



L'Abri Papers #RW01



Perfectionism

The Road to Heaven - or Hell?

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We are surrounded in our culture by the seductive sirens of perfectionism. Everywhere we go we find advertisements, magazines, and diet and exercise programmes, seducing us to have the perfect body, perfect health, the perfect house, (in England, the perfect garden), and perfect clothes. We are also surrounded by high performance technology so that we can have almost perfect cars, computers, etc. so we come to expect perfection in every walk of life - even football pitches with always green grass.

Now of course it is not wrong to enjoy high standards, it is wonderful to enjoy the sound of music from an almost perfect hi-fi stereo set. It is not wrong to strive for excellence in life and not all perfectionism is wrong. I want to emphasize this because by the end of this lecture you may think that perfectionism is a great evil! There are some very good aspects to perfectionism, and many great scientific achievements and great works of art, music and literature have come from perfectionists! But I want to focus on the negative aspects because I see them having such a destructive and crippling effect in many lives.

The problem comes when we live under the tyranny of believing that perfection is possible, where we have standards so high that they are, in reality, impossible to attain. This is complicated because I see in myself some areas of life where I am a perfectionist and other areas where I am not at all. To give an example, I think of someone who is a wonderful teacher in high school, her pupils love her, and she produces excellent results. But, when she had her first baby which was, like most babies, rather unpredictable and messy, she felt she was losing control and became quite depressed. Certain situations bring out perfectionism in a very negative way and others draw it out in a good way.

The core of the problem is that when a person's self worth depends on reaching those high standards, it is an inevitable script for self defeat and their own personal hell of repeated failure and eternal regret. Sometimes perfectionism leads on to all sorts of other psychopathology of extreme anxiety states, depression, phobias, compulsive cleanliness, checking rituals and so on. I am not going to deal with these in this lecture. I want to look first at the underlying thought patterns and fears of perfectionism. Then we will explore its roots and finally touch on some practical strategies for change.

The Thought Patterns and Fears of Perfectionism.

Underlying the perfectionist's approach to life are certain patterns of thinking that arise from particular fears:

(1) All or nothing, black or white thinking. I must do everything just right or not at all. The person who sees things in this way sees everything in polarised categories of, for example, absolute tidiness or chaos, absolute cleanliness or total dirt, absolute goodness or absolute badness, being a saint or a sinner, being a complete success or an absolute failure. So a student who has As all along and gets one B then says "I am a failure". Underneath this all or nothing, black or white thinking is a deep fear of failure.

Some people have divided perfectionists into two types - driving 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 oscillate between drivenness and defeat.

(2) An intolerance of ambiguity. This is a problem of living in tension or in balance with the inevitable polarities of life. Very often perfectionists make their feelings the integration point - they swing from one pole to the other never completely satisfied. We have to hold together certain polarities - the polarities of freedom and form, wanting freedom and independence and yet also wanting security and dependence. The perfectionist will often feel totally responsible for something or reject all responsibility completely.

(3) A tyranny of the shoulds and oughts in life. As someone has said it is a case of "hardening of the oughteries". The perfectionist is particularly driven by guilt, not guilt in relation to God, but guilt and shame produced by the ghost of a critical parent looking over a shoulder, the concern about what others will think, or what we think our parents will think of what we are doing. "I should be able to keep this house tidy like my mother did, even with the three children rampaging around". "I should be able to visit all those people in the church". "I should be able to get straight As and get on the tennis team". The expectation that I will be a saint and be perfect means that any sign of imperfection shows that I am hopeless failure. And if there is failure then there is a greater degree of guilt and self recrimination - a vicious circle saying to myself that I should not have to repeat this same mistake so many times. A healthier response in that sort of situation is to ask how I can learn from these mistakes. "Yes, I made a mistake but I can try again; it is not a total failure. Perhaps this is not my gift, perhaps I need to be easier on myself and not devastated if I fail".

I think of another example of someone who was so proud of her house, and so keen to keep it absolutely Perfect that whenever visitors came, she would put newspapers all over the carpet so that it would not get dirty. Her children could never have friends to come for a meal, let alone stay the night, because she was so terrified that they would put their dirty hands on the wall on the way up the stairs. She would run around after them, if they did have friends, scrubbing the walls. This is a dysfunctional perfectionism because it puts cleanliness and tidiness way above personal relationships. She was driven by guilt, a deep fear of failure, and underneath that a fear of rejection. These deep fears drive us into all sorts of patterns of behaviour which are very unhelpful and wrong. Behind them, at an even deeper level, are often powerful longings for acceptance and love.

(4) One practical consequence of wanting to do everything right is procrastination and indecision. The motto of the perfectionist might be "nothing ventured, nothing lost". Paul Tillich in his book, 'The Courage to Be' puts it this way "there is an anxiety of becoming guilty, the horror of feeling condemned". This anxiety is so strong that it makes responsible decisions and any kind of moral action almost impossible. Paul Toumier 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 will lose everything".

Dennis Gibson gives an excellent example of the perfectionist, labouring over a menu in a restaurant torn between the fillet of sole and the lasagne. He orders one, frowns, changes to the other, then summons the waiter to switch again back to the first. Finally his exasperated wife solves the problem for him by saying, "Look I'll order the lasagne and you get the fillet of sole". Coerced by the waiter's increasingly evident impatience the man agrees. When served, he looks at his wife's lasagne and says "I knew I should have ordered that". He touches all bases so that no-one can fault him for his choice. Lest fillet of sole be the wrong decision, the man hastens to point out that it was not his decision because it was forced upon him, and his heart was really with the other correct choice. There is a fear of commitment because it might be wrong, the desire to be in control and master of our own fate.

Sometimes we avoid the hard work of decision making by procrastinating but giving the reason that we are "waiting on the Lord" and Gibson writes again ""Seeking God's will". "The leading of the Lord". "God is able". These words readily degenerate into clichés that justify indecision. It is easier to say that 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. We "put out the fleece" instead of using our best judgment, deciding, and learning from any painful consequences that ensue. We resist trial and error learning which happens to be one of God's favourite ways to teach us wisdom. 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) Relationships are understandably often impaired because of the underlying fear of rejection. This can lead to a defensive oversensitivity to criticism. Communication of genuine difficulties, failures or struggles is very difficult and there is little real intimacy. Perfectionists expect a lot of themselves and others and they are inevitably disappointed and frustrated leading to irritation and anger. Finally there is real fear of losing control so that feelings, especially anger, have to be strongly repressed. When they do come out they may come out in an explosion which is frightening to everyone. The overwhelming need is to keep everything under control.

The Roots of Perfectionism.

1. Hypercritical Parents.

Perfectionist parents often teach their children to be perfectionist both in terms of the way they model relationships and in the way they cope with life-their high expectations of themselves and their high expectations of their children. The perfectionist parent tends to have three particularly dangerous predispositions - (1) a lack of tolerance for mistakes, and therefore increased criticism of themselves and of their children. They need to hear the words of Paul "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger"; (2) they may have great difficulty in showing their affection, being intimate, and giving approval, because they may not have had very much of it themselves; and (3) acceptance is always conditional, at least that is the way it feels to the child - if they are not top, if they do not get an A, then they may not be accepted - the sort of parent who, when a child comes in with a B, notices the B but not the nine *As*.

2. Psychodynamic Theories.

Freud believed that perfectionism and obsessional compulsive tendencies are a fixation at the anal stage of life, the time of potty training. He was right that it is at about this time that

there is a struggle in a child's mind in relation to his parents, not so much to do with toilet training in and of itself, as it is to do with issues of power and control. So, when a child (at the age of 18 months) begins to experiment with separation and independence and mother responds with anger, then the child may have to deal within himself with hateful feelings towards mother and yet at the same time feel a tremendous need for her - an oscillation between love and hate. A child needs a lot of help to get past this stage, and, in a good, loving, and caring home then the stage is passed easily, and the child learns to cope with independence, dependence and strong emotions!

Harry Stack Sullivan, a post Freudian psychotherapist and analyst, believed that perfectionism was due to insecurity and uncertainty in a family where there is little love. Where there is confusion and chaos in the family, the child may choose to make everything in their own personal life very ordered in order to cope with the confusion that is all around them. So, to increase the predictability of life events, this person may ensure that their room is always the same from day to day, their clothes taken off in the same order and placed in exactly the same places. They may take their daily walk at the same time along the same route, the desire being to reduce the risk of being caught unawares by an event which may present difficulties, conflict, and emotional turmoil. If the world is not orderly, if prize possessions are moved, then chaos throughout their whole environment is possible. Leon Salzman, author of "The Obsessional Personality", writes: "There is now good reason to believe that the obsessional defense mechanism provides the most widespread technique for enabling humans to achieve some illusion of safety and security in an uncertain world".

Karen Homey, a neo-Freudian analyst, highlighted the way we develop an idealized image of ourselves to cope with feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and self hatred. She speaks of the idealized image as a "devouring monster": "Surveying self-hate and its ravaging force, we cannot help but see in it a great tragedy, perhaps the greatest of the human mind. Man in reaching out for the Infinite and Absolute also starts destroying himself. When he makes a pact with the devil, who promises him glory, he has to get to hell - to the hell within himself".

3. *Genes, Temperament and Culture.*

It is clear that children have very different personalities and temperaments from an early age, and some very young children are perfectionist in terms of a desire for neatness and order and compulsively checking things. There are also certain cultural predispositions. Japan and Switzerland are perfectionist cultures. They produce many good things of high quality and excellent standards. To go on the buses and trains in Switzerland you have to be there right to the second; the bus will come by at 1.53 exactly! There are also perfectionist subcultures and I fear that some churches fit into this category where you are not allowed to show your real feelings, difficulties or struggles in life, but have to put on an outward show of everything in life being just fine! To have problems shows that you are not a very mature or spiritual person.

4. *Reaction to a Fallen World.*

We must now shift perspective from the details of day to day life to the big questions of our origin and our destiny and why we have the problems that we do. From the bible we know that when we were created by God, we were perfect and in a perfect environment. We know too that we will one day be made perfect again. So, many of our aspirations and longings reflect the reality of who we really are. But, sadly, since Adam and Eve's rebellion and because of our own, we live in an imperfect, fallen world where we have to accept some of the frustrations of imperfection until Christ returns. David Benner writes "The

quest for perfection is, therefore, a spiritual quest. It is the quest for wholeness. Much more than the quest for an absence of mistakes, it is the longing for the ideal, for what is right, beautiful and pure. While it is easy to view such longings as naive expressions of innocence, a person who has lost all idealism and drive for perfection is a person to be pitied. Perfectionist longings continuously remind us of our failings and limitations, but without such reminders we would more easily forget the paradise which, while lost, is the place for which we long.”

Also, we were originally created by God for relationships - with God and with each other, and for dominion over the rest of creation. When trust in relationships is undermined at an early age, then the child will tend to protect himself or herself from the pain of deep unmet legitimate longings for love, affirmation and affection by learning to control emotions and other people to get some of those needs met. This style of living and relating will often continue into adult life. The God given task of dominion is deflected from its original purpose and harnessed in an attempt to control everything in life. These sinful strategies for silencing pain and meeting needs may work in the short term but in the long term only exacerbate the problem as they are ultimately very self centred.

Salzman’s work suggests that there are two major themes about the perfectionist, obsessional, style of thinking. The first is a hatred of the reality of being a limited person in an uncertain world. I remember someone saying to me that they were angry that they had a finite mind. They were exceedingly frustrated with being limited and fallen because, if they were perfect, there was no risk of failure or rejection. We can see, in this, the attraction of a perfectionist theology where health and wealth are promised. The implication of this expectation is that we can transcend the limitations of a fallen world and can have heaven now. It promises too much too soon. Much of the attraction of the New Age movement is that it is promising perfection through our own efforts or by changing our view of reality to believe that everything is already perfect.

Secondly, Salzman says that the perfectionist has a love for the illusion of control and the possibility of making life predictable. Gibson talks about it as the “lust for omnipotence”. The perfectionist does not want anyone to rule them. They want to be in complete control or not at all. Does this not remind you of the temptation of Adam and Eve “you shall be as gods”. “You will be in control, you won’t be limited, you won’t be finite, you will be like god, you can do it on your own”. That is why perfectionism is the road to hell because essentially it is saying that you can be God and in control of all that happens. It is not surprising that we feel this way too, because we have achieved so much control over our environment and our health compared to our ancestors five hundred years ago.

The Centrality of Grace.

All the great religions of the world, except one, have this same driving force- how can man overcome his limitations and become like God? And most of the great religions of the world have rituals, ways of making oneself good enough. So all the great religions of the world, except one, are a process of reducing anxiety by human achievement, reducing fears by works and rituals, in the service of some god or another, thus giving the illusion of possible acceptance and security.

Christianity is profoundly and wonderfully different. Francis Schaeffer never used to tire of saying that Christianity is both the hardest and the easiest religion in the world. It is the easiest because we come with nothing, with empty hands, to the foot of the cross. And yet it is the hardest for that very same reason, because our pride does not want us to accept that we should come with open hands; we want to bring something, we want to contribute to our

own salvation, we want ultimately to have the last card in our hands, to be the one who says we are in control rather than God.

So, perfectionism can also be the road to heaven, because it drives us to see that we cannot reach God's standards on our own. Like the law, it "leads us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" Gal. 3.24. We come with nothing, accepting the free gift of his love, acceptance, and sacrifice on the cross for us, bowing in dependence on him, submitting our will to his knowing that we are accepted, forgiven, loved and valued not for what we do, not for what we have achieved, not for being perfect, but because we recognise how imperfect we are, how sinful we are, and how far we fall short of the perfection of God.

So my worth in the eyes of God does not depend on my works. I don't need to live under law but under grace. So many perfectionist Christians still live under law. Somehow they cannot appropriate and accept the grace of God because there is a basic insecurity with deep fears of rejection, of failure, of non-being, of chaos, and of being out of control. But all these deep fears are dealt with by returning to a relationship with a loving God who accepts us, with all our failures and imperfections. He has plans to make this old ruined cottage of my life, into a glorious palace fit for a king to live in, and he is the one who is going to make us perfect because we cannot do it ourselves.

Be Perfect as Your Heavenly Father is Perfect.

You may say "surely there is a proof text for the perfectionist in Jesus' own words 'Be ye perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt.5.48)? Isn't that enough, isn't that the only command that we need?" This text is surely pointing in the direction that we need to go. The Greek word here is "teleios" meaning mature, reaching an appointed goal. We are called to maturity and holiness. Paul recognises that perfection is not here yet: "When perfection comes the imperfect disappears" (1 Cor. 13.10). One day we will be perfect but it's not now. "Not that I have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of me" (Phil. 3.12). He talks also of us being changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3.18), We have been saved and justified, and we are now in a process of being *changed, being made new*, and being made perfect.

Strategies for Change.

Now we may know and that we cannot make ourselves perfect, and yet we also still wrestle with perfectionist tendencies. Our sinful nature is still active and we need help to change many of the old, insecure, perfectionist tapes which still run in our heads. We may know the facts of God's acceptance of us but don't often feel it in our hearts and so we don't live as if we were accepted.

So how can we help ourselves and others to change, to become more like Christ, to move towards "maturity"? Insight is helpful, but it is often not enough. In fact perfectionists are very good at having insight and understanding of the roots of the problem but they can't change and they usually need practical strategies to help them. And change is a fearful prospect. Because we recognise the real struggles that perfectionists have in coping with life, there is a balance in dealing with this between compassion and challenge, between a hug and a kick! This is really a confrontation with reality. One such confrontation with reality for one perfectionist friend was a move as a missionary to Africa. Surrounded by dirt, imperfection and chaos, where nobody knew what time of day it was and nothing ran on time, she had to change! In this potentially very frightening situation, she realised that she had been living in an unreal fantasy world, believing that perfection was (almost) possible on earth!

David Burns lists some ways of helping people to change with cognitive therapy - (1) Ask the person to list the advantages and disadvantages of trying to achieve perfection in their lives. One girl was asked to do this and she managed to list two advantages and about six disadvantages some of which were - "it makes me so tight and nervous I can't produce fine work or even adequate work at times, secondly I am often unwilling to risk the mistakes necessary to come up with a creative piece of work, thirdly my perfectionism inhibits me from trying new things and making discoveries because I am so preoccupied with being safe ...". When you put down on paper the advantages and disadvantages you, hopefully, begin to see that often the costs outweigh the benefits.

(2) In trying to re-programme this distorted all or nothing thinking, David Burns asks perfectionists "to spend a day investigating whether or not the world can be evaluated in a meaningful way using all or nothing categories". Are the walls in this room totally clean or is there some dirt? Is that person totally handsome or totally ugly or somewhere in between? The exercise usually demonstrates the irrationality of this dichotomous thinking.

(3) Keep a daily written record of self-critical thoughts - the automatic thoughts that come when one is under pressure. You lose a game of tennis and immediately sink into the depths of despair because you feel an utter failure in the whole of life. You cook a meal and it goes wrong - that's the end of the world. There are other ways of thinking about that but until you become aware that that is what you habitually do, you don't realise that you actually need to try to change it and that you may need someone else to help you to change. You need not be a victim of your automatic thoughts; you can actually be an agent in making some choices to change and to struggle against those habitual patterns.

(4) Set realistic goals. Most perfectionists assume that setting the highest personal standards leads to the optimum performance but have never objectively tested that assumption. Athletes and salesmen aiming for the optimum performance actually hit below the optimum so, if you aim for the average, you may succeed more times.

