

# Exchanging Perfection for Good Enough



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# Winning Over Perfectionism

It is possible to change.

*by Karen Casey Arneson*

I was one of those people who would rather just do it myself—much like the toddler who fusses when Mommy tries to help him get dressed in the morning. I was positive that I could do it better than anyone else, and I’d get it done right the first time. It didn’t really matter what it was—I had to control it.

Child development specialists call this behavior in toddlers “ego-centrism.” I’ve learned that in me, it’s also ego-driven.

Along with that need to control, came the need for perfection. I’d re-do the bed my child made, critique my husband’s home-improvement projects, and stay late at the office double-checking anything that had my name attached to it. Too often, I also ran a commentary in my head about the poor performance of others.

Not a pretty picture.

# Introduction





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Was it any wonder that I found my children hesitant to help around the house, my spouse staying late at the office, my coworkers steering clear and my friends ... hmmm, what friends? Who can stand getting too close to a boastful, critical, control freak?

Fortunately, for me, I reached a breaking point. Exhausted and hurt, I took my complaints to God. What was wrong with everyone? Didn't they appreciate how hard I was working? Where was the support?

Funny, whenever I've taken complaints about others to my Father, he inevitably turns that spotlight back on me ... and he did. I can't say I've completely conquered these habits, but I'm winning more battles than I'm losing. I'm waging the war; and the Lord is definitely on my side in this one.

Perhaps you too have come to that place of exhaustion and hurt. If so, I know you'll find this download a great resource in the war against perfectionism. You'll be challenged to take a close look at why you behave the way you do and what it's costing you; and then, you'll be given ideas and tools for learning how to let go of the obsession and to be satisfied with your personal best. You *can* win! I'm cheering for you!

Blessings!

*Karen Casey Arneson*  
*Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership*  
*Christianity Today International*

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### THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

# “If I Could Only Be Perfect...”



Why do we feel like we have to work so hard to earn acceptance?

*by Carla Barnhill*

**I**t happened when I was 12, but I remember the moment like it happened this morning. My older brother had gotten himself into trouble—again. My mom and I were folding laundry, talking about the situation and how worried she was about my brother’s actions. Then she said to me, “I know we’ll never have to worry about you, honey.”

Now my mom meant it as a compliment. Her intention was to tell me she knew I was well-behaved and smart enough to avoid some of the stuff that had gotten my brother in hot water. But in my mind, her words set a huge weight on my shoulders. When she said, “We’ll never have to worry about you,” I heard, “Make sure we never have to worry about you.”

That simple conversation set me on a mission—to be the perfect daughter. My goal was to make sure my parents never had a doubt about where I was, what I was doing, or who I was with. So I never missed a curfew, never drank a beer, never hung out with anyone who might lead me into trouble.

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Those few times I did get into trouble with my parents, I felt horrible. And even though I got off with a few stern words, I still felt like I’d let them down.

My desire to be perfect carried over to my relationship with God. I honestly thought God would love me more if I went to youth group, if I said my prayers, if I went to Bible camp. I believed I could impress God if I did all the right Christian things. I didn’t always do those things because I wanted to. I did them because I wanted God to think I was perfect.

And I know I’m not the only one who has felt like being a good person—being a perfect Christian—is the key to God’s heart.

### **The Problem with Perfection**

Striving for excellence isn’t always a bad thing. Doing our best is part of the Christian life. Way back in the Old Testament, God’s people were told to “present as the Lord’s portion the best and holiest part of everything given to you” (Numbers 18:29). Even though God was talking about tithes and offerings, we know our whole lives are offerings to God, and that we need to give God our best.

The New Testament is just as clear. Matthew 5:48 says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We are supposed to shoot for the highest standard of goodness—God’s goodness. And Paul tells the Corinthians, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

But perfectionism is “doing our best” for all the wrong reasons. Perfectionism is about us, not about God.

I was being good because I thought it would help me earn love and acceptance. If my behavior pleased my parents, they’d love me even more. If my behavior pleased God, I’d earn his favor. I came to believe my worth was based on how good I was—and on how good other people thought I was.

