

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Perfectionism

During her first term of service Betsy had a maid and housekeeper, but she never put the hiring of help in prayer letters for fear that supporters would think she was pampered. Later she and her husband bought a house back “home” so their children always return to the same place—what would those who gave money think? Then someone loaned them an SUV to drive for deputation—a Lexus. Surely their supporters would stop giving.

When introducing himself to a group of nationals, Paul thought he had told them he was embarrassed about his language ability, but he had told them he was pregnant! Even though they laughed, he believed he was stupid and could hardly face the other missionaries. He just could not get that incident out of his mind because he wanted to do everything right. He had agreed to write an article for the monthly agency newsletter, and he had written the article; however, he had missed three deadlines to submit it because he kept going over it to make sure it was perfect.

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a trait that some missionaries have, a trait that involves setting goals or standards so high that they are virtually impossible. Such perfectionists measure their self-worth by their performance in reaching these goals; however, they are usually disappointed when they fail and are very critical of themselves for this failure. They believe that anything short of perfection is terrible and that people will lose respect for them if they make any mistakes. They get caught in a vicious cycle as follows.

- Setting impossible goals
- Failing to reach those goals
- Becoming less productive with failure
- Blaming themselves, which lowers esteem
- Trying harder by setting additional impossible goals...

Perfectionists are usually rather unhappy and depressed, feel guilty, have no sense of personal satisfaction, and perform more poorly than people who set more realistic goals.

What is not perfectionism?

Although similar to striving for excellence, perfectionism is not the same. Setting realistic goals and standards and then working to reach them is very good. Healthy strivers set goals that are attainable, just a little more than they have already done, and they feel satisfied when they reach their goals.

Also mistakes or failures are interpreted quite differently. Such failures are seen as a learning opportunity and an incentive to work harder by those striving for excellence. Perfectionists see failures or mistakes as personal defects. They may have difficulty understanding that baseball players who fail to get hits 70% of the time are considered to be excellent players.

Doesn't the Bible say to be perfect?

The Bible has many passages about being perfect, and it refers to one group of people who at least border on perfectionism.

The Old Testament has very few places where it commands people to be perfect. Moses said, “Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God (Deuteronomy 18:13, King James Version). The Hebrew word

“tamim” used in that passage means “whole” or “complete.” Most recent versions translate it differently than the King James Version.

The New Testament has more places which tell Christians to be perfect. Here are some passages spoken by Jesus and written by an early missionary.

- Jesus, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).
- Jesus, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21).
- Paul, “We proclaim him...so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

These passages and many others in the New Testament use the Greek word “telios” which basically means mature or complete. Although perfectionists may believe they must become flawless in everything they do and say, telios (perfect) does not mean that.

What does the Bible say about perfectionism?

One group who at least bordered on perfectionism was the Pharisees who tried to keep every rule in the Old Testament as well as all of the traditions that had developed during past centuries. They often criticized those who did not share their ideas, and they did not have anything to do with such “sinners.”

The Pharisees condemned Jesus because his disciples picked some grain along the way and ate it on the Sabbath. Eating was not against the rules, but harvesting was (Matthew 12:1-14). Jesus warned his followers to avoid being like the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36).

Paul, an early missionary, said he was a Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee, part of the strictest sect of Judaism. He tried to do everything perfectly right for years even if it meant putting Christians in prison and killing them (Acts 23:6; Acts 26:5; Acts 22:3-5). However, after meeting Jesus, Paul said that he considered all of this “perfect” performance as worthless loss and as rubbish (NIV), garbage (NLT), or even dung (KJV) (Philippians 3:7-9).

What causes perfectionism?

Several things can lead to perfectionism, but the probably the most common are developmental and cognitive factors.

Early in life, as children, some missionaries may have found that people in their lives valued them because of their performance, how much they succeeded. Rather than valuing themselves as children of God, these missionaries began trying to win the approval of others. As adult missionaries they then try to please everyone by being absolutely perfect and never making a mistake or failing anything.

Other missionaries may have developed some flaws in their thinking, often in thinking about God. They may see God as being pleased with them only if they have a certain minimum number of converts, only if they spend so much time in devotions and prayer, etc. They have long lists of “shoulds” or “oughts” that are impossible to keep. They fall short of their goals, and become critical of others who do not live up to their own goals. Even though other missionaries may see them as very successful, they feel like failures themselves.

What can missionaries do about perfectionism?

Perfectionists often find it very difficult to change. They have often been that way for many years and do not want to quit or find it difficult to quit even though they are unhappy, depressed, and not functioning well. Remember that God had to blind Paul for three days before he was ready to begin changing (Acts 9). We do not know how long it took for Paul to change, but we do know that he went immediately into Arabia to allow God to work in him before he talked with anyone else. After his time “alone” with God in Arabia, Paul returned to Damascus for three years before going to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and talk with James (Galatians 1:11-24).

Because some missionaries find it so difficult to change, and the process of changing takes far more space than is available here, I am not even attempting to summarize what needs to be done. For those readers who want to try changing, here is a link to excellent information about perfectionism on-line. Perfectionism in Perspective is provided by the Centre for Clinical Interventions, Government of Western Australia, Department of Health at http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infoax.cfm?Info_ID=52. This information package is organized into modules one can work through. The modules are as follows.

1. What is perfectionism?
2. Understanding perfectionism
3. What keeps perfectionism going?
4. Changing perfectionism
5. Reducing my perfectionist behavior
6. Challenging my perfectionist thinking
7. Adjusting unhelpful rules and assumptions

8. Re-evaluating the importance of achieving
9. Putting it all together

These modules are each ten pages long, but the pages have many illustrations and lots of white space. The modules are written to be done in the order they are presented, so even though Module 1 has the same title as the first section of this document, please note that it has much more information than presented here. It is essential to do Module 1 before trying to do any of the others. Then do Module 2, etc.

In addition, as perfectionistic missionaries do the modules they need to remember to bring in thoughts and behaviors that are unique to them and their Christian perspective. For example, when listing unrealistic goals they should think of things such as the following.

- “All of my Bible school students must like me.” Jesus told the apostles that people would hate them and persecute them (Matthew 10, John 15). Paul, an early missionary, met many people who did not like him (2 Corinthians 11).
- “I must have many converts every time I preach.” Paul preached a great sermon in Athens and had only “a few” converts (Acts 17). Other times when he preached or healed he was arrested or driven out of town.

In addition, asking trusted people to help one become aware of unrealistic goals can be very valuable. These people do not need to be counselors or pastors, but they must be trusted people who know the missionaries well. Many missionaries have a select group of supporters who they can ask to pray for “healing” or “growth” as they struggle with things like perfectionism.

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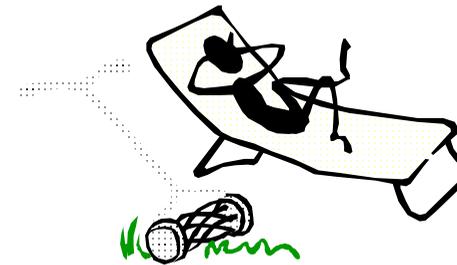
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