



# PERFECTIONISM

The Performance Trap

June Hunt



HOPE  
for the Heart

# PERFECTIONISM

## The Performance Trap

JUNE HUNT



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Dear friend,

How well I remember the early years of our young ministry, when I gathered the new eager employees of HOPE FOR THE HEART for a meeting in my home. There I announced I had an important message—a must for them to remember: “I *expect* you to *make mistakes*.”

Obviously, these words won’t be found in any handbook for new employees. But I also recognize that people—not just our little HOPE family, but *all of us*—need the freedom to be who God created us to be—which means freedom to try and freedom to fail. So I told our team, “Don’t be fearful if you make mistakes because I don’t expect you to know everything. You can’t know all about your job. You will make mistakes and, over a period of time, you will learn, you will grow, and you will get better.”

It wasn’t long before a member of our team had an opportunity to test the sincerity of my words on a grand scale. Marcie (not her real name) writes:

“I was responsible for overseeing the production of HOPE FOR THE HEART’s very first informational brochure. But somehow, amid all the proofing and editing, the call letters for all the radio stations that aired our program were transposed. *None* of the call letters were correct! As a result, the brochure was completely worthless and needed to be redone. Thousands of brochures had been printed at quite a costly amount.

“June’s assistant, Kay, called and said June wanted to meet with me right away. As I sat in the corner

conference room, crying and wondering how in the world I could have made such a horrible mistake, I felt sure June was coming to fire me. At that moment, I looked up, through my tears, and saw her walking up the sidewalk, carrying a single yellow rose. I wasn't sure what to make of that, but felt it couldn't be a good sign.

“How wrong I was! As soon as June entered the room, she handed me the rose and began to comfort me. She acknowledged my hard work on the project, assured me that I still had my job, and reminded me again that everyone makes mistakes. Words cannot express my shock, gratitude, and relief! I worked for HOPE for nearly 15 years after this happened and June never mentioned it again.”

Friend, I share Marcie's story, not to shine a spotlight on myself, but to illustrate an important point taught to me by my merciful Savior.

When I look back on my own personal failures, I'm fully aware of how the Lord has continually given me both sides of the same coin: grace and mercy.

**Grace** means giving me a gift I *don't* deserve. It is beautifully described in Ephesians 2:8–9: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*” (NKJV).

**Mercy** means not giving me the penalty I do deserve. Titus 3:5 describes it this way: “*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us*” (NKJV).

Scripture exhorts us to interact gently with those who have failed: “*If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently*” (Galatians 6:1).

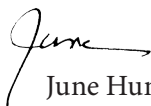
Knowing this is God’s heart when we *sin*, imagine His tender mercy when we *make an honest mistake*! People who fall short of our expectations—and their own—don’t need condemnation. They don’t need harsh criticism. Instead, they need to be reassured, reaffirmed, and restored.

Though many years have passed since the founding of HOPE FOR THE HEART in 1986, I still share the same message with our new employees: “I expect you to make mistakes. I don’t want you living with *a demand for perfection*, but rather *a desire for excellence*. Perfection is not the goal here, *excellence* is.”

Romans 3:23 reminds us that we all “*fall short of the glory of God*.” That’s why Jesus lived, died and rose again! He is the only person who ever lived a perfect life. You and I never will.

So if you struggle with perfectionism, my prayer is that this book will help you re-examine your true worth in light of God’s Word—a worth that’s not based on “perfect performance.” And as you do, may you discover God’s matchless mercy and grace, and begin to freely share them with others.

Yours in the Lord’s hope,

  
June Hunt



# PERFECTIONISM

## The Performance Trap

For perfectionists, the pressure is *always* on, and the performance *never* stops. All of life is lived under the glare of an unforgiving spotlight. The smallest blemish, the tiniest flaw, or the slightest mistake is sure to raise an eyebrow and silence sought-after acceptance.

Perfectionists are performers, but they are also prisoners chained to the opinions of others—their self-acceptance invariably linked to cherished accolades. Overlooked crumbs on the kitchen counter leave a perfectionist humiliated before guests. A student's self-worth plummets if a record of high-scoring As is broken by an unbearable B.

Even when compliments do come, such praise provides only a fleeting moment of pleasure because now the bar—the measure for self-worth—is simultaneously raised even higher.

Instead, God's plan is that we aim for *excellence*, not perfection, to accomplish our personal best with the gifts He gives us, using the power He provides.

If you are caught in the performance trap, *stop* and *rest* in the unconditional love of Christ. Stop and rest in the unconditional acceptance of our Savior. Stop your need to perform perfectly *today*. Let your last curtain call be the final curtain on performing perfectly for others.

You need to know that you are called to live for an audience of “one”—and only One—the Lord Jesus Christ, who loves and approves of you *just as you are*, crumbs on the counter and all.

Instead of living for the approval of others, you can learn to say what the apostle Paul says ...

**“We make it our goal to please him ... ”  
(2 Corinthians 5:9)**





## DEFINITIONS

Guess who's coming to dinner!

He's a special guest, their personal friend—it's Jesus Himself. So everything *must* be perfect. Martha has invited Jesus to share a meal in her home, and she's all abuzz with her busy work. Only the best is suitable for the Prince of Peace.

Martha focuses on the menu. It must be fit for a king, but not just any king. After all, Jesus is the *King* of Kings. In addition to cooking, there's sweeping and dusting and all the other details. Martha ponders, plans, and prepares, and now upon Jesus' arrival, she's completely distracted by what's yet to be done. The Bible specifically states, "*Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made*" (Luke 10:40).

