

P E R F E C T I O N I S M

PURSUING  
EXCELLENCE  
WITH WISDOM

LOU PRIOLO



P U B L I S H I N G  
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## 31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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# How to Nourish Your Soul

*A LITTLE BIT EVERY DAY* can do great good for your soul.

I read the Bible to my kids during breakfast. I don't read a lot. Maybe just a few verses. But I work hard to do it every weekday.

My wife and I pray for one of our children, a different child each night, before we go to bed. We usually take just a few minutes. We don't pray lengthy, expansive prayers. Usually we're brief and to the point. But we try to do this most every night.

What do you see in these examples? Although they don't take long, these practices are edifying, hopeful, and effective.

This devotional is just the same. Each entry is short—just a few tasty morsels of Scripture to nourish your hungry soul. Add it to your daily Bible reading. Read it on the subway or the bus on your way to work. Read it with a friend or a spouse every night at dinner. Make it part of each day for thirty-one days, and it will do you great good.

Why is that?

*We start with Scripture.* God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God Himself.

*Our study of Scripture is practical.* Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your daily life. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Lou speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading usually contains at least one reflection question and practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer Lou's questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

*Our study of Scripture is worshipful.* Maybe you are frustrated (even angry) with yourself because you've not lived up to your own high standards this week. Maybe you are far too often displeased with aspects of yourself that are not displeasing to God. Maybe you don't know what to do because God has thrown an obstacle in the way of what you want to accomplish. Or you've been avoiding certain people or situations out of fear of rejection. If you look around your life, you'll find signs of perfectionism everywhere. That's why God's Word matters. As a sinner, you are an imperfect person who is striving after unrealistic or unhealthy self-imposed standards. You can't fight this battle on your own. You need a Savior who is merciful, long-suffering, and patient with you. He in turn will lead you to be grateful for Him. What should your study of God's Word lead you to do? Worship Him. Every time you feel trapped by your perfectionism, it should remind you to say, "I can't do this on my own. I need Jesus to help me." You need a Savior who can rescue you from your sin and change you—not just one time but daily. As you study your Bible, you will learn that God has a lot to say about perfectionism, and He will help you to fight it.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Whenever you have to fight your perfectionism, it will remind you of God's goodness and power and promises. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now to remind yourself about what God and the gospel teach us about cultivating lives free of perfectionism.

This devotional starts you on a wonderful journey in which you'll grow in Christ. After you finish reading (and rereading) it, if you want more, you'll see more resources listed at the end of the book. Buy them and make good use of them.

Are you ready? Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

## INTRODUCTION

### Just Stop It?

“RELAX!”

“Stop trying so hard!”

“Don’t be so idealistic.”

“Cut yourself some slack.”

“You can’t be the best at everything.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“It’s not that big of a deal!”

“You need to take a chill pill.”

If you’re reading this daily devotional, chances are you’ve heard sentiments like these from people who have noticed your determination to accomplish a task—or your frustration over not being able to accomplish a task according to your own specifications. In your heart, you know they’re probably at least partly right. But you also know that you cannot simply *stop* your perfectionistic tendencies the way you might turn off a ceiling fan with a wall switch. You’ve been thinking this way for as long as you can remember. These thought patterns are deeply engraved in your mind—they are a part of who you are as a person and how you make dozens of decisions every day. Furthermore, you don’t really want to change them—well, at least not all of them. “I never want to stop trying to be the best. It just wouldn’t be me.”

Forgive me for saying this, but please relax for a moment. I am not going to suggest that you become someone other than the person God made you to be. If the Lord intended you to be a John or a Susan, He is not planning on turning you into a Jimmy or a Stella—He just wants you to be the John or Susan whom He intended you to be.

And, as far as simply stopping your perfectionism on command, that’s not the solution. A battleship cannot turn on a



dime but must reorient itself in a new direction over the course of many meters—especially if the new orientation is a complete 180-degree turn. So think of this little book as a resource that will, little by little, help you to navigate your heart in a new direction.

“But wait a minute, Lou! I think you are forgetting something! There are a number of Scripture passages that seem to compel me to, in fact, be perfect (see Matt. 5:48), to excel even beyond what I am already doing (see 1 Thess. 4:10), and to diligently strive after certain things (see 2 Peter 1:5–7). How can I stop trying to be perfect when the Bible requires me to pursue excellence? My conscience may not allow me to ‘relax’ quite as easily as you say.”

Great point! But have you considered that your conscience may have to be reprogrammed? That is, it may have to be purged of extrabiblical rules and fortified with a proper, more theologically accurate understanding of the passages that have previously impelled you to undertake an inordinate pursuit of excellence. Mature (or “perfect”) Christians train their consciences to increasingly align with the Word of God: “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14 ESV).

Reading and applying this book will largely be an exercise in retraining your conscience to know the difference between what a sin really is and is not and to know when trying to do a good thing becomes a bad thing in God’s eyes.