Inside, I was stressed out. The pressure to be perfect was almost too much to handle. But I didn’t think I could tell anyone how I felt because that would mean admitting I wasn’t perfect. And that was the last thing I wanted to do.





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### God’s Perfect Plan

When it comes to God’s love, we perfectionists tend to get the order of things all mixed up. We think, “If I’m good enough, if I do all the right things, God will love me.” But God reached out while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). God made the first move.

Once sin entered the world, the relationship between God and humans was strained. And all through the Bible, people tried to fix that relationship with animal sacrifices, with money, even with a huge tower to heaven. But it took God’s sacrifice to bring us back to him. God’s incredible gift of salvation is ours because God loves us, not because we earned it. (Check out Romans 4:4–5.)

When Jesus tells us to “be perfect” in Matthew 5:48, he’s saying that God’s idea of perfection is radically different from the world’s idea of perfection. The world says perfection is having the best body, the most popular friends, and the happiest family. But Jesus tells us God is our best example of perfection. That means perfection is only found in striving to follow God. And as the apostle Paul explains in Philippians 3:12–16, God wants us to keep our eyes on him and follow the example of Christ in all we do.

Yet even Paul, one of the greatest Christians of all time, admitted he wasn’t perfect. He knew he could only gain salvation through a relationship with Christ. But he continued to do his best as a natural response to God’s love for him. And for Paul, doing his best meant growing in his faith, seeking God in everything he did, and loving God with his whole heart.

The same is true for us. Being perfect in Christ isn’t about living up to expectations—the world’s, your parents’, your own. It’s about being obedient to God, day in and day out.

But before we perfectionists get all worked up about trying to be perfectly obedient, we need to remember this: The Bible says our actions don’t have anything to do with God’s acceptance of us (Ephesians 2:8–9). They are simply a sign of God living in us, a result of the new life we have in Christ (James 2:14–26). They demonstrate our desire to make our faith stronger. They are a way for us to give glory to our loving God. And when we follow God’s commandments, we show his light to others (Matthew 5:16).





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Showing others the light of God doesn't mean you can never mess up. In fact, our efforts to be perfect can often give people the wrong idea about our faith. One of my friends once told me she didn't think she was good enough to be a Christian. She didn't think she could live up to the expectations everyone had of Christians—always being nice, never getting into trouble. She saw Christianity as a secret club that only the “good” kids could belong to. My efforts to be the perfect person sure didn't help her think otherwise. But if I'd have been more honest about my own failures and shown her how God forgives, she might have felt differently.

Perfectionism is a losing game. Fortunately, it's one we really don't have to play. After all, God reached out to us when we were as far away from him as we could possibly be. Being a Christian isn't about being perfect; it's about being forgiven. So we can relax and be confident that God knows we're not perfect and loves us just the same.

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## Thought Provokers

- *How would you complete the title sentence: “If I could only be perfect...”?*
- *What is the difference between perfectionism and Jesus' instruction to “be perfect” in Matthew 5:48?*
- *How might striving for perfection impact your witness for Jesus? How might it affect your relationships with other believers? With your family?*





GETTING DEEPER

# Facing Failure

You may be surprised at what you find!

*by Verla Gillmor*

**A**s I handed my carefully wrapped package to the postal clerk, I thought, *By tomorrow, my publisher will have my manuscript, and in a few months I'll see a lifelong dream fulfilled—a published book!*

I expected to feel elated, but instead felt numb. Completing the project had been a mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual marathon. I felt as though every intelligent thought I'd ever had, I'd poured into that book. I didn't have a single word left in my brain!

A few days later, my editor called. "We love the manuscript. Just one more thing ... we want you to write four more chapters. Get it to us as soon as possible. We're on a tight schedule."

It was as though I'd undergone a 9-month pregnancy, endured 24 hours of hard labor, delivered a beautiful baby, and a week later the obstetrician said, "You need to go back into labor for another 6 hours."





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For the next three weeks, I struggled. I negotiated with God. I cried. Day after day, whatever I wrote went immediately into the wastebasket. Panic seeped into my thinking: *I'm this close to the finish line, and I can't make it come together!* The only thing that appeared certain was failure.

