

Chapter 5



The Bitter Roots of Perfectionism

Bible Character – Martha – Luke 10:38-42
Symptoms – Effects – Causes – Biblical Cures

Summary of Perfectionism

The desire to do things perfectly is not a bad personality trait. It is a good thing to pursue excellence in all that you do. But when your pursuit of excellence becomes perfectionism, the desire for everything to be perfect, then your pursuit of excellence becomes a dysfunction.

There are two kinds of perfectionists, the **adaptive perfectionists** and **maladaptive perfectionists**. That means there are good perfectionists and bad perfectionists. Which are you?

Adaptive perfectionists strive for excellence, not perfection. They strive to develop and improve their skills throughout their lives. They have high standards. They do their work with optimism and take pleasure in a job well done. Adaptive perfectionism can be beneficial. The adaptive perfectionist is a nice guy who is self-sacrificing, conscientious, dutiful, hard-working, and often very religious. Over 90% of physicians and 75% of successful ministers are overachieving perfectionists. Other professional perfectionists include lawyers, engineers, musicians, architects, dentists, and computer programmers. What would we do without them?

Unfortunately, many perfectionists are maladaptive, that is, they are dysfunctional perfectionists. They are frustrated perfectionists. They are their own worst enemy. They are driven. They are never satisfied. They get angry and frustrated when things aren't done their way. They live in a constant state of hurry. They always feel they don't measure up. They are insecure, paranoid, anxious, and unhappy. They live in an imperfect world that frustrates them every day. The carrot of perfection is always in front of them, but they can never quite catch it.

Here's how to tell if you're a bad perfectionist.

If you're a frustrated person pursuing perfection, then it is hindering you emotionally. You have become a troubled person. You are disappointed in yourself and feel low self-esteem. That is not good. If you become easily aggravated at your own mistakes and the mistakes of others, then there's a problem. If you try harder and harder until you are exhausted chasing the illusive dream of perfection, then something is wrong. If you become an obsessive-compulsive (OCD) house-cleaner and nit-picker where everything has to be spotless all the time, then you will trouble the people around you. It just can't be done, so you set yourself up for disappointment. You will find yourself frustrated and angry at not attaining perfection.

If striving for perfection troubles you or upsets you, or other people around you, then it's dysfunctional.

The Situation (biblical character)

Our biblical character, who exemplified perfectionism, is Martha in Luke 10:38-42

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Let me describe this story to you.

Mary and Martha had contrasting personalities and thought patterns. Martha was the Type A personality, a perfectionist. Mary, on the other hand, was a Type B personality, a laid back people-person.

Can anyone deny Martha was a frustrated perfectionist? She is forever characterized as worried and upset over many things. She was driven to distraction. I want you to enter the life of Martha's kitchen and living room for a moment.

The situation is Jesus was traveling throughout Palestine doing miracles and preaching. Crowds were following him everywhere. Reports about him spread all over the region. He was now approaching Jerusalem and stopped in the little town of Bethany, at the home of his close friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

In this passage, we find Martha working in the kitchen. Imagine the scene with me. Martha was a great cook. I picture Martha as being on the larger and rounder side of life. That's the way most grandmas are. She enjoyed being in the kitchen. In the kitchen she was the boss. I picture her being maybe ten years older than Mary. She had a big heart. She loved to serve. She loved to cook. If they had a cooking show in Palestine, Martha would have been the star.

She was chef extraordinaire. She could cook any kind of meal and make it a feast. She worked magic in the kitchen. She made it happen. She was the organizer. She knew where everything should be. She probably had little mottos posted in her house. "*A place for everything and everything in its place.*" She was careful about everything. She wanted things to be just right for Jesus. After all, Jesus, the Messiah, was coming for dinner and it's not every day you have the King of Kings and Lord of Lords come for dinner.

There were going to be a lot of important people attending this banquet. It was probably difficult for Martha to predict just how many of Jesus' friends would be there. There were the 12 disciples plus many important people of the community. There might have been 50 people or more coming for dinner. Martha was really uptight about it, wouldn't you be? She wanted everything to be perfect for Jesus.

I picture her getting up early in the morning to go to the open air market to buy supplies. There was no refrigeration, so would have to choose the meat and all the freshest vegetables and supplies. The tomatoes had to be perfectly ripe. The onions were the best money could buy. She had to taste all the seasoning. Then she had to stock the shelves. She had to do it all from scratch. There were potatoes to boil and mash, salads to make, recipes to follow, bread and pies to bake. There were tables to set up, tableclothes to be ironed, silverware to shine, and tables to be set. Her only real help were a few neighbors and her sister, Mary.

Ah, Mary. Mary was unlike Martha. Martha was a detail person, the workaholic, the perfectionist, the nitpicker, and the demanding one. Mary was not like her sister. She was probably not as round as Martha. I imagine her being slender and attractive. Some people actually say that she was the Mary Magdalene that washed Jesus' feet with her hair and anointed his head with oil. She was probably a very beautiful young woman. Mary was a more attentive people-person. She relished conversations more than food.

