What comes to mind when you see the word “Perfect?” The American Heritage Dictionary defines perfect with at least 11 nuances of meaning. An idea common to each of the nuances is “complete.” Stated in a negative way, “without flaw,” or “flawless.” We use the word “perfectionist” to describe someone who believes that moral righteousness can be achieved by repeated effort or that success can be achieved by the completion of high standards without making mistakes.

**Adaptive perfection improves, maladaptive perfection impairs**.

On one hand, we want professionals to be perfectionists. We want a perfectionist surgeon. On the other, we develop psychological distress if we set unattainable expectations for self and other. The latter concept, setting unattainable expectations, suggests disruptive stress in identity development. Author, James A. Fogarty, in “The Magical Thoughts of Grieving Children” (2000) attributes the formation of unrealistic expectations to a mode of coping available to children called, “magical thinking”:

Magical thought is children’s inaccurate conclusion(s) regarding a loss experience resulting in children believing that they are responsible for the loss experience and need to fix the loss experience. Magical thought may lead children to believe that they have developed a method of mourning, but they have actually developed an unhealthy and complicated process of mourning (p. 1).

Helpful perfectionism defines perhaps difficult, but achievable goals, that when achieved provide a sense of completion, wholeness, and purpose. By definition, unhelpful perfectionism defines standards beyond anyone’s reach because this provides an image or illusion of control over grief and loss. Maladaptive perfection reinforces a deep, inner sense of disappointment, learned helplessness, and situational depression when we fall short of unattainable expectations.

**Maladaptive perfectionism compensates for emotional neglect.**

Self-help recovery literature organizes around the psycho-social-spiritual hang-ups that develop when a primal-innate want of affection (as in a child’s esteem for a parent’s nurture) attaches to a role with expectations defined by responsibilities that seem achievable (be a perfect boy or girl). Focusing on fixing provides a distraction and sense of purpose. The efforts expended convey a sense of love which gives altruistic feedback of approval, worth. By “fixing” the problem (instead of feeling it) I imagine control over the pain of grief and loss in life.

In other words, when deprived of mature love in our family of origin, we compensate for a deficit in our primal-innate want of affection and need for a nurturing caregiver (instead of crying, just push through) by shifting attention to works, responsibilities, things we can do to feel attached to the system. We shift focus away from primary interests, concerns, and feelings (Who I am) and onto role performance and responsibilities (What I do) as the means to contain a hunger for affection.

**Role performance rewards and reinforces emotional neglect (but feels like love).**

This shifting away from primary life experiences and toward role performance develops into a personality pattern in which the avoidance of feelings feels right, and the awareness of primal needs seems selfish, bad, or wrong. So much effort goes into avoiding primary feelings that we begin to organize our daily activities around appearing “normal” as a strategy to avoid awareness and expression of our emotional parts. Addictions of substance and of behavior serve to alleviate the stress generated by our effort to keep our primal-innate want of affection from surfacing and from flooding our heart and mind with images and implicit feelings of guilt, shame, and fear, in other words, failure. The perfectionist trap develops as we use a fix-or-fail strategy (what I do) to solve the identified problem of failure (who I am). How does that trap enslave the soul?

**Emotional neglect dominates personality through self-control and self-contempt cycles**.

In the perfectionist trap, fear of failure incentivizes role responsibility. With each responsible deed, we reinforce value for fear of failure because the negative identity pushed us through, and we imagine it helped us (“My fear of failure motivated me to get through the problem.”). But when we fail, we experience the negative punitive feelings of guilt, shame, and fear that distract us from our true vulnerable-dependent-malleable self (I ought not fail!). These feelings communicate highly negative messages that condemn until we get back into fix-or-fail mode (“See you blew it. You’re flawed. You don’t deserve affection.”). We develop the double-bind trap that says, “I cannot, not fail!” and “I cannot succeed.” So, we learned early in life to, on the one hand, view imperfection as failure; and on the other hand, view perfection as redemption. And we use the punitive effect of failure to push us toward perfection. Does this feel familiar?

**Self-defeating cycles keep perfectionists from feeling wholeness, perfection, and completion when vulnerable, dependent, and malleable.**

The biblical world recognized this trap as bondage to fear. The natural fear of death that followed the fall motivates humankind to survive (vulnerability feels bad, dangerous). In an effort to survive, humankind discovers the inevitability of death and imperfection. Jesus saw humankind’s effort to perfect and survive as an enslavement to the fear of death (Hebrews 2). Humankind avoids the fear of death by setting standards for its own survival. These standards, rituals, like perfectionism, provide a distraction that feels like purpose. In the moment it feels helpful but cycles away from everlasting inner peace, rest, or fulfillment.

Unfortunately, many used the law as a kind of self-promotion and advancement in the eyes of others. This moment became an immediate reward that reinforced their works rituals (“Look at and accept me for what I do because who I am does not matter—no one knows who I really am.”). Jesus said of the Pharisees, who loved to be seen of men, that when seen they received their reward. And, they’ll keep repeating this cycle without coming to know the true worth of what they’re missing.