My extra book chapters eventually sprang to life—which is why I feel safer talking about them than a failed relationship or a failed business venture. Failure's something we'd rather talk about after it's overcome with subsequent success.

That's unfortunate, because failure teaches us things we can't learn any other way. The key is to treat failure as a visitor: allowed to deliver unpleasant news, but not allowed to take up permanent residence. We need to say, "Make your point—then leave."

Are you learning from your failures? Here's what I've learned so far from mine:

### **All failures are not equal.**

When a beautiful, talented young woman is named first runner-up in the Miss America Pageant, we say she failed. Yet some people would give their right arm to experience that kind of failure—to be named the second most attractive female in a national competition. It's a matter of perspective. We need to look closely at our failures and give them weight appropriate to their importance in the overall scheme of things.

For example, I once received a "D" in college. I know it's ridiculous, but that sticks in my mind like a pebble in my shoe. Why do I fixate on that grade, and not the fact it happened the semester I carried 19 credit hours, worked part-time, got engaged, and spent six weeks in the college health center with mononucleosis? When I put the experience in its proper context, it loses its power to undermine my confidence.

### **Failure teaches us what's important.**

I have a close friend who was downsized out of a job she loved. It caught her by surprise because she was good at her work.

"I tended to be full of pride," she says. "I got away with it because I was successful. But losing my job under those circumstances really humbled me. In the end, I was glad. With pride, you have no permission to fail. It's a heavy yoke to wear. I don't wear it anymore, and I feel much





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‘lighter’ in my spirit. I don’t have the burden of having to be perfect.”

The best part, she says, is how God used the experience to bring her to him. “Had my bubble not burst, I might never have become a Christian. Success doesn’t require any explanation. But when failure touches us, we want answers. I began asking questions about life—and they ultimately led me to God.”

### **Failure is a circumstance, not a life sentence.**

I know a woman who spent 15 years in the extremely challenging restaurant industry. She felt from day one, when she opened her first franchise, that God had her there for a reason. She ran the business with integrity, provided excellent service, put out a quality product, and championed biblical values to everyone with whom she came in contact—employees, vendors, and customers.

It wasn’t a cakewalk: Someone threw a bomb into the restaurant three weeks after it opened. Then her chief franchise competitor opened a restaurant right next door. “Every day,” she says, “I gave the business to God. It was up to him to keep it going.”

As the business flourished, her husband joined the company as chief financial officer. Fifteen years later, they owned 14 restaurants, enjoying financial success and the respect of their peers.

Then one day the franchise company changed the rules. My friend and her husband felt they could no longer operate successfully without compromising their values. The parting of ways was messy; it exacted a heavy emotional and financial price. To observers, it looked like a colossal failure.

I wish failures didn’t have to be in plain view—especially in view of those who hold biblical values in low regard. It feels so unfair. My friend admits it was a painful time. Over and over she and her husband revisited what happened, trying to drain off the wisdom from the situation before discarding the rest.

*In My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers says, “If through a broken heart God can bring his purposes to pass in the world, then thank him for breaking your heart.” My friend and her husband chose that path. Now she’s able to talk convincingly about the whole experience as a

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“Romans 8:28 thing”: “We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose” (CEV).

She says she’d do it all over again. “God hands you a package and you open it,” she says. “You don’t always know what’s inside. I want to spend my life doing whatever God gives me to do.” Today my friend’s a successful executive coach who counsels other CEOs on how to manage their businesses and their lives.

### **God sees failure through different eyes.**

Book chapters, beauty pageants, and grades don’t inflict the same damage as more serious failures—especially those brought on by our own choices: an addiction that threatens to undo us; an uncontrolled tongue that damages important relationships; a deceit that betrays the trust others placed in us. But it’s vital to remember God views even serious failures differently than we do.

While God expects us to take responsibility for our part and to ask his forgiveness, he never confuses the sin with the sinner. God may be deeply disappointed in our behavior, but he never walks away. “But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful. But there is more! Now that God has accepted us because Christ sacrificed his life’s blood, we will also be kept safe from God’s anger. Even when we were God’s enemies, he made peace with us, because his Son died for us” (Romans 5:8–10, CEV).