Please keep in mind that perfectionism is an issue that is not identified by name in the Bible—at least not by this name. But because it is one of those temptations that is “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13), Scripture both identifies its underlying sinful roots<sup>1</sup> and prescribes its solutions. There is hope and help on the pages that follow. As a biblical counselor for over thirty-seven years, I’ve had the privilege of helping many who struggle with these tendencies (including at least one member of my immediate family) to find freedom in Christ from the bondage and misery so often associated with this unbiblical mindset.

Although I do not struggle with all-or-nothing thinking as a rule, there are certain areas in my life in which I do battle “perfectionism.” For example, I sometimes take longer than I should to make decisions because I want to be sure I have considered every biblical directive and principle before I set the decision in concrete. My wife and daughter reminded me yesterday that I am also perfectionistic (I prefer the word *persnickety*) about my food. My pasta must be done al dente, my coffee (which must be imported from Italy) and my soup must be piping hot (vichyssoise excepted), my cheese served at room temperature, my Coke poured into a glass filled with ice, my eggs runny, my meat medium rare, my fish sizzling but moist, my cooked vegetables more crunchy than soggy, my fried food salted and served immediately, and my ice cream not too sweet and not too cold. It’s not difficult to see what I value simply by looking at my struggles in this area.

What about you? What perfectionistic tendencies do you struggle with? Are you a perfectionist or simply a person who pursues excellence in certain areas? To what extent is your desire to excel rooted in your love for the Lord? To what extent might it be grounded in the love of people’s approval or some other idolatrous desire? What do you overvalue?

To answer these questions, you need to have a clear understanding of what perfectionism is. Over the course of this devotional, I will give you several biblical working definitions of perfectionism. These should serve as guiding principles to help you to grow out of your perfectionism and enable you to make wiser choices in the future than you have in the past.

“Okay, but I have one more question. I really like my perfectionistic tendencies and don’t want to change. I mean, sure, there is some daily misery associated with being a perfectionist, but I don’t mind tolerating a little misery. I’m not sure I want to do all the work of changing unless my perfectionism really is a sin and God really does want me to change.”

I agree. Why invest time, effort, and thought into changing something that doesn't need to be changed—especially when there are so many more apparent sin issues that God wants us to work on? You and I will probably not change unless we are convinced that God requires us to do so.

I believe the manifold sinfulness of perfectionism will become apparent as you read through this devotional. But for now, consider what is the most common sinful motivation of perfectionists. (Hint: it is, arguably, the most serious sin in the Bible—one that God promises to judge quickly and severely.) Is it not the sin of pride? In one way or another, perfectionists are more concerned about establishing their own reputation (and agenda) than God's. Their striving after flawlessness belies the fact that they are fallen creatures who will never be perfect in this life. In other words, such people may think more highly of themselves than they ought. Moreover, it is pride that tempts them to compare themselves with others and spend inordinate amounts of time on tasks that will demonstrate their superiority to others. As you work through the manifestations of perfectionism described in this book, see if you can connect the dots between each of them and the sin of pride.

“This sounds at least mildly painful. You want me to face up to my pride, and you probably want me to change. I don't think I can do that! The way I've lived my life is too deeply ingrained.”

This is not something you can do on your own, but with God's help, you can change. As you read this devotional, remember all that God has done for you already. He sent His Son to live a perfect life for your sake and then to atone for all your sin by His death. Now Christ lives again, and He offers you a new way to live—a way that is empowered by His Spirit (see John 14:26) and His Word (see Isa. 55:10–11). Not only that, He's given you spiritual leaders and a spiritual family to come alongside you and help you to bear your burdens (see Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:11–16;). If you are willing to face your pride of perfectionism and look for a different way to live, there is hope.

## DAY 1

# Union with Christ

*We were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection. (Rom. 6:4–5)*

OUR UNION WITH CHRIST is one of the most essential doctrines for Christian living. Yet sadly it is also one of the most neglected, under-taught, and undervalued, resulting in many problems in the lives of believers.

Do you understand what your union with Christ means? Matt Fuller has a helpful analogy: “When you become a Christian, you’re united by faith to Jesus. His story becomes yours. . . . Imagine a baby inside a mother’s womb. The baby’s life is determined by what mum does. If she dives to the bottom of a swimming pool, then so does the baby. If she takes [an elevator] to the top of a skyscraper, so does the baby. If the mother eats hot spicy food, the baby even knows about that! The child is united to its mother, and dependent upon its mother for life, and whatever mum experiences, so does the child.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s consider our text for today. It says that through baptism, you have been buried with Christ into death. To be baptized into His death is to be baptized into His resurrection. What happened to Christ has happened to you as well. Why? Because, like a baby in his or her mother’s womb, you are now in Him. He died, so you died. He was resurrected, so you are resurrected. He lives, so you live.

Understanding this principle will completely transform how you view your sanctification—the lifelong, Spirit-driven process

by which you are freed from sin and made holy. Paul also tells us, “Our old man was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:6). This means that, as a result of being united to Christ, you have died to your old, sinful way of living and will now live in a new and different way.<sup>2</sup>

“What does this have to do with perfectionistic, all-or-nothing thinking?” you ask.

