

March 30th: Perfectionism

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our series on caring for our souls, so if you’re in need of a little care today, then we’re glad you’re here.

For this next month, we will be continuing to discuss a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, and specifically, we’ll be embarking on a journey into our complex brains, exploring mental health conditions and realities that have an impact on our souls. Even if you don’t personally suffer from these conditions, or have these diagnoses as part of your story, I hope that these meditations will increase your awareness and compassion for friends and neighbors who are burdened by these experiences or who are looking for acceptance. Together, we can work towards better community supports, greater understanding, and spiritual wellbeing for everyone.

Before we look more closely at our last topic for the month, Perfectionism, let’s pray together.

Holy God, our scriptures tell us that you alone are perfect, and yet so many of us are engaged in an endless pursuit of perfection. We set standards for ourselves that we can never live up to, we punish ourselves when we fail, and we experience shame for all the ways in which we feel we don’t measure up. The result is that we have wounded ourselves in ways that feel difficult to heal, but you draw near to us and remind us that we are beloved in your sight. Help us this week to hear your caring voice more clearly, so that we might be able to see ourselves through your eyes. Amen.

Have you ever encountered something that looked good at first, but turned out to be bad news? Maybe you ate that gas station sushi against your better judgment, or you didn’t realize skiing was so dangerous until you came home in a cast... Well, today we’re talking about one of those things—because I think we’ve all learned that appearances can be deceiving, and sometimes we get lured in by an activity or idea that’s not good for us.

Perfectionism is one of those things that sounds like a gift, but is actually a curse. Perfectionism is one of those things that would appear really great, turns out to be a really big headache. It sounds like it would be a good thing for human beings to be concerned with perfection or at least excellence, right? It sounds like a positive thing to be focused on doing a good job or striving to be our best, doesn't it?

Spoiler alert: no. It's not.

Well, let me backtrack. Yes, it is admirable to be ambitious, high achieving, successful, or hardworking—and yes, it is laudable to have a growth mindset and be accountable for our mistakes so that we improve our character and relationships. Those are all examples of a healthy approach to our lives, but those things are not the same as perfectionism. Perfectionism goes beyond this healthy level of labor and emotional commitment and becomes something detrimental to our emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

If you were to Google perfectionism, you will find a variety of different definitions—there's some consensus but also a little diversity. Merriam Webster calls perfectionism “a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable” while Wikipedia writes that perfectionism is a broad [personality trait](#) characterized by a person's concern with striving for flawlessness and perfection.” In more clinical terms, the American Psychological Association calls perfectionism “the tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation.”

So if we put all of those together, we might be able to understand that for many people, perfectionism isn't just a temporary feeling or a once in a while practice, but an ongoing state of being. It could be a mindset that affects all of our interactions, or an impulse that we might struggle to control, or a trait that appears in our behavior when we are engaged in certain activities or pursuits. And this mindset, or impulse, or trait is undergirded by this belief that perfection is possible—that flawlessness is actually attainable, and even necessary for external validation, internal approval, or self esteem. For people

who are stuck in a state of perfectionism, this type of performance is simply expected, which makes it hard to escape from. Case in point: I was listening to a podcast a few weeks ago when I heard one of the cohosts repeat a quote that she resonated with—a statement that reminded her of her inner perfectionistic voice when looking at her own personal story and moments of success. She said, “I didn’t see it as an achievement, because in my head, it was my obligation to achieve it.”

Oof.

That quote hit me hard, and I scrambled to write it down because I knew that I wanted to share it with you all in case there was someone else who was struggling with the same kind of thoughts. If you’ve ever dealt with the weight of these expectations, you know that it can feel like an elephant sitting on your chest. It can feel like a voice in your head that never lets you rest, never allows you to be at peace.

But underneath these feelings, there’s a question that maybe we don’t always ask. Where did these beliefs come from? Where does perfectionism originate?

Well, it’s complicated. Scholars and mental health professionals have mixed opinions about this—because it can be hard to pinpoint. Perfectionism can be a childhood coping mechanism for someone with a highly critical parent or parent figure, or it can be something that an individual can adopt as part of a stressful work environment. Brene Brown has talked about how perfectionism can be part of an internal belief system, an idea we hold onto so that we don’t have to deal with feelings of judgement, blame, or shame in our lives. She says that it can be a tool to shield ourselves from painful memories or experiences, hoping that if we can do things perfectly or appear perfect to others, we can avoid further discomfort. I think that’s very real, and that kind of internal pressure can be exhausting to deal with.

But it’s not just an inner issue, because perfectionism is also built into our larger culture—advertisements sell us perfectly curated homes, perfectly clear skin, perfectly organized closets, perfectly relaxing vacations, perfectly toned gym bodies, perfectly nutritious meals for our children, and so much more.

Maybe these days we're more aware of the airbrushing and photoshop and manipulation in these images, but I still think these kinds of images or ideas are insidious. And that's because these messages are geared towards making us think that this kind of perfection is within our grasp, they try to convince us that if we're not able to measure up to these standards, then we are either a failure or we're just not trying hard enough.