It’s impossible to fail so badly that God’s grace can’t reach us. We can hand over to God the messes we’ve made and stand amazed at his ability to create beauty from the ashes.

Jesus’ death on the cross looked like a failure. He hung there exposed and forsaken by his own Father. An angry mob called him a phony. He had warned his disciples that dark day was coming, telling them it would not be the end of the story. But when it happened, I doubt his followers believed any part of that could remotely “work for the good of anyone who loves him.” Who knew?

That’s the point, really. In the midst of what looks like failure—real or imagined, large or small, our fault or someone else’s—God’s perspective is the one that counts, regardless of other louder voices. He

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says the good guys win in the end, and he ought to know. Our job is to do what he told us to do until Jesus comes back.

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### Thought Provokers

- *How is the fear of failing tied to perfectionism?*
- *Do you have a story of failure? What did you learn from the experience?*
- *What purpose might failure have in helping us find the balance which leads to doing our best in God's strength?*
- *Remembering that Jesus' death appeared to be a failure gives me hope. What are your thoughts?*





BIBLICALLY SPEAKING

# Measuring Up

How I learned I didn't need to worry about measuring up.

by Verla Gillmor

I'm sure the warning signs were there. But I was moving at such a fast pace, I missed them all until the day I woke up totally burned out, with no idea how I got there. Difficult questions ran through my head: *Was this what life was supposed to look like? How had things gone so awry?* It wasn't exactly a midlife crisis, but something was terribly wrong.

My life wasn't that different from a million other women—college, marriage, a child, a career. Somewhere along the way, though, I started feeling as though I were living someone else's life.

I needed time to think—to tally what I knew for sure, what I needed to hang onto, and needed to discard. As I sorted things out, I realized there were truths about living an abundant life I'd totally misunderstood. Here is what I learned:

## You Have to Run Your Own Race

Our culture constantly evaluates whether we're "successful" by measuring everything from our bank account to our IQ to how many miles we can run without full cardiac arrest. The benchmark isn't how well we do, but how well we do compared to everyone else.





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So whenever I used to read Hebrews 12:1, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” I’d picture myself running alongside my sisters in Christ, constantly trying to gauge how I was doing. *Was I spiritual enough? Was my home sufficiently organized? How did my appearance stack up?* I especially worried about how I was doing as a mom and wife. I wanted to know if I was “holding my own.”

One day I had to drop off something at the home of a woman I didn’t know. While chatting, she showed me around her house. She’d covered her children’s beds with quilts she’d made from scraps of their old clothes, filled with embroidered squares that depicted events in each child’s life. Her refrigerator displayed a star-filled chart that indicated how many Bible verses her kids had memorized. In the backyard, each child had his own vegetable garden.

I felt like throwing up.

When I got back in my car, I started to cry. *God, this race business is a drag. If this is what it takes to be a good mom, I concede defeat. I can’t measure up! I hope you have a Plan B!*

The next morning, I revisited Hebrews 12:1, and the Holy Spirit illuminated something I’d been missing: We’re to run the race marked out *for us*.

It was as though a 500-pound weight fell off my shoulders. I didn’t have to measure up to other moms. I didn’t have to take on an assignment someone else thought I should—especially when it didn’t fit my skills and talents.

Years ago I was asked to help plan a women’s conference. Because I had a job in the business world, they assigned me the task of managing the event’s budget. I’m sure the conference planners thought the match was brilliant. But I was miserable. It wasn’t that I didn’t know how to do the assigned tasks—paying bills and producing voluminous reports of mind-numbing information. The problem was the assignment didn’t use my strengths or involve anything I loved to do. I’m a people person. My heart soars when I can lead, inspire, teach, and influence others. My assignment was painful because I wasn’t running my race.

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Of course, life always includes a certain number of things we don't enjoy (in my case, God didn't give me the "loves housecleaning" gene!). But if we're running our race most of the time, we'll feel a level of satisfaction and purpose that makes the hard parts easier to bear.

