

The Poison of Perfectionism

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Amen. You may be seated.

If you have your Bible today, will you turn with me to the letter of Paul to the Philippians 3. I want to begin in verse 7. These are, I assume, quite familiar verses but let's hear them again.

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-- 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

This is the word of the Lord.

And we ask for your blessing, our Lord, as we hear this now fruit-bearing blessing. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

Some years ago, I was listening to an interview with a woman named Michelle Segar and I almost turned it off because she was talking about exercise and I must say that exercise theory is not really my thing, but she caught my attention and I not only kept listening but I actually bought her book which is called "No Sweat," because she said something that

just as a, you know, a person and as a pastor it really made me think. Her big idea in this interview was that a lot of people, as you know, really struggle to be consistent and to make progress in physical exercise and she suggested that one of the reasons why we have difficulty being consistent and making progress is because exercise is really for us a chore that we feel we should do because that's what society tells us. You know, right thinking, well-adjusted people should be healthy, they should care about health, and they should really be fit. If you want to be, you know, fit and well in the 21st century, you should be healthy and fit, that's what you should be, and we can sometimes make some progress pushing ourselves to exercise because we feel like we should be healthy and fit but a lot of us find after a while that motivation kind of wears off and she said what really is needed if you want to keep yourself at it and keep growing in it, is you've got to find a way to make your exercise not a chore you should do but find a way to make movement, physical movement, a gift to you. And this struck a chord with me because while I don't particularly love a lot of the exercise regimes that have been handed to me in the past, I love physical activity; my body responds very well to it and I enjoy it, and she said that's what you need to find. Find a way to make physical movement something that rewards you, is a gift to you, and then do more of that and just keep doing more of that. So I put that in my "to ponder" file.

Then I was talking with my neighbor, Aneta. She grew up in Poland behind the Iron Curtain and she was a musician and a dancer and she knows the world of Polish music culture like before the Iron Curtain fell, she knows that world intimately, and she said one of the things that's very interesting is Polish music and dance students mastered these arts. They were world-renowned for their proficiency, absolute virtuosity was expected and achieved, and yet she said what was interesting was that she found that very very often, in most cases even, these students over time with all of their virtuosity came to hate the music and the dance. They were absolutely masters of it and they had no love for it anymore. So I put that in my "to ponder" file.

Then recently I started reading a book called "Too Perfect," and this book explores how many of us, I've actually come to think all of us to some degree, but how many of us learn, usually it's early in life, not always but usually pretty young we learn this, and it's almost always subconscious in the sense that this is not something we like notice consciously. But this book, "Too Perfect," is about how most if not all of us learn usually early almost always unconsciously that security, the sense that I'm good and the world is okay, security lies on the other side of meeting a standard or an expectation or a demand. Meet the standard, then things will be okay. I'm sure many of you can remember as you think back over your life how over time there began to be this kind of deep but usually unarticulated sense, it's just kind of there under the surface, you wouldn't even think about it most of the time, this sense that things are okay if I don't do that. Things will be okay if I do that, if I meet that standard.

Now some of us are probably prone to this dispositionally but even if you're not, I think most of us experienced very early in life, many of us with our mom and dad or one of our parents, often with other people, maybe with friends we grew, that you just realized that with mom or dad or both, or with these friends or these people in my life, maybe a

teacher or whatever, for things to be good meet the standard. For things to be okay meet the standard. And it was not uncommon for this standard to be almost undiscernible in many cases. Many of you know what it was like to live with parents where you just actually weren't sure what it would ever take for things to finally be okay with mom or dad. Or you probably had friends in your life where one day things were okay, and the next day they're not okay, and you're suddenly on the outs and you're not exactly sure what happened or quite what it would take to get back in. It's not obvious what the standard is but somehow you must have, you know, fallen foul of that standard. This is really interesting how this affects even children whose parents left very early, absentee parents, because little people, it's interesting what happens in little people's hearts. When dad walks out when they're 18 months old, a little person does not conclude, "Oh, dad has issues." The little person concludes, "I must have not measured up. That's why daddy's not here. I must have fallen short of the standard." And you don't even know what it would take to meet the standard but it's there and you'd better meet it if things are going to be okay.

And in time, of course, many of us grew to project this onto the larger world. You realized very clearly to keep things okay with your teachers and your professors, meet the standard. To keep things okay with your spouse, meet the standard. To keep things okay with your kids even. "What would it take for them to finally like me?" Meet the standard. For things to be all right with these friends, meet the standard. For things to be all right with your pastor, meet the standard. For things to be all right somehow in the cosmos so the other hammer, the other shoe doesn't drop, meet the standard. For things to be okay with God, meet the standard. Get a grip. Stuff your feelings or maybe get in touch with your feelings, maybe that's the standard. Up your performance, you just kind of find it's kind of all over in the world. Now this gets really complicated because what you begin to realize as you go through life is that to make things okay, to keep things together, right, to get things right, to get things as they should be, here's the problem: you're not the only variable. Other people need to meet the standard if things are going to be okay. "I'm killing myself here, what's wrong with these idiots?" Right? "What's wrong with my wife? What's wrong with my kids? What's wrong with my church? What's wrong with my society? Things are not okay. This is not meeting the standard." And for some of us, you realize the variables are even in your environment. "If I can just get all the books straight on my shelf, if I can just get the lights dimmed to a certain level, if my shirt is tucked in just so and my hair is just so, if I can eliminate all the destabilizers, I could eliminate all the messes, if I can get rid of all the germs, if I can get rid of all the risks, somehow, somehow things will finally be okay. I can just finally have peace. I can have some joy. I could have that sense of security. I can have a sense of wholeness and well-being." It's always on the other side of the standard, meet the standard.

But it's even more complicated because there's a very curious counter-reaction to this because for every person who internalizes this often undefined standard, for every one of those there's the person, for everyone who's striving, spends their life striving to somehow, somehow measure up to this standard, for every one of those there's another person whose reaction either right away or eventually is, "Bleepity, bleep you and your standard." And it looks like freedom, it looks like being delivered from this bondage to

the standard for this rebel but it's actually you discover there's often a very strange drivenness here as well because now you are driven to meet the anti-standard, to be true to yourself so you can live with yourself, to find your security and find your okayness and even find your identity in the fact that I am bloodied but unbowed, I don't conform. It becomes its own standard.

These people become instead of hyper-responsive to demand, they become hyper-reactive to demand. They are triggered by demand. They're angered by it. They're frustrated by it. This becomes its own form of needing control, especially of other people. You really find this with children, people that have spent their life reacting to the standards that were imposed on them are very hard on their kids because their kids make demands. "Get outta my face! Stop bothering me! Stop asking me questions! Give me some peace!" And they're harsh with their kids. They're controlling with their kids because they're hyper-reactive to the demands that inevitably come from children, from friends, from spouses and whatever.

What I'm trying to describe, dear saints, is perfectionism, a complex set of reactions to this realization, whether it's true or false doesn't matter, the reactions we have to this realization that security lies on the other side of meeting the standard. If you can get things just so, we'll be good. And in light of that, what I am so struck by in reading this text we just read is something about Paul. Now here is a guy, you could never say Paul wasn't motivated, this guy runs with fire in his soul, but if you look at verse 12 there's something very strange. He says, "I'm running like crazy, not that I'm there, not that I'm perfect." Somehow he runs with fire in his soul but he has no delusion of being perfect and no burden to be perfect. He has neither the delusion nor the burden of being perfect.

And I want to take a moment now and I want to just think about Paul's anti-perfectionism. His anti-perfectionism. How can Paul be that motivated and be that free from the delusion and burden of being perfect? Now you guys know, you can't spend any time around serious Christianity, there is unserious Christianity, but you can't spend any time around serious Christianity without feeling the tension on one hand between God's grace, and we know that grace is just a free gift, God is gracious because he chooses to be gracious, you don't earn that, you don't win that, you don't merit that, that's just free, there's a tension though between God's free grace and our efforts which he also requires. And this is very puzzling sometimes for people because if you think that God's favor toward you, you think that God's acceptance toward you, you think that your identity as God's child, your security in God's love, this beautiful thing that we call access to God as our Father, do you think that is based on your performance? Then Jesus lied on the cross when he said, "It is finished." If you still need to perform, then Jesus didn't finish the work of offering to God what God requires. So either Jesus is wrong or you're wrong, and if Jesus is wrong and you've still got to perform for God to love you and give his favor to you, then the reality is that's a recipe for one of two things: either pride because I have met the standard, or despair because I haven't. Now that's one thing but then on the other hand, it is a perversion of God's grace to say, "Well, hurrah, it's finished. I'm good. I'm gonna go just sin like I want to so God will keep pouring out his grace on me." That's

obviously a perversion of grace and the Bible very explicitly says without holiness no one will see the Lord. So how do you put these things together?

Well, during the Reformation there was a Bible truth that was recovered and it directly challenged this idea that you would ever merit God's grace and the idea that just blew that to pieces was the understanding from the Bible that what God demands of us, beloved, is how much righteousness? Absolutely perfect righteousness. The standard is perfection. God accepts no halfway measures when it comes to righteousness and holiness and so there is no chance of you getting there on your own. One single slip means you're disqualified. You cannot get there on your own efforts. You can't fulfill that standard of perfection through going to your priest enough through, you know, taking the sacraments enough, through maybe, you know, you end up being one of these people that takes the counsels of perfection, I take a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, and I give myself over 100% my whole life, forsaking all other things and I give myself over to perfection. You can't even get there through all of that. The only way you can have that perfect righteousness, the Reformation understood from the scriptures, is through Jesus being righteous for you and his righteousness being reckoned to your account. Amen? That's your perfection. Jesus was perfect. God reckons his perfection to you. That's the gospel. That's the good news. Through Jesus' righteousness I have peace with God.

That's really important but then if you bring that over, the standard of perfection now over into your life as God's child, now your sins are forgiven, Jesus is your righteousness, and here you are as a child of God, but the standard is still perfection and there's, again, you can feel the tension because if we have perfect righteousness through Jesus then it would seem like we shouldn't have to bother anymore about it, we could just kind of coast, not bother whatsoever trying to, you know, please the Lord because he's already pleased because Jesus has pleased him, right? So we should, it feels like maybe we shouldn't even have to think about it now but we know that's not true, and so now we have a puzzle. If we are somehow having perfect righteousness through Jesus alone, if we're somehow supposed to still keep seeking righteousness, seeking to be perfect, aren't we back on this treadmill of futility?

I remember a young girl I was talking to in high school years ago, and I asked her, "Do you try to be like Jesus?" And she looked at me like I had six heads. She said, "Why on earth would I try to be like Jesus? He's perfect. I could never be perfect. I don't even try." Well, something's off there because we're supposed to seek to be like Jesus and so back to Paul and I just find this text so interesting. Paul is straining toward a righteousness he already has by faith alone. Isn't this interesting? He's even striving to attain the resurrection from the dead and you have to say, "Paul, you've gone batty, man. The only way you're gonna get raised from the dead is because God just freely raises you from the dead. How do you work toward the resurrection? If there's one thing that's a free gift, it's got to be the resurrection." And yet he says, "I'm striving to attain the resurrection that I already have guaranteed to me through Jesus." He's running toward what he has already been sovereignly called to by God. God's already called him with his upward call and God's call just carries you all the way. And yet Paul is running. He's running toward, he says, making his own what Christ has already made his.

What we see in this man is a man who is completely at peace in God's gift to him in a way that energizes him. He is so completely at peace in God's gift to him that he is energized to go for it. He is compelled by love to become slowly and only eventually in the resurrection to eventually perfectly become what he already is in Christ. To become what he already is without a single trace at any point in that process that he has arrived and without any burden to arrive there by his striving. He knows what brings him there is grace and so he runs.

Let me try to make this a bit clearer. You have a picture here of a man who strives toward perfection because the standard has already been met. The standard of perfection has already been met through Christ and so Paul is running for it. He's already okay in Christ. He's completely settled in Christ. In fact, okay is totally the wrong way to put it. He is eternally and gloriously good in Christ. It is finished. He is loved. He is secure. He is set in Christ and so his running energetically is not because he's striving to be okay, he's not striving to be secure, he is running toward it because what God has called him to and what Christ has won for him it's just so good. It's just so good. He just loves running toward that glory for which Christ has already saved him. And just so we don't get confused, he says, "I count as garbage any merits before God that I might be able to claim not because of Christ's qualifications but because of my own qualifications." He says, "Those are rubbish to me."

So the more Paul knows the perfection of what Christ has given to him, he is a child of God, his sins are washed away forever, he has perfect righteousness, he is good before God, the more he knows Christ and all of God's free gift to him in Christ, the more energetically he runs toward the fullness of restored humanness for which Jesus saved him. Perfectionism is the toxic delusion and burden of striving for security through our own efforts and what I want to say to you if you hear nothing else today, beloved, is that in Christ God has rid you of that delusion, that burden, that toxicity. Jesus is your perfection. That is your security. So now you are free for the first time to run toward, to pursue the glory of God's full restoration of your humanity, what the Bible calls holiness, to run toward that, to strive toward that, to labor toward that as a free gift and as your absolute highest good because you're already complete in Christ.

You can see the difference even apart from Christianity. You can see even out in the world that pursuing perfection is so very different from pursuing excellence. To experience excelling at something or to experience excellence when other people excel, it's to experience the pleasure of just goodness for its own sake. It's just awesome. It's amazing to see potentials develop, to see broken things mended, to see twisted things straightened, to see ugliness beautified. It's just awesome and people who love excellence love excellence because excellence is excellent. It's a gift. It's good. It's glorious. Then there are those who are pursuing perfection. It couldn't be more different. Pursuing perfection, meet the standard or things are not okay, it's a mandate, it's a compulsion, it's an agony. It's an agony.

Now I want to think for a moment about how perfectionism poisons everything. Poisons? You know, why do pastors have to use hyperbole like that, it poisons things? Because once you have tasted the difference, dear saints, between the continual frustration of the not-thereness of things, the frustration with the not-thereness of things over against the rejoicing and the on-the-wayness of things, once you've really tasted the difference between frustration with the not-thereness of things on one hand and rejoicing in the on-the-wayness of things on the other, you know that the one is death and the other is life.

Perfectionism kills everything like a toxin. I want to tell you two things that kills: it kills joy and it kills love. Think with me about this for a minute. Perfectionism kills your joy and with your joy it kills your strength because perfectionism responds to the gap between what is and what will be, between what is and what could be, between what is and what even should be. Perfectionism responds to that gap not with gratitude, "Thank God we've already got this," and not with hope, "Amen, God has made promises what could be, will be, should be. God will bring it about by his free grace, by his power. He loves us, we're on the way." Perfectionism does not see that gap between what is and what could be and should be, does not see it with gratitude, does not see it with hope, sees it with anxiety and frustration. The perfect that is not yet has crazily enough become the enemy of the good that God has already done, is doing, and will do. Goodness is the realization God has worked, God is working, God will work, and perfectionism does not see that. It is anxious. It is frustrated by the not-yetness of things and not-thereness of things rather than rejoicing in hope and the on-the-wayness of things because God.

Now the problem with this, and there are, you know, mild problems here, the problem with it, of course, is that it makes you frustrated with creation and redemption because the crazy thing about creation and about redemption, God's restoring creation, is that not-yetness is normal, not-thereness is normal in both creation and in redemption. God's work, beloved saints, is a process by design. I don't know why God didn't make a world that already had all of its potentials completely fulfilled. I don't know why when Jesus saved me he didn't just make me perfect and whisk me off to the new world where everything is just absolutely as it ought to be. God has chosen to work in creation and redemption through a process that is his choice, and when you have peace in that process, it enables you to joyfully participate in the process of what God is doing.

But if you're frustrated by the not-thereness of things, it not only kills your joy, beloved, paradoxically it kills your participation. You can see this in time management. Perfectionism kills your joy. Think about how that affects your time management. A very wise pastor once said if you can never see these words, "It is good enough," you will never manage your time well. If you cannot say, "Hey, you know what? It's 5 o'clock, God is good, we got to 5. Let's just sit back and enjoy the Lord." You can never say that, do you know what's going to start happening to you? Your joyless, frustrated existence is eventually going to make you less productive, less fruitful. You'll be getting more work done and actually accomplishing less. It will kill your strength. It will rob you. I have watched students who get in this trap. They are paralyzed by the fear of failure, paralyzed by the fear of not meeting the standard until they get to a place where they burn themselves out of school they're so exhausted from their frustration.

Perfectionism kills your joy. It kills your mental health as part of killing your joy. Think about mental health now. Perfectionism kills your joy. Some of you know the exhaustion, the drain of continually over-thinking everything. Does that make you a better thinker? Does the joylessness of over-thinking everything? Have you ever met someone for whom there are no little things? You just want to say, "Brah, you lack proportion." There are no little things and this hyper-thinking about everything, there's no joy in it because you've got to over-think everything and eventually what happens is you start to kill your own mind, you start to kill your mental health. It robs your joy. It robs your strength.

Or people who are always waiting for the hammer to fall and they're trying to eliminate all the risks in life because, you know what? You just don't ever put yourself in a position where that hammer might fall. Does this make you more able to live a life that is healthy and flourishing and even risk-avoiding? No, it makes you paranoid. It kills your joy. It kills your strength.

And there's a distinctively religious version of this. I know so many Christians who are so full of anxiety because, "I don't have enough knowledge. I don't have enough faith. I don't have enough virtue. I don't have enough works." It's never enough and do you know what I see in these Christians? Holiness just starts to become more and more a thing they can't actually connect to because they're just so full of anxiety about the not-yetness of things.

Perfectionism kills your joy and it kills your strength and there's a Reformed version of this because we Reformed people, we have a whole, like take that anxiety about I'm not good enough, you know, and dial that up to like 13 on a scale of 10 in Reformed churches because we have this crazy belief that God chooses people before the foundation of the world and those people he has chosen, in time he actually gives them this thing called the new birth where they become new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the new creatures always bear fruit. And so you've got churches full of Reformed people saying, "Hm, the way to know that I am born again and the way to know that God chose me before the foundation of the world is I'm always digging around in my fruit basket trying to figure out if I've got enough fruit in here to finally decide that I'm really the Lord's." Now there's a hellish way to live, constantly trying to figure out if my fruit basket, you know, if I, you know, search my entrails enough to know that there's enough work of the Holy Spirit in there that I can finally have peace with God. That's just perfectionism.

My friend Joe Minnick has written something so beautiful about this. He says, "Satan can only try to get you to disbelieve in a God who's always closer to you than he is." Satan can only try to get you to disbelieve in a God who's always closer to you than Satan is. God's closer to you than you are. And Satan's activity reduces to comedy for the one whose vantage point is transformed by the gospel. For the person who comes to see their story as the story of salvation, the whole of life, the cosmos, and one's experience becomes a comedy. To consciously reflect on this as in Martin Luther is to laugh at one's self and to laugh at the devil. That's what the grace of God does, it restores your joy and what you discover is the joy of the Lord is your strength. It enables you to participate in the process of what God has done, is doing, and will do because you have joy.

And it kills love. Perfectionism kills love because it keeps you from recognizing and affirming in other people what is truly good because it's always imperfect. Can I ask you guys a question? When is a garden finally done? When can you look at your garden and say, "Finally my garden is done. I'm never touching it again." We need to think about that because if you are that kind of gardener, if there can be no rest for you, things are never okay for you, there can never be any delight for you until it's finally done, then the reality is there can be no rest for you and no delight for you while there is life because living things are never done. And if you take that gardening metaphor and you bring it over into developing human souls, developing human skills, developing human relationships, when is a child done? When is a friendship done? When is a family done? When is a church done? When is a nation done? When is a civilization finally there? It's that gap, beloved, between the actual that is and the ideal of what could be and should be, it's in that gap that love operates or doesn't.

But I suppose we've all met these people. Most of us are these people. The score-keeping spouse just always so frustrated because of this filing cabinet of ways your spouse has failed you. The manager parent to live under whom is to live under a prison warden because this parent is so busy trying to keep it all together they're actually alienating the hearts of the very people that they're trying to care for. That's perfectionism. We've probably met the person who will not commit, the young man who will never be married, the young woman who will never be married, people who cannot sustain friendships. Why? Because they're looking for the perfect. They're waiting for the perfect and they just will never ever ever ever commit because it's not perfect. Well, that's perfectionism. We've probably met the person whose relationships are suffering in all kinds of awful ways because they're chasing that amount of money that somehow magically is going to give them peace, chasing that professional advancement that finally makes them feel like, "I matter." Chasing more possession so I can finally be happy. Somehow your security, your identity, your okayness, your fulfillment, it's still out there on the other side of whatever, meet the standard. It's perfectionism that kills your relationships.

And the flipside of perfectionism, one last thing about this, is the flipside of perfectionism is demonizing. If you really think about it, the flipside of perfectionism is demonizing. There are people, many of us I'd say have this at some level where if someone is not right where I am, or someone is not right where I think everyone else ought to be, they're not on the center line, man, they're not on the center line where they ought to be, how do you start looking at these people who are not on the center line where everyone is supposed to be? Well, their integrity is obviously suspect. They're probably weaving in the lane on purpose. Their opinions surely cannot be held in good faith. Their opinion surely cannot be something I could actually learn something from, even though they're not standing right where I am. Their intent is probably to grab power. Their intent is probably to threaten everything I hold dear. And we get in all this panic and wrathful demonizing of those people out there who are not on the central line. I've come to believe that right-wing McCarthyism and left-wing cancel culture are just perfectionism transposed into a political key.

It kills your joy. It kills your love. I'm done, thank God. Here's my conclusion: in every single heart there's a perfectionist but Christ has set us free. And it's interesting that Paul says in verse 15, "Let those of us who are mature think like I think. I've not obtained, I'm not already perfect. I'm just running towards what Christ has already made my own." And God grant us maturity at Trinity to think this way. But do you notice what else he says in verse 15, and this is just so comforting, he says, "if in anything you think otherwise," if that perfectionist starts to rule in your heart, if you're not resting in Christ and so you're not running well, "God will reveal that also to you." His saving grace can heal even our resistance to the cure. Isn't that amazing?

God give you peace, beloved. Amen.