No doubt—as endeared friends of Jesus—both Martha and her sister, Mary, often listened to Him speak to the multitudes. They heard Him say, "*Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Did this mean He expects all of His hearers to be *sinless* in thought, *faultless* in deed, *flawless* in character?

To understand the heart of Christ on perfectionism, realize that you may need to rethink what perfection means in order to gain a biblical perspective.

## WHAT IS Perfection?

Jesus, the Perfect Man, arrives at the home of His close friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the conversation is compelling. But notice the contrast: Martha fixates on food for the stomach, while Mary feasts on food for the soul.

Both have their focus on Jesus, but Martha frets over what goes *into* His mouth, while Mary focuses on what comes *out of* His mouth. Mary relishes every word uttered by the Wonderful Counselor. While Martha flits, Mary *sits* at the feet of Jesus, inspiring her spirit and soul.

The diverse behavior of the two sisters prompts a lesson from Jesus about biblical *perfection*. The one scurrying in the kitchen—not the one sitting at His feet—is the one who needs the lesson. After all, Jesus said ...

**“I tell you, do not worry about ...  
what you will eat or drink. ...  
Is not life more than food?”  
(Matthew 6:25)**

## Two Different Distinctions

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### THE CONTEMPORARY CONNOTATION

- ▶ **Perfection** means being faultless, flawless, sinless, entirely without error—free from defect.<sup>1</sup>
  - The Bible describes God in this way: “As for God, his way is perfect: The Lord’s word is flawless ...” (2 Samuel 22:31).

- The Bible describes Jesus in this way:  
*“... the Son, who has been made perfect forever”*  
 (Hebrews 7:28).

## THE BIBLICAL CONNOTATION

### Spiritually Mature

► **Perfection** means being mature and complete—blameless (incontestable in character) and “righteous”<sup>2</sup> (right in God’s sight). God has provided all that is necessary for you to walk righteously—in a way that is right in God’s sight.

- **“Perfect”** is the word used to describe Noah’s complete maturity.<sup>3</sup>

*“Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God”* (Genesis 6:9 NKJV).

- **“Perfection”** is what Paul prayed for—that all believers would achieve complete maturity.

*“This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect”* (2 Corinthians 13:9 NRSV).

- **Perfection** is what Paul admitted he had not attained, but what Christ planned for him to achieve—complete maturity.

*“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me”* (Philippians 3:12 NKJV).

## Spiritually Complete

► **Perfection** means “complete, finished, whole.”<sup>4</sup>

- **Perfect unity** is what Jesus prayed for—that all believers would experience complete unity of love.

*“... that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23 ESV).*

- **“Perfect peace”** is spoken of by Isaiah—that God gives complete peace to those who steadily entrust their lives to the Lord.

*“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you” (Isaiah 26:3).*

## Aim for Excellence

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**QUESTION:** “Since the Bible says, ‘*Be perfect*’ (2 Corinthians 13:11 KJV), aren’t we literally called to be sinless?”

**ANSWER:** God understands that all humans—even faithful Christians—make mistakes and sin. The biblical word “perfect” typically means “mature and complete” as we surrender our will to God’s will. Therefore, we are called to be perfect—not faultless, sinless, flawless—but rather be perfect—mature, whole, complete.

The Bible addresses this truth—that at times we all sin: “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8).

## WHAT IS Perfectionism?

As Jesus visits His faithful friends, Martha's eyes become fixated on the reclining figure on the floor—her sister, simply sitting at the feet of Jesus. Resentment rears its ugly head and takes root in Martha's heart.

In essence, Martha is fuming in front of Jesus. “How can Mary just sit there when there is so much to be done? Mary isn't helping at all! No one's helping me. No one notices my perfect efforts to make the perfect meal in our perfectly clean home.”

Martha decides that Jesus needs to do something about this! She's determined to get Mary up off the floor and into the kitchen. So rather than appeal to Mary, Martha challenges Jesus' insensitivity. As she chastizes Him for being uncaring, her words are saturated with self-pity: *“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?”*

Then, propelled by her perfectionism, Martyr Martha audaciously commands the Commander of the universe: *“Tell her to help me!”* (Luke 10:40).

Many people today are propelled by their perfectionism—to their personal detriment.

► **Perfectionism** is an unhealthy, compulsive pattern of thinking that demands perfection in any undertaking.

- Anything less than perfect is unacceptable.
- No task is attempted unless perfection is attainable.

For example, Jesus tells the parable of the talents—money given to three men by their master to invest wisely. This consisted of eight talents—or eight pounds of gold—with each talent the equivalent of about 20 years' worth of wages. While two servants doubled their investment, the third man hid his gold and said, *"I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you"* (Matthew 25:25).

► **Perfectionists** appear confident, conscientious, and highly productive, but the truth is ...

- They are full of self-doubt and fear that the slightest mistake or misstep will cause others to be disappointed in them or reject them.
- They become overly sensitive to the opinions and feedback of others, often disregarding their own healthy instincts.

The Bible says, *"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart"* (1 Samuel 16:7).

► **Perfectionists** live in an overly cautious way.

- They are reluctant to try new tasks, take risks, or tackle big projects.
- They fear failing or appearing "inadequate" in the eyes of others.

The Bible says, *"Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power"* (Ephesians 6:10).