually the utmost in arrogance – because it refuses to accept what God offer.

**3. False ideas about reality must be challenged:** This world is not as it should be. We live in a frustrating world.

**4. Sometimes seeing the ridiculousness of our thoughts can help.** Thinking you can really control your world is kind of comical – see how Isaiah 44 uses sarcasm to expose how ridiculous idolatry is.

**5. The Church:** We need a gospel community where flawed people are welcomed. This is vital.

**6. The Gospel is the key – we must gratefully remember what God has done for us in the gospel.**

- **The 2 sides of justification:** We are declared not guilty and declared as having Christ's righteousness (2Cor 5:21) God does demand perfection, but He gives what He commands. Hallelujah what a savior!
- **The doctrine of adoption:** God accepts are faulty works because we are sons and daughters and Christ makes up what is lacking in them. (See 1Peter 2:5)

**7. The practice of Sabbath rest should not be overlooked.** Setting aside a day of rest can be a very tangible way to express that your hope is in God rather than your own performance – and this is a formative practice. Marva Dawn's book "Keeping The Sabbath Wholly" is an excellent introduction to the practice of Sabbath.

**For more reading: "Perfecting Ourselves To Death" Dr. Richard Winter**