### **You Can't Do It All**

I'd rather eat chalk than admit I can't do something. It isn't because I'm brimming with self-confidence. It's our culture. Everywhere we turn we're told there are no limits to what we can do.

The truth is, we *can't* do it all.

My girlfriend Beth figured this out before I did. She loves kids. When Mr. Right never came along, she decided to become a single mom and eventually adopted four kids.

"I had this grandiose idea of how I was going to parent," Beth says. "With my first child, Robby, I held onto my lofty goals. When Preston came along, I thought, *Uh, oh. Let's rethink this.* By the time Kent joined the family, I was making changes on the fly. I'm still adjusting."

Beth says she's abandoned any hope her house will look "picked up" for more than 10 minutes. She no longer folds underwear—if it makes it into the correct drawer, she's happy. And instead of hauling a laundry basket from room to room, she's placed a basket in each child's room for them to transport. Every little bit helps.

Acknowledging our limitations means letting go of an unrealistic ideal, setting boundaries, saying "no" more often, and prioritizing what's left.

In Luke 10:41, Martha—upset about too much to do—asked Jesus to instruct her sister, Mary, to help with food preparation. Jesus replies, "Martha . . . you are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is necessary and Mary has chosen the better thing" (CEV)—time with *him*.

God doesn't expect us to do it all. Only a few things are necessary. Do you know your few things? Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses, your spiritual gifts, your natural talents and skills. What makes your heart dance? What do you do that other people repeatedly





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affirm in you? How would your spouse or best friend describe the way God “wired” you?

### **You Can’t Make Life Behave**

I used to think I’d be happy if I could get my weight down to a certain magic number. Or if my husband could get promoted so we could afford a bigger house. I defined happiness as manipulating circumstances into perfect alignment, then yelling, “Okay, nobody move!” Then we would live happily every after in a freeze-framed perfect world.

Seven years ago, I found out I couldn’t make life behave. Within a few months’ time, several unexpected events threatened to unglue me. My husband—the love of my life—decided he didn’t want to be married anymore. I had to undergo several surgeries due to a rash of serious health problems. I was self-employed, and two of my major clients unexpectedly cancelled their contracts, leaving me in financial jeopardy. Every area of my life was falling apart.

That’s when I found control doesn’t deliver what it promises. Disappointment and exhaustion were the only fruits of micromanaging my world. Disappointment—because control couldn’t restore what had been lost, insulate me from heartache, or guarantee my safety and security. Exhaustion—because I learned it’s tough doing God’s job when I’m not God!

Although I was stripped of everything I leaned on for security and success—relationships, health, financial stability—God taught me I still had him, and I could be secure in that.

Let’s face it—safety, stability, and peace of mind don’t come from trying to control life’s unpredictable circumstances. They come from being anchored to Someone who doesn’t change. As Scripture tells us, “I the Lord do not change” (Malachi 3:6) and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Security comes from putting ourselves into the hands of the One who really knows how to be in charge. God says, “Give control a rest. Your life is safer in my hands than anywhere else.”

These three lessons aren’t the only ones I’ve learned. But putting them into practice has altered how I live. I’ve accepted my pear-shaped body (and the futility of finding a suit where the skirt and jacket both fit). I

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serve in two ministries at my church that are a good match to my gifts, and often say “no” to other opportunities. I block out chunks of time for solitude. These changes—which take constant vigilance to maintain—have increased my peace and contentment significantly.

Of course, the most important lesson I’ve learned is that God loves me—really loves me. He doesn’t love me because he’s forced to; he chooses to love me. I matter more to him than anything else in all creation. It was as if he’s saying to me, *When you made a commitment to me, I made a commitment to you, and I love the chance to prove it.*

Second Corinthians 4:7–9 explains what that relationship is supposed to look like. “We are like clay jars in which the treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer. But we are never crushed.... God is with us” (CEV).

It’s that knowledge of God’s great love that gives me the confidence I need to make tough choices. And it’s freed me from worry about whether I measure up to anyone else’s standards—except his.

