The Pursuit of Excellence & the Perils of Perfectionism

Richard Winter, MD
Professor of Practical Theology and Counseling,
Psychotherapist,
Covenant Theological Seminary
St Louis, MO
Perfectionism

- Strong desire to be flawless in appearance, performance and character
- What do we expect of ourselves?
- External pressures
- Internal drives
- Healthy or unhealthy?
The Pursuit of the Perfect Body

• See colored notes for examples of magazines and images
The Pursuit of Perfection

• The Promise of Technology
The Pursuit of Excellence

• The Promise of Technology
• +
• Hard Work, Commitment and Discipline
• +
• The Pressure to Excel
Seductive Sirens of Perfectionism

- Appearance
- Performance
- Beauty
- Brawn
- Brains
- Bucks
The Promise of Perfectionism

• There’s no denying that when you count up material comforts, remarkable achievements and other outward signs of success, perfectionism will seem to have served you well – especially in this day and age. We have been going through an era in which setting high standards and devoting an inordinate amount of time and energy to attaining them is considered a prerequisite for success.

• But appearances can be deceiving.

    - Miriam Elliot and Susan Meltsner. *The Perfectionist Predicament*
Types of Perfectionism

• Appearance
• Performance
• Moral
• All Round
Assets and Liabilities of Perfectionism

- Sometimes good, sometimes bad!
- Healthy and/or Unhealthy
- Normal or “Neurotic”
- A Spectrum?
Perfectionism – a spectrum

820 academically gifted 6th graders

25 % Dysfunctional Perfectionist
42 % Healthy Perfectionist
33 % Non-Perfectionist
Unhealthy Perfectionists

• Have standards that are high beyond reach or reason
• Strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals
• Feel their best efforts are never good enough
• Unable to feel satisfaction or joy in a job well done

• *Measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment*
• Preoccupied with performance and/or appearance
Normal/Healthy Perfectionists
(People of Excellence)

• Pursue Excellence
• Derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labors of a painstaking effort to meet high standards
• Feel free to be less precise as the situation permits
• Rejoice in their skills
• Appreciate a job well done
Perfectionism

• See colored notes for chart
Types of Perfectionism
Hewitt and Flett (1991)

- Self Oriented
- Socially Prescribed
- Other Oriented
- Combined
Self Oriented Perfectionism

• See colored notes for chart
Self Oriented Perfectionism

NORMAL/HEALTHY
• Self assured
• Assertive
• Conscientious
• Organized
• Disciplined
• Determined
• Diligent
• Thoughtful
• Empathic
• Helpful
• Strong Moral Standards
• Sensitive Conscience

NEUROTIC/UNHEALTHY
• Depression
• Impatience
• Self blame
• Shame and guilt
• Irritability/Anger
• Fear of criticism
• Avoid Challenges
• Suicidal tendency
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

• Self worth contingent on other’s approval
• Perceived expectations of others too high
Other Oriented Perfectionism

• Why can’t they do it the way it should be done?
Thought Patterns of Unhealthy Perfectionists

- All or nothing thinking
- Need for control
- Tyranny of “oughts” and “shoulds”
- Excessively rigid standards and inflexibility
Thoughts and Feelings of Unhealthy Perfectionism

• Perception of consistently failing to meet high standards set by self or others
• Shame, social comparison, inferiority
• Concern over mistakes
• Doubts about actions
• Over responsibility
• Excessive need to control
Perils of Perfectionism

• Anxiety and Worry
• Procrastination and Excessive slowness
• Indecisiveness
• Excessive checking, list making, and organizing
• Not knowing when to quit or giving up too soon
• Decreased Productivity and Performance
• Failure to delegate
• Eating Disorders
90% girls age 3-11 have a Barbie doll

• Measurements
  – 36-18-33 Barbie
  – 33-23-33 Fashion model

• See Colored Notes for images
Longing to be...