A lot more than I can put in this small book! Everything that follows will make sense if you grasp this concept. But how about this for today’s takeaway? You have been fused to a person who is truly perfect. Nothing you can do will improve upon His perfection. Will you embrace and rejoice in His perfection, or will you continue to try to establish your own? Do you want others to see and marvel at your flawed attempts at perfection or at His total perfection?

**Reflect:** In what specific ways has your union with Christ changed how you live? What perfectionistic thought patterns can you identify that ought to change in light of this union?

**Act:** Write down in your own words how you would explain your union with Christ to a friend.

## DAY 2

### Are You a Perfectionist?

*Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD! (Lam. 3:40 ESV)*

IF WE WANT to find God's solution to our problem, it is important that we understand our problem as God does—through the lens of Scripture. He gave us His Word to correct us and train us in righteousness (see 2 Tim. 3:16). Today's text says we must not only examine ourselves but also return to the Lord and His way of doing things. The Hebrew word for *return* in the verse is the one most commonly used in the Old Testament to mean *repent*. The idea is to *turn back*: when we realize we are going in the wrong direction, we turn around and go back in the right direction.

So, how about a few self-examination questions to help you to evaluate if you need to turn back from perfectionistic thinking? How often are the following statements true of you?

- I find it difficult to disclose who I really am to those closest to me.
- My family, friends, or coworkers would say that I am too demanding of them or that I have unrealistic expectations of them.
- I procrastinate because I'm afraid that I'll not be able to perform perfectly.
- I beat myself up when I make a mistake; making a mistake is terrible to me.
- I believe if I don't always give 100 percent, I'm being irresponsible.
- I'm afraid of failure.
- I have an all-or-nothing mentality. If I can't have it all, I don't want any of it.

- I have difficulty distinguishing what God considers to be unacceptable behavior from what my friends and family consider to be unacceptable behavior.
- I find it hard to relax when there is more work to be done.
- I believe that once I've started a task, I've got to finish it.
- I believe in following rules to the letter.
- I evaluate myself more on the basis of external attributes, such as personal achievements and productivity, than on the basis of Christlike character.
- When I sin publicly, I'm much more troubled because I have embarrassed myself than because I have embarrassed God.
- I avoid depending on others because I don't want to expose them to my own limitations.
- I evaluate myself on how I compare to others instead of comparing my work to how the Bible calls me to perform.

Don't be discouraged if you answered "frequently" or "almost always" to many of these questions. Perfectionism is an unbiblical mindset, but be of good cheer: Jesus Christ came to do away with your sin!

**Reflect:** Pick three statements from today's list that most indicate your perfectionistic tendencies. List them in order of significance.

**Act:** Show the list to three people who know you well and ask them for their input.

## DAY 3

# What Is Perfectionism?

*The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20–21 ESV)*

PERHAPS YOU’VE HEARD a perfectionist humorously described as “someone who takes great pains and gives them to others.” Today let’s look at a biblical definition of perfectionism: *perfectionism is expecting God to give me in this life what He has promised to give me only in the next.* Perfectionists want to live in a world without sin, sickness, suffering, and Satan. The problem is, except for the first and last two chapters of the Bible, we find at least one of these four Ss on every page. It is not until the *next* life that those of us who know Christ as our Savior and Lord will be free of them.

Have you come to grips with this reality? Or are you frustrated with God for forcing you to live in a corrupted environment? Because of the fall, we live no longer in the garden of Eden but in a world bereaved of its splendor. Perhaps you understand this on an intellectual basis, but do you live your life as though it is true?

Our passage reminds us that, as a part of God’s creation, we have been involuntarily subjected to futility. The world in which we live is broken and full of misery. Apart from Christ, and our belief in the new heavens and new earth, our world is a pretty miserable place to live. But Christians don’t live “under the sun,” as Solomon repeatedly declares in Ecclesiastes—we live “under the Son.” We live not for this life or for this world but for the world and the life that are to come.



The first step in learning to overcome your perfectionistic tendencies may be for you to reevaluate your thinking about the world in which God has placed you. You are living not in paradise but on a battlefield to which He has drafted you to serve as His soldier. To strive for perfection now is an exercise in futility.

Yesterday, we looked at the primary Old Testament word for *repent*. Today, I would like you to consider the New Testament Greek word for *repentance*. It is a compound word that combines a word for *think* with a word for *again*. In Greek, to repent means to “think again” or to “rethink” something.

To have any hope of losing your perfectionistic tendencies, you must change how you think and how you interpret the world in which you live. You will have to learn to think biblically about all of God’s creation—including yourself. And you will have to reset your affections from this life to the next one.

As you go through your upcoming day, why not meditate on specific ways you can begin to adjust your thoughts, motives, and especially your values in order to gain an eternal perspective on living as a fallen creature in a fallen world? Then give some thought to what it will be like to be free from sin, sickness, suffering, and Satan when the Lord Jesus Christ reveals His glory in you.

**Reflect:** What exactly do you have to rethink and reinterpret about living in a world that has been cursed by sin?

**Act:** Spend five or ten minutes today thinking about what it will be like to live in a world without sin, sickness, suffering, and Satan.