*Verla Gillmor, a business consultant, speaker, author and president of LifeChasers, Ltd. ([www.lifechasers.org](http://www.lifechasers.org)), a ministry resource for Christians who work. This article first appeared in the **July/August 2002** issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

### Thought Provokers

- *In striving for perfection, what is the standard? Is there some “ideal” that we compare our efforts to? Is this standard the same for everyone? Who sets it?*
- *How are control issues and perfectionism related?*
- *The author learned the hard way that ultimately she is not in control. What has God been teaching you about attaining security and success?*





BRINGING IT HOME

# Confessions of a Former Perfectionist

How four discoveries helped me realize my unreasonable expectations.

by Kathy Collard Miller

One evening when I returned home from shopping, my husband, Larry, met me at the door, grinning. What's he up to? I wondered.

He led me into the kitchen and announced, "I did the dishes for you!"

As I hugged him and exclaimed, "Thank you!" I looked over his shoulder and noticed crumbs and drops of liquid on the counter.

*But you haven't wiped the counter, I thought. You haven't finished the dishes!* Before I could chastise him, I remembered how my struggles with perfectionism and impatience robbed me of enjoying and appreciating my wonderful husband. I thanked him again, determined not to allow his "mistakes" to bother me.





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The next evening Larry did the dishes again. I realized he wouldn't have washed them a second time if I'd criticized him the day before. I witnessed again the power of affirming his attempts—even if they didn't meet my expectations.

Someone once said that a perfectionist is a person who takes great pains and passes them on to others. I would have given my husband a great pain that evening if I'd discounted his effort. Yet that's exactly what perfectionism does: It brings pain and destruction to our lives and marriages.

Throughout the first seven years of our marriage, I struggled with perfectionist tendencies. Nothing Larry did was good enough. He wasn't a good enough provider—even though he worked two jobs to support our family while I stayed home with the kids. He didn't talk enough to me; he didn't help properly with the housework; he wasn't as concerned about my desires and expectations as I was. The list went on and on. My standards were set so high that Larry couldn't win—ever. Since Larry didn't meet all my needs, I believed I couldn't give him credit when he showed me love. Instead I focused on his inadequacies. No matter how Larry tried to please me, I found fault and pointed out his shortcomings to “motivate” him. I “punished” him with my displeasure by withholding sex, affection, joy.

My demands and impatience were destroying my marriage! Larry began to work more overtime, and when he was home, he tuned me out by reading or watching TV. My sense of failed expectations became so bad that I felt I didn't even love him anymore!

Then one day during my devotions, God opened my eyes to what I was doing. My behavior wasn't getting me what I wanted. So why was I continuing it? I'd thought, *When Larry changes and meets my needs, then I can be joyful and content.* But I realized he might never change! God wanted me to be joyful and content regardless.

From that day on I worked to reverse my attitude, become more patient, and strengthen our relationship by putting these four ideas into practice.

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### **It's okay to give yourself a break.**

I realized I couldn't give Larry a break, because I couldn't give myself one. Perfectionism can be called a kind of "dys-grace" or "ungrace" because it's the opposite of grace. Perfectionism says, I need to earn approval, while grace offers approval as a free gift.

I expected myself to be perfect because I felt God—and others!—required it. That pressure spilled into my marriage. From my perspective, I was striving for perfection—so my spouse should too!

Granting myself grace has been a gradual growth process. But if we believe that God understands our mistakes and messes—that he's willing to forgive—then we can stop expecting too much from ourselves and our spouse. In Philippians 1:6, the apostle Paul assures us God knows our weaknesses and won't give up on us: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (NASB). As Christians, because we accepted that Jesus bore our sins when he died on the cross, you and I are already perfect in God's sight. We have nothing to prove; we're accepted.

### **It's okay to give your spouse a break.**

Once I was able to understand that God grants me grace, I was able to offer grace and patience to my husband.

One day God helped me put that into practice. Larry, an amateur pilot, was out flying his plane while I was home cleaning the house. I sensed God saying, "Tell Larry you love him." I was shocked. *No!* I thought. *I don't love Larry.* My unmet expectations had squelched my love—because love and a perfectionist attitude can't really coexist.

*Besides, I thought, I haven't said those words to him in more than two years. If I say them now, he might think I approve of his negligence toward me and the kids.* In my perfectionistic thinking since I didn't feel love for Larry all the time, I couldn't say I loved him.

Finally, I felt God whisper, "Think it the next time you see Larry."

*That's strange, I thought. But if he doesn't hear me, then he can't use it against me. All right, Lord, I'll do it, even if it isn't true.*

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That evening when Larry returned, I stared at him, gulped, and thought, I love you ... but I don't really.

Even though I obeyed God begrudgingly, an amazing thing happened. Over the following months, as I continued to think the words *I love you* whenever I looked at Larry, I began to feel love for him. I also recognized that I'd been holding Larry responsible for my happiness. As I received grace for myself and then offered it to Larry, my "all or nothing" thinking changed. I accepted the truth that Larry couldn't meet all my needs—only God could. In time, Larry noticed that I wasn't as angry and demanding. And our marriage became more comfortable and enjoyable for both of us.

### **It's okay to give positive feedback.**

I remember one time when Larry was hanging pictures, I refrained from saying anything positive until all were placed precisely the way I wanted. I reasoned, *If I tell Larry he's doing a great job before he's finished, he'll get lazy and not complete the project the way I need it done.* I didn't realize I was discouraging him; I thought I was motivating him.

But excellence is doing our best with the resources at hand. Positive feedback is what really motivates my spouse—even in the middle of a project or when it may not be done as "perfectly" as I'd like! That's why I could say "thank you" the day he did the dishes, even though he hadn't wiped the counter. Years ago, I would have felt it was my duty to correct him immediately, withholding approval until the job was done exactly to my specifications.

When I sense the need to correct my spouse and withhold praise for the job he's done, I ask myself these questions: Is it really that important? Can I wait until another time when he isn't basking in the glory of his accomplishment? Waiting helps diminish those perfectionistic tendencies.

Once I began to lighten up, Larry confessed, "I used to think, *Kathy is never satisfied no matter what I do, so I might as well give up trying to please her.* I don't think that anymore. Now I want to please you because I know you'll appreciate it."

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### **It's okay to be different.**

While this is an obvious statement, it was a shocker for me to grasp: My spouse views life differently than I do. I always believed Larry saw life from my perspective. And since there was only one way of doing things, he should do them the right way—my way!

My viewpoint took a 180 degree turn, however, after a friend gave Larry and me a personality test. After we finished, we discovered our temperaments and learning styles are different.

My temperament, combined with my perfectionism, makes me want to over-analyze all the facts before making a decision. And then I constantly second guess myself. Larry's temperament enables him to make fast decisions and feel confident about them. Before, I'd thought fast decision making indicated he wasn't sensitive to my opinions.

The test stressed that different is different; it's not necessarily wrong. It didn't mean he was insensitive to my opinions. As I recognized that Larry and I view situations differently—and that's okay!—I became more patient, loving, and kind toward him. I have to remind myself that there are several ways to do something—not just my way. As someone once said, “Two plus two may equal four. But so does three plus one.”

While sometimes it still frustrates me that he “can't get his act together,” I rely on patience and grace. I ask myself, *Is this because we define “act” differently? Are different motives energizing us?* Then I take a look at my answers. Usually, I'm the one who's more rigid, so I stop taking his behavior personally, back off, and accept our differences.

Now that Larry and I have been married 35 years, we look back on that time 28 years ago when my perfectionism brought “great pains” into our relationship with gratitude for God's healing. By changing my viewpoint and giving grace and patience to myself and to my husband, I've learned to appreciate him. Now I express my love many times a day—and so does he. And yes, we even rejoice in our differences!

*Kathy Collard Miller is author of Partly Cloudy with Scattered Worries (Bethany House). Visit Kathy at [www.KathyCollardMiller.com](http://www.KathyCollardMiller.com). This article first appeared in the **Fall 2005** issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP MAGAZINE.*

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### Thought Provokers

- *What light is shed on perfectionism by understanding God's grace?*
- *Do you believe love and perfectionism can coexist? Why, or why not?*
- *Discuss how perfectionism reflects an unhealthy spiritual life. What might perfectionism reveal about our hearts?*

Features





LEADERSHIP TOOLS

# A Spiritual Audit

Moving away from perfectionism to our best.