• Accepted and loved in a lonely world

• Powerful in a dangerous world

• In control in a disordered world
Attitude to Body

- All……………………..Nothing
- Obsess………………..Neglect or Abuse
Perils of Perfectionism

• Eating Disorders
• Depression and Suicidal Ideas
• Relationship Problems
• Obsessive Compulsive Symptoms
The Roots of Perfectionism

- Genes
- Culture
  - Sub-Culture
  - Military and Medical
- Family
  - Example/Modeling
  - Parental Expectations and Criticism
  - Shame and abuse
- School
- Church
  - Example/Modeling
  - Theology
    - Law or Grace?
Roots of Perfectionism

• Shame
• Fear
  – Failure
  – Rejection
  – Loss of Control
• Pride
  – *We have to be careful not to elevate our preferences to moral standards and judge others by them. We only do so to feel superior.* – Tim Keller
Practical Strategies for Health Learning to Live with Imperfection

- Evaluate pros and cons of perfectionism
- Recognize all or nothing patterns
- Keep journal of thoughts and feelings
- Awareness of feelings and fear of loss of control
- Resisting lies we tell ourselves
- Move from idealism to reality
- Accept day by day, little by little
- Work on small goals
Living with Imperfection


- Less perfectionist about physical appearance
  - No more than 30 mins getting ready
  - Miss workout in gym
  - Willing to gain five pounds without upset
  - Learning to tolerate anxiety
Living with Imperfection

• Become more tolerant of others
  – Stop caring how they wash the dishes
  – Tolerate spouse/friend arriving late
  – Allow children to make mess
  – Learning to tolerate anxiety
Bigger Questions
Beliefs about the Nature of Reality

• Evolution, chance and time...?
  – What is perfection?

• Impersonal God or energy
  – Perfect already?

• Personal God
  – Created perfect
  – Fallen
  – Being restored
  – Memory and longing
Beliefs about Values

• Appearance?
• Performance?
• Productivity?
• All good but...too important?
Physical Beauty

- Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Abigail
- David
- A gift to be cared and used creatively
- But dangers!
  - “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment...Instead it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit...”
It’s downhill all the way!

• Knees
• Back
• Brain
• Disease
• Decay
• Death
The glory fades...

- All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers the flowers fall...
- Isaiah 40:6-7
Matthew 5-7

• Jesus – on what’s really important
Beliefs about the Nature of Perfection

- Appearance
- Possessions
- Performance?
  - Grades
  - Quality work
  - Athletic or artistic performance
  - Financial success
- Productivity
- Character development?
- Become more truly human, more like Christ
What is really important?

- Being a good steward of the gifts God has given you
- Character and Integrity
- Becoming truly human – fruits of the spirit
- Living in relationship with our Creator
The Path to Perfection

• All the great religions
  – Common awareness
  – Try harder

• But Christianity different
  – A personal and moral universe
  – Need rescue
  – A loving God who comes
• Road to Hell
• I can be good enough
• I can be in control
• I can be God of my own universe

• The Road to Heaven
• A perfect Sacrifice
• A Free Gift of Grace
• He was wounded for our transgressions...
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have
turned every one to his own way; and the Lord
has laid on him the iniquity (imperfection) of us
all. Isaiah 53:5-6
If True...

• Our fundamental worth and identity do not depend our appearance or performance

• When we know we are accepted and loved with all of our imperfections we are set free to pursue excellence without fear of failure or rejection, and with gratitude to our Creator.
But...Old Habits Die Hard!

• Trying to be perfect

• Tension:
  – Gift of perfection...............Becoming perfect

• For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy. Heb. 10:11-14 (NLT)

• “Be perfect...” (Matt 5:48)
  – Maturity of character
  – Aim and goal
  – Cannot do it on your own
Unhealthy Perfectionism

Core Beliefs (often unconscious)

• I must be in control
• I am terrified of failure and rejection
• I am what I do or how I look

Intensity and frequency

“Recovering Perfectionist”
The Optimum Environment for Change

- Relationship with God
- Relationship with people
- Experience acceptance and grace...
- “with the worst hanging out!”
The Velveteen Rabbit

• “What is REAL?”
• “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”
The Promise of Perfection!

• I consider the present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. Romans 8:18

• We, who...reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory. 2 Cor. 3:18

• “I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am”. – John Newton
Until that day...

• He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Phil 3:20

• The command to be perfect is not idealist gas....! C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity*

• Until that day...groaning for glory. Rom. 8