We get this kind of information all the time, and if we're not careful, it can really get to us. It can make our minds spin, and our hearts ache for acceptance. It can seep into how we talk to each other, or how we speak about ourselves. The belief that we need certain levels of achievement, success, beauty, or skill to feel good about ourselves or feel like we're enough can leave us searching for validation and approval. It can make us feel like we're stuck in an impossible position—facing a gap between who we are and who we long to be.

It's a headache, that's for sure. Wilt Chamberlain expressed this best when he said, "They say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you that practice makes perfect. I wish they'd make up their minds."

Now might be a good time to share that I've got some bad news for us, so brace yourselves. Here it is: perfection isn't possible. It's not real. It's not reality. Or at least it's not real when it comes to human beings—I think we can all agree that perfect sunsets and perfect pastries do exist. But when it comes to us, we are complicated, messy, and sometimes confused people. We have moments of brokenness, we disappoint each other, we have past experiences that make us vulnerable to unhealthy choices and dynamics.

Unfortunately for the perfectionists among us, even though the ideal of perfection isn't something that we can actually achieve and it's not something that is within our grasp—it can still be difficult to disconnect from this way of thinking or acting. But if we want our souls to be free from these oppressive and anxiety producing experiences, then we have to make an effort to tell ourselves and each other the truth. And here's the first piece of that truth: when we make perfection our goal, or we choose it as our idol, we are bound

to fail. We actually set ourselves up for disappointment, because there is no way that we can live up to expectations that we've built up in our mind. We hold ourselves accountable to a version of ourselves that does not, will not, and cannot exist, and we wound ourselves when we try.

I don't think any of us want to feel that way. I don't think any of us want to live that way. Even if we struggle with perfectionistic impulses, I don't think any of us really want that kind of life, or the deep distress that comes with it. And I don't think God wants that kind of life for us either. Rev. Lizzie McManus Dail, an Episcopal priest in Texas, recently published a book called "God Didn't Make Us to Hate Us," and she argues that God didn't design human beings so that we would feel these intense emotions of failure or fear of judgment. God didn't form us and breathe life into us so that we could grow up to be filled with self-loathing or feelings of inadequacy. God didn't make us the way we are so that we would yearn to be something else.

Scripture tells us that the essence of God is love, and that love for us extends beyond our human comprehension—but where else might we find evidence of this idea that perfectionism isn't part of God's desires for our lives?

Well, today we're looking at a passage from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, his first epistle to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. This group of Christians also lived in a culture that valued ideals of beauty, skill, and aesthetic perfection. They also probably struggled with comparing themselves to the people around them, or feeling like they weren't measuring up to societal standards. They also had complicated feelings about how to understand God's love for them, while still understanding their need for forgiveness and grace as broken people.

In these verses, Paul is trying to help them gain some perspective—and he does this by comparing human beings to God.

Starting off, Paul says this: "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" And then in verse 25, Paul writes, "For the foolishness

of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Some might say that Paul’s words here are harsh—and that could be true. Paul certainly isn’t mincing words, he’s being pretty direct with this teaching. In Paul’s hierarchy, human beings are very clearly not God, and even on our best days, we fall very short of God’s character and ability. Even if we meet certain expectations in our own world, none of that matters, because God’s traits are beyond anything that we could ever achieve.

We could see this passage as demoralizing and demotivating—but in a weird way, I actually think Paul’s language here is meant to be a comfort to his fellow human beings. I think Paul’s comparison can help us realize that the proper perspective can liberate us from the traps and temptations that we might fall into. When we realize perfection isn’t expected of us by God—we can be free from our own idealized expectations as well. When we fully understand that God didn’t make us to hate us, we can escape our own inner critics and live as our most authentic selves, even if it’s messy and complicated.

Now, that doesn’t mean that we can’t strive to grow and learn, it doesn’t mean we can’t look for opportunities to heal from our pasts, and it doesn’t mean that we can’t seek transformation through God’s grace—but it does mean that we can do so without any pressure or expectation that we will ever be perfect. We can do our best to become more successful in our personal or professional endeavors—but we trust that none of these goals or achievements are the foundation of our inherent worth. We can feel empowered to become more like Jesus—more kind, more loving, more generous, more courageous, more gentle—without feeling like our innate value changes based on our behavior.

You can start to move towards this mindset with just small steps—noticing when our perfectionistic impulses are triggered, taking a moment to remind ourselves that the images we see and messages we hear are designed to trick us and trap us, and reminding ourselves that human imperfection doesn’t change God’s plan for us.

Here's what I hope you take into this new week, here's the final piece of truth that I hope will be good news:

God's love is not a bait and switch, it's not something that sounds good but is actually bad news. God's love for us, God's love for you isn't rooted in your ability to figure everything out or be the best or never make a mistake—it isn't contingent upon getting perfect grades, or having a clean house at all times, or having kids who never misbehave. God's love for me doesn't rest on my ability to write a perfect sermon, which is good, because I never do and I never will.

God's love for all of humanity is grounded in God's perfect and holy character, and when we see ourselves and each other the way that God does, we can liberate our souls from the prisons of our own creation. My friends, this is a truth that will set us free—so be free this week.

Amen.