Behavior learning theories call this process reinforcement. Working to appear as normal feels like approval and reinforces attachment to the works that lead to the approval. And when failure occurs, the negative reinforcement of self-condemnation punishes until we get back on the treadmill of perfection. Getting on the treadmill of perfection resets our effort to avoid judgment, failure, and guilt-shame-fear. In other words, in maladaptive perfection, guilt-shame-fear-contempt FEEL NORMAL! The Pharisees wanted affection, but they desired to acquire it by performing public rituals. Jesus refuted this. He taught his disciples to perform rituals in private before the Father. Jesus affirmed accepting and refuted wanting favor with God. The Apostle Paul gives us a kind of journal entry about how accepting favor with God delivered him from the perfectionist trap.

**The Apostle Paul describes his emotional exhaustion and torment with self-defeating cycles.**

The Apostle Paul details his psycho-social-spiritual struggle with legal, moral perfectionism in Romans 7. In essence Paul admits that he cannot ***not*** want to be righteous. Keeping the law gave him responsibilities that he could check off his list and feel righteousness with each check mark. But one commandment threw him. He said, the command to not covet disrupted his perfectionist pursuit. Paul coveted righteousness by the works of the law. But the law said, “do not covet.” Paul could not, ***not*** want to be righteous, but he could not be righteous by attempting to be. In that moment he felt wretched and unfixable. In that moment he stopped wanting and started receiving favor.

**The biblical world identifies, values, and favors as perfect those that confess and embrace their imperfections. It’s paradoxical. Accepting what we cannot change, changes what we cannot accept.**

In the biblical world, the perfection of God demanded the death of a perfect sacrifice. The death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection proved that Jesus in fact was the one prophesied who would fulfill the covenant with God and thus make the offer of covenant to humankind an eternal reality. When Paul hit rock bottom, he shifted his attention from his own efforts to efforts of Jesus Christ expended on Paul’s behalf and as evidence of God’s favor toward humankind. Jesus, the fulfiller of the covenant, was God’s “peace on earth, goodwill to mankind.” In Christ, perfection takes on a whole new meaning. Mature love begins with favor.

In the biblical word perfection takes on the meaning of patience in faith waiting upon the Lord because of his favor and not in order to earn it. The Greek word conveys the idea of purpose toward a goal of maturity, completion. In the biblical world the covenant starts with the believer in a position of favor with God—not failure. The promises of God call the believer to remember his favor, to feel and focus on his favor as hope for the path ahead—faith is the essence of things not seen and the substance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1-2). James writes, “Consider it a good thing when you fail into different trials, knowing this: that the testing of your faith involves patience (feel and focus). So, let patience have her maturing or perfecting work so that you experience mature love and not a want of affection!” (1:1-2). The psalmist affirmed this truth in the Old Testament times.

The psalmist wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The want refers to not looking to some other source for affection. The psalmist details the Lord’s method in developing faith. One method the psalmist describes as “yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” The psalmist viewed trials as opportunities to wait, to be patient, to recall the favor of God. God uses trials to mature faith in his favor NOT fear of his punishment. This act of remembering, of mindfulness springs us from the perfectionist trap.

**Did your parent favor you with love or make you feel responsible to earn it?**

In the recovery world, the unfulfilled thirst for affection disrupts much in the development of a child’s psycho-social-spiritual identity. If mature love casts out fear, as the Apostle John describes the gospel, then by inference it appears that immature love instills fear. To one extent or another we grew up in families with imperfect, immature caregivers. Despite the best care, no caregiver could solve the problem of the fear of death. No caregiver could deliver a child from the perfectionist trap unless that caregiver both lived and exemplified the gospel concept of favored and encouraged the awareness of feelings and of focusing on what those feelings meant in that moment for that evaluation and experience.

So, in the biblical world, when called to be perfect, this call calls us toward maturity in the kind of love that remains preserved in the gospel. The call to be perfect includes the favor of God. God so loved the world—while the world, while you and I lived in total dedication to survival of the fittest and in defiance of dependence—He gave his unique, one-of-a-kind son who learned perfection through the things which he as well suffered (Hebrews 5:8)—that whoever commits to bonding with Jesus Christ (receiving his favor) shall not want, shall never perish, shall not have to live by the morals of the survival impulse, but have everlasting life—the favor of perfect love.

**Our vulnerable, dependent, and malleable nature conveys the value of human life (think about why we value infants).**

Jesus, like the professional, was the perfectionist. His perfectionism was eminently helpful and proved his favored with God. He perfected faith by living in his Father’s favor. In this favor he valued the vulnerable, dependent, and malleable nature of his life. The model of Christ like the message of recovery begins with and continues in favor—The Lord denies the proud (working for favor) but favors, grace to the humble (receiving favor). Receiving the favor of God replaces the thirst for affection that underlies the dependence on addictive substances and the addictive rituals that re-enact the want of affection.

**Recovery resources provide information, insight, and instruction for starting a journey based on faith in God’s favor and continuing that journey as a testament to favor.**

Receiving the gospel initiates the humble into full participation and partnership with the covenant of grace. You are favored and flawed! Go out and live as if favored and when flaws appear, like Paul, confess that the only escape from the trap of perfectionism is acknowledging its lesson: You are unable to do what you must to achieve the approval you crave. When you admit that you are flawed in this sense—then and only then do you learn what grace means—favored first and completely before attempting any effort to acquire it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven! Matthew 5:3