A half hour after Jesus arrived, Martha looked frazzled. She was perspiring with her apron spotted with meat sauces and flour. Martha was nervous. She was running behind and dinner would be late. She was a little upset because she realized her sister was not in the kitchen. There might have been some servants or neighbors there, but they weren't the ones that were knowledgeable to direct serving the courses. She needed Mary as the go-to girl, the girl Friday.

Listen to her thoughts that day.

"Where in the world is Mary? That girl is never here when you need her. All she cares about is herself. Here I am left to fend for myself. It's not fair. I have to do all the work. Nobody cares about little ole me. I'm stuck in the kitchen. This dinner will be ruined and it's all her fault. No one will ever want to eat at my house again. This dinner is going to be a fiasco. That lazy, good-for-nothing, self-centered sister of mine is just sitting around like there's nothing to worry about."

Martha's Symptoms

I want you to notice some negative thoughts going through Martha's mind. There's some Stinkin' Thinkin' going on. There were some exaggerations and some dysfunctional thoughts going through Martha's head. Did you catch it?

All or Nothing

"Mary is never here when I need her." (All or nothing.) She exaggerates, accuses, mind reads, jumps to conclusions, calls her names, catastrophizes, and personalizes everything with a royal pity-party.

Mind reading

She was running around slamming pots and pans. She was grumbling, thinking negative thoughts about Mary. She thought Mary was probably primping herself in the bathroom. "That girl does nothing but look at herself in the mirror all day long."

Jumping to Conclusions

"What is she doing anyway, flirting with Jesus?" She was mind reading and making negative assumptions about Mary's motives.

Name Calling

"That little hussy!" She assumed the worst about Mary's motives. She was putting Mary down in her mind, and blaming and shaming,

Personalizing, Pity Party

She felt she was the only one who really cared about a good meal for Jesus. In her mind, she built herself up as though she was the only one who cared.

Finally she's had enough. She was exhausted, drenched in sweat, with a dirty apron covered with flour and food stains. Her hair was disheveled. She looked out the kitchen door into the living room, and saw everybody having a great time, and pretty little Mary sitting down at Jesus' feet leaning on a pillow staring at him with google-eyes.

Angry Thoughts, Justice Thoughts

With that Martha says. "Enough!" and blows a fuse. Martha didn't come into the room quietly. No, she wanted everyone to notice there was a problem here. There was a serious injustice going on. She was angry, no, she was furious. No more Miss Nice Lady. She boldly barged into the party, stomped her foot, and blurted out,

*"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me?
I'm doing all the work by myself.
Tell her to help me!"*

Can you imagine talking to Jesus that way?

Would you ever talk to the Lord that way? We often soft pedal the biblical stories without entering the emotion of the hour. We miss the emotions hinted at in the story. This was an emotional moment. Everybody in that room was thinking, “How dare she! I hope she doesn't come after me!”

She came after Jesus like an angry bulldog. I think she was shaking her finger at Jesus, too. She had a big threatening finger. If looks could kill, Mary would have died on the spot, and Jesus would have been flogged.

“My sister is not helping me and you’re not helping matters either. Tell my sister what to do. Go on. Spit it out, Mr. Commander-in-chief. Tell her off!”

Bossy, Bossy, Bossy

It’s always an emotional moment when a perfectionist blows her fuse. I want you to notice what Jesus said. Jesus didn’t get flustered. Jesus knew what was going on. He knew all things. He was the only one who could really read minds. He knew the heart of every man. He knew Mary’s heart, thoughts, and motives.

Then Jesus says, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.”*

I want you to look at three descriptive words here. They described the situation with adjectives.

There are three words used in this passage that describe Martha’s state of mind. It is good to look at the original words used in the New Testament since many translations interpret them by using synonyms and today’s expressions, which aren’t always accurate.

1. Distracted – “*perispao*” – drawn aside, preoccupied

Verse 40 – “Martha was cumbered about (distracted) with much serving.”

The first is in verse 40. The King James Version says she was “cumbered about.” The word in Greek is “*perispao*” meaning distracted, driven, and preoccupied. It is the word that was used for drawing a sword out of its sheath. She was stretched to the limit. Her patience was at an end. Perfectionists are preoccupied with their own performance. They want to get an ‘A+’ on all their exams. They try to be perfect in all they do.

Martha was **distracted**. Underline that word in your Bible. What does that mean? She was obsessed. Martha was consumed with making the meal. She couldn’t see anything else. She had blinders on. She could only see pasta and meatballs, nothing else. Nothing else mattered. People didn’t matter. The party didn’t matter. Jesus didn’t matter. Mary didn’t matter. All that mattered was her obsession, her point of view.

2. Anxious – “*merimnao*” – troubled, anxious, filled with care

Verse 41 – “Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things.”

The second is in verse 41 in Jesus' comments to her. He said, "You are "careful." The word is "merimnao" meaning to be anxious and overly careful. The NIV translates it "worried" and perhaps that is a good word. It means being overwhelmed with care. Jesus used this word when describing the seed of the word that was choked by the "cares" of this life. It is the word Peter used to say, "Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Cares are normal, we all have them. But this care is overriding all other thoughts. Excessive care creates anxiety, inner turmoil, worry, frustration, anger, and depression.

Jesus puts his finger on the problem. He addressed her kindly and endearingly, and says, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious about many things." Anxiety is the anticipation of a bad outcome. She was expecