

The gospel frees us from: Perfectionism

Philippians 3:4b-14

How many perfectionists does it take to change a lightbulb? Well, only one - but it will take them a very long time. First of all, they'll notice the lightbulb needs changed. They'll build it up as a big deal - there is this task to be done that must be done as well as possible.

Maybe they'll look around for the most efficient type of bulb to replace this one. Then they'll look around for the best price. Then they'll buy the new bulb, and go ahead and change it. Whilst they're up there, they'll give the light a good dusting, and get the lampshade as straight as they can. Then they'll evaluate it all. They'll ponder whether they've bought the best bulb that they could have, and also wonder what others think about their bulb-changing performance.

Okay, maybe not. But the perfectionist approach to day to day living comes out in all sorts of everyday ways. Like the 'living in comparison to others' that we looked at last week, perfectionism is a slightly unnoticed trend in our culture that can prove life-sapping. And like living in comparison, the good news is that the good news about Jesus sets us free from it.

You might not be troubled by perfectionism. It's something that some people particularly have an issue with, and others don't. You might spot the trend in yourself if you're troubled by this first PowerPoint slide. It's got quite a few flaws, after all. Actually, it probably doesn't bother you at all, but it would do if it was something *you* had produced.

I know perfectionism is not spelled like that. The picture and the text boxes are laid out all wrong. It's very far from perfect. But the thing is, the slide does communicate what we're looking at today and what passage we're focusing on. So it has done what it's supposed to do. And actually, that's fine. Today, I hope we'll see how the gospel - the good news about Jesus - frees us from trying to get things perfect, and to live out our lives the way we're supposed to.

I found these dictionary definitions of perfectionism:

Perfectionism {noun}: Refusal to accept any standard short of perfection.
Demand for the highest standard of excellence.

Now this could sound like a good thing - people not being content with who they are and how things are, but striving to see how far they can go, what might be possible to achieve. Surely science and medicine and art and ethics our whole culture is better when we're striving for higher and greater goals?

But the effect of perfectionism can be crippling. Reaching for what you can't grasp does that to you. Some people strive to turn out flawless pieces of work; or to get their appearance perfected in clothing, shape, face and hair; or to make their house clean, clear and with everything set at right angles; or to be the model husband, wife, father, mother, child or friend.

There are those who try to get at least one compartmentalised part of their life perfect. Maybe because they find that they can't get everything perfect, but perhaps one thing could be. Or maybe because actually, everything else in life is falling apart.

At any rate, this striving for perfection leads to setting incredibly high standards for yourself, and perhaps for other people too. There is a relentless drive to 'do better.' Even when you do a great piece of work or cook a fantastic meal, you can only focus on the tiny thing that *wasn't* good about it, that nobody else even noticed.

As well as an almost constant living in critical self-evaluation, there's a concern about how other people see you too. 'I want to achieve these things so that I'm worthy in other people's eyes. It's not that I want to be applauded; just appreciated and valuable to others.'

At this point, some of you will be thinking, 'yes, yes! This is me! Tell me more!' And others will be switching off because this is not the way you think, so today's going to be irrelevant to you. Well, although it's true that some people are perfectionist types and others aren't, when I take a look at the culture we live in, it seems to be driving more and more of us that way.

We live in a world where you are somebody if you succeed. A culture that prizes the high achievers. The people who dream big and then make it happen - 'Let's be like them!' we hear. The people who dress beautifully and confidently draw cameras their way - 'Let's look like that!' we think. It's also a culture where people post the best versions of themselves on social media. Online, we make our public image as perfect as we can present it.

And it's a culture where increasing demands are placed on us at work because education and healthcare are stretched beyond their resources, and private sector work is a world of cutthroat competition. And the retired grandparents have got to step up too because the parents have got to work more. Work, and even retirement, are telling us, 'you've got to do more, be more, achieve more!'

Whether it's self-talk because this is your personality type, or whether it's the influence of a culture that's obsessed with appearing flawless or meeting targets, or whether it's an upbringing where the unspoken or even spoken message you grew up with was 'you'll never be good enough' - we need to recognise the dangers of perfectionism.

These unattainably high standards lead to something inevitable - disappointment in yourself when you fall short of your self-imposed standards; or disappointment in others when they fall short of them. This is life-sapping. It's something we need set free from. And it's something the good news about Jesus can set us free from.

What are the unattainably high standards you're striving for? Who is putting that on you - yourself, or other influences?

We've talked about some of the ways perfectionism presents in our lives. And we've talked about some of the causes - for some of us it's our self-understanding (and that could be to do with personality or upbringing or both). I'd suggest for all of us it's the culture we live in.

But the deeper root of all of it is this: Am I acceptable? Am I *actually* accepted? Am I loved and delighted in? And here at the root is where the good news about Jesus begins to shake off the perfectionist chains.

You are loved. 'For God so loved the world (He so loved *you*...) that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him may not die, but have eternal life.' (John 3:16). It was His total, absorbing, lavish *love* for you that led God to give His most excellent and perfect thing - the very life of His Son to a death on the cross - in order that you might *know*: you are loved, accepted and completely delighted in!

There's something about being loved that sees beauty in you where you only see imperfection. You hear it sung from lover to lover. Ed Sheeran sing this in his song *Perfect*: 'When you said you looked a mess... I whispered underneath my breath... but you heard it... Darling you look perfect tonight.'

But God's love for you goes beyond even the most genuinely sentimental kind of love that looks *beyond* imperfections. He loves you lavishly as a Father, but His biggest expression of that was to offer something to actually *deal* with all our flaws, failures, imperfections, sins and stains in life.

You are accepted. Here's the thing about God: He's something of a perfectionist Himself. He demonstrates a 'refusal to accept any standard short of perfection.' *But...* He gave us Jesus. Not just to die for all the ways that you and I fall short of perfection (which are *many!*) But also to live the only genuinely perfect life first. And to offer that perfect life to God, on *your* behalf! It's what John Calvin called 'the wonderful exchange':

'This is the wonderful exchange which, out of His measureless benevolence, Jesus Christ has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, He has made us sons of God with Him; that, by His descent to earth, He has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, He has conferred His immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, He has strengthened us by His power; that, receiving our poverty unto Himself, He has transferred His wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon Himself, He has clothed us with His righteousness.'

Basically, Jesus took everything imperfect and unacceptable about us to belong to Him, and died on the cross for it. And He gave all His perfection and acceptability in God's sight to belong to those who put their lives in Him. When Paul talks in Philippians 3:4-14, which we read earlier, about 'a righteousness from God that comes through faith in Christ,' this is what He's talking about. Jesus gifting *His* perfection to us to wear in front of God.

When you believe that good news; when you let it sink in and begin to really trust it, you're set free from striving for unattainably high standards. Because you believe that the highest excellence, even perfection itself, has been lived out and presented on your behalf by Jesus Christ.

You're set free from worrying about how you are looked upon and how worthy you are in others' eyes, because you're confident in how God Himself looks at you - He sees the perfection that Jesus clothed you with. He looks at you with total acceptance, love and pride; He adores you as a Father does His child.

'You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' That's what God said to Jesus when He was baptised. And in the baptisms that mark our own

lives as adopted children in God's family, we identify with Jesus in that just as He identifies with us. Because of your dependence on Jesus, God says to *you*: 'You are my son... you are my daughter... whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

You don't have to earn daddy's approval. When God adopts you as a child through faith in Jesus, you absolutely have it. Even if you could reach the highest standards off your own bat, it would be rubbish compared to what you receive with life in Jesus. That's what Paul tells us in Philippians 3.

In vv.4-6, he offers a perfectionist's CV. And he says 'actually, I *have* performed pretty strongly against the high standards set both by my society, and myself. I was well born, and I've lived up to my opportunities. I've lived the strict moral code of the Pharisees *faultlessly*. I've used my 'zeal' - my relentless drive - highly effectively to get rid of as much of the church as I could, because I thought it was an immoral distraction from God.'

Paul was a perfectionist who had managed to live up to the high standards. But then he met Jesus. And he says in vv.7-8 that all of that stuff that he used to live for wasn't just trivial or unimportant, it was actually rubbish. That word translated 'rubbish' can also mean 'dung.' It's something not to be kept, but to be deliberately rid of because you're much better off without it.

Knowing Jesus means throwing out the old perfectionist ways and *replacing* them. First of all, it means replacing the root of your *identity*. So, rightness in the eyes of self or others by striving for perfection gets replaced by rightness in the eyes of God by accepting the perfection that's given to you. Paul says in v.9 that he wants to be 'found in Jesus.' He gives up trying to establish himself, and humbly accepts an identity Jesus gives him that is better by far.

Paul's *motives* get replaced by completely different ones, too. His old motives were to live up to his own expectations and establish himself in the eyes of others. In vv.10-11, we read about the new things he wants: 'I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.'

These motives are all Christ-focused instead of self-focused. That's a *big* replacement, and a really freeing change in his life. Paul's *relentless drive* doesn't have himself at the centre of it anymore (how well *I* can do, how people see *me*). It's replaced with Jesus at the centre (I want to know *Jesus* more, become more like *Him*, share more of *His* life, death and resurrection).

Paul's *striving* to become something he should be gets replaced with a *striving* to become what he already is. In vv.12-14, Paul talks about pressing on to win the prize that Christ has already won for him. He says 'it's *not* that I've already been made perfect' in v.12. But being seen as perfect in God's eyes because of Jesus, he can run on in life, growing, gradually becoming more and more in practice what he already is in status.

Sometimes there comes a point in a game - maybe with eight minutes to go and 21 points up in a rugby match - where the team in the lead knows that they've got the win. The pressure is off. And there's a freedom and lightness amongst the players; they actually start playing some of their best stuff now. It's not cagey, uncertain rugby - it's free flowing and confident, because they don't have to worry about the consequences of little errors now.

Something like that is what faith in Jesus brings you. The win is in the bag. You are perfect in God's eyes through faith in Jesus who gifts you that. You are totally loved, cherished, treasured, accepted and delighted in. So you can go and play some of your best stuff now without worrying about the little errors.

Rowan Williams makes this comment about v.13 - 'St. Paul's language in Philippians about 'stretching forward to that which is ahead' was a very important image for early Christians. 'Straining forward,' (*epektasis* in the Greek), is being pulled towards what is ahead of us. But 'straining forward' is probably the wrong language, because it can suggest that it's all about me making an effort rather than God drawing me out.'

The gospel frees us from perfectionism by replacing a lonely hike towards an unknown outcome with a run towards a prize already won for you and a proud Father God cheering you on towards the finish line.

What strikes you most in the language that Paul uses in Philippians 3:4-14?

Here's one way a Christian psychologist called David Carlson counsels people whose self-esteem is affected by striving for unattainable standards and concern about how others see them. He directs them to:

- 1) Accept myself as a child of God who is lovable, valuable and capable.
- 2) Be willing to give up considering myself the centre of the world.
- 3) Recognise my need for God's forgiveness and redemption.

We've talked a little bit about the first two of those, so we'll finish with something around the third point. We need God's forgiveness and redemption. Because we're all hugely imperfect. We all fail, sin, fall short. But the good news about Jesus is that this doesn't define us or end us. Because forgiveness and perfection in God's eyes are freely available to us through faith in Christ.

When you live your life really believing that, you come to see imperfection as inevitable. And so when you see imperfections in your work, your appearance, your relationships, your behaviour - it doesn't collapse you. Knowing that it's simply impossible to produce perfect work, or live a perfect life, have a perfect home or be a perfect husband/wife/brother/sister/aunt/grandad/doctor/teacher/student frees you from the fear of falling short.

It doesn't mean our sinfulness and shortcomings are okay - I can't just say, 'It's okay that I'm always grumpy with the kids or rude at work, because we're all imperfect.' God accepts us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us there. He wants us to strive to become more like the Jesus who has already given His perfection to us.

But you can live with not being the finished product yet. Because you're confident, as Paul said earlier in Philippians 1:6, that '...He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'

Living in a rhythm of recognising and admitting your faults regularly, as you bring them to God in prayer and ask forgiveness for your sins, is a much more freeing way to live than covering up or hiding from yourself or other people the flaws that are really there. You can do it when you know God's forgiveness is assured in Jesus.

One of the upshots of thinking the way that Carlson suggests is this: Criticism just matters way less. Whether it's your self-criticism, or whether it's other people's criticisms of you, they just aren't as personal and wounding.

Because if I'm a cherished child of God, I'm really secure in my identity. And if Jesus is the centre instead of me, what I think of myself and what others think of me just doesn't matter as much as it did. And if my imperfection as inevitable, then of course there will be obvious flaws in me worthy of criticism - they just don't define me.

They say nobody's perfect. Actually, one person was - and is. So how about we root our lives in Jesus, make our lives about Him and not us, and depend on His perfect, forgiving love for us?