(5) Perfectionists often need a challenge in relation to their assumptions about their relationship with God, especially acceptance and trust. They need to learn to rest on facts and not feelings. One good example of this which shows the rather convoluted thinking of the perfectionist quoted by Minirth and Meier "John P Workaholic feels insecure in his relationship to others including God. Since the love he received from his parents was on a conditional basis he usually sees God the same way. Thus he often has trouble with faith and often doubts his salvation. To counteract these doubts John takes an extreme Calvinistic point of view. He carries the sovereignty of God to an extreme, to the point where he believes the individual has absolutely no responsibility for his life. Of course the only human responsibility in regard to salvation is that one believes in Christ However, John tends to carry the sovereignty of God even beyond this - that there is absolutely no human responsibility. This helps John to control his own deep-seated insecurities and fears that he might be rejected. In fact however, John secretly asks the Lord into his life literally hundreds of times as deep within he does not feel that God could possibly accept him on an unconditional basis. Thus he thinks like a hyper-Calvinist to relieve his guilt but he feels like an Arminian - conditionally accepted".

Another therapist gives an example of the way he helped one of his clients to break out of this view of God. The therapist made his client, Tom, take the role of God. Tom did not believe that God could accept him just as he was and if he came to him in repentance, God would somehow demand that he should be perfect. The therapist got Tom to say, in the role of God, to an imaginary Tom opposite him, four things - firstly, "you, Tom, are not good enough for me to forgive you", secondly, "it is possible for you Tom to become good

enough for me to forgive”, thirdly, “your salvation, Tom, depends on the amount of effort that you put into it”, fourthly, “Tom, I hereby cancel the concept of grace”. This semi-humorous technique helped *Tom* to *understand his wrong view of grace*.

The Environment for Change - an alternative family.

We do not stand alone in the battle. We need each other in the process of sanctification and change and the structure of the church is very important. Individual counselling is inadequate on its own. I believe that it is vital to have small fellowship groups where we can feel that we are accepted just as we are. Now it may take some months and years to grow to a level of trust where we can let down our hair a bit and allow people to see that we’re not so perfect after all, and to share some of the tensions and difficulties of life. We need to see together, from the scriptures, how Paul, David and other “men of God” struggled with life. We need to be able to come to accept that we do get things wrong, that we do make mistakes, that we don’t have answers for everything and sometimes in this uncertain, fallen, world we have to act without knowing all the consequences of what we will do, and we need to be prepared to take risks to move outside our predictable lifestyle.

We have found, within L’ Abri, that when people come to stay with us - and they may come and be around our families for up to three months at a time, studying, working alongside us, sharing our meals and something of our family life with us - we get to know them pretty well and it is the day by day practicalities that often help perfectionists to break out of their normal style of thinking. The vacuum cleaner breaks down and we don’t have another perfect vacuum cleaner to take it’s place. After the garden has been weeded, it does not remain weed-free for long! Playing volleyball, for one girl, was a release from her perfectionism. It took two months to get her onto the volleyball court but eventually she risked it. Her fear was that she would be rejected if she couldn’t play well, but she was able to see that she was acceptable even when playing a very mediocre game. She found that this experience enabled her to take risks in other areas of her life. “I was accepted”, another girl wrote, “with the worst hanging out, I was set free to do my best without the crippling fear of failure and rejection.”

Learning to face and deal honestly with hurts and disappointments, and with guilt and bitterness is also at the heart of change. Learning to forgive and accept forgiveness is crucial to the healing process. These are the subjects of other lectures.

Gibson summarizes the ongoing struggle in responding to Salzman’s description of the obsessional (perfectionist) personality: “what we need our minds renewed about most of all is the matter of being limited mammals in a dangerous world. The obsessive (perfectionist) says “I will not tolerate limitations. I will be in control. I can be in control.” Salzman anaemically says we should accept our limitations and then we will be content. A false comforter counsels the (perfectionist) obsessive, “The world isn’t a dangerous place like you fear. Just trust. You won’t be hurt.” But Christianity teaches that you are limited, that the world is dangerous... it is not merely likely but certain that you will be hurt out there. But, the Christian view teaches that you can well afford all that because it is a small part of a larger picture. There is a loving God that runs everything towards an end that includes your well being. He says to you “I AM, therefore don’t you be afraid.” The answer is to submit to the living God and that submission frees us from the bondage of having to have our own way. The beginning of real freedom is found in bowing to his will. So, concludes Gibson, “Salzman leaves us with a cynical shrug, but the gospel of God’s grace leaves us *with, a song* “lost in wonder love and praise’.”

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