*by Karen Casey Arneso*

If perfectionism truly is a spiritual weakness, or even sin, it needs to be dealt with on a spiritual level. This tool is provided to help you recognize and celebrate your strengths while identifying areas needing growth.

<b>1. I believe God loves me unconditionally.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>2. I believe God is at work in me; and I am content with whom I am becoming.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>3. My faith is personal; I am not just "going through the motions."</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>4. I seek to be a blessing to others.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>

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<b>5. My prayer life is becoming a "conversation" with God, rather than a checklist of petitions.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>6. I am humble and gentle with others.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>7. I am growing in faith through time spent in the Word and prayer.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>8. I obey God as I receive his instruction.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>9. I am patient with the mistakes of others.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>10. I seek to encourage others and affirm their abilities.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>11. I have defined "my race."</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>
<b>12. I am growing in the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Sometimes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>No</b>

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# Additional Resources

More places for more information.



**Leadership Gone Wrong: Here's how to make it right.** This downloadable packet from **GiftedforLeadership** offers wisdom for a difficult leadership situation.

**Prevent Burnout: Your guide to thriving and staying energized.**

Perfectionism can lead to burnout. This downloadable packet from **GiftedforLeadership** teaches the truth about burnout and how to protect against it.

**Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism** by Richard Winter, Intervarsity Press, 2005,

paperback. Perfectionism can be a motivating force that pushes us to achieve great things and become fuller people in Christ. It can also be a detrimental force that drives us to unhealthy patterns and obsessions. When does being good become bad? In this book Richard Winter explores the positive and negative effects of perfectionism on our lives. He looks at the seductive nature of perfectionism as it is reflected in today's media. He examines the price and perils of perfectionism including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other psychological disorders. He then moves on to explore the roots of perfectionism, delving into what originally awakens this drive in us. Finally, he provides a new perspective on perfectionism that is thoroughly rooted in finding our confidence in our identity in Christ and his teachings. For anyone who struggles with perfectionistic tendencies, this book will provide fascinating insight and instruction into the healthy pursuit of excellence and perfection.





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**Overcoming Perfectionism—the Superhuman Syndrome** by Ann Smith, Health Communications, 1990, paperback. Ann Smith discusses how perfectionism may have benefits but is ultimately an obstacle to quality living as it prevents intimacy and lowers self-esteem. It can leave an individual looking competent but feeling totally inadequate. This book offers practical hints, together with a few lighthearted ones, as a guide toward learning to “live in the middle.” This book shows you how to let go of your superhuman syndrome and achieve a balanced recovery.

**Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism** by Thomas S. Greenspon, Free Spirit Publishing, paperback. Perfectionism is a problem for many families. This accessible encouraging book can help you solve the problem. You’ll learn that perfectionism is not about doing your best. It’s not about the struggle for excellence, or the striving for high goals. And it’s not the key to success. You will learn how perfectionism can block your ability to do well. Drawing on professional and personal experiences like sharing stories, research, insights, and strategies gathered over the years, the author describes a healing process for transforming perfectionism into healthy living practices and self-acceptance. His ideas have worked for others—and can work for you.

**The Relief of Imperfection: For Women Who Try Too Hard to Make It All Just Right** by Joan Webb, Gospel Light, 2008, paperback. Is perfectionism a blessing or a curse? Self-described “recovering workaholic” Webb believes it’s time for women to stop trying to fix everything and start enjoying authentic, intimate relationships with others and with God. Learn how Jesus lived in the midst of imperfect surroundings; discover the depth of God’s grace; and more. Includes a small-group guide. 224 pages, softcover from Regal.

**What to Do When Good Enough Isn’t Good Enough** by Thomas S. Greenspon, Free Spirit Publishing, paperback. Watch for Mr. Greenspon’s latest title. Available on or about 3/15/09.

RESOURCES





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# Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

**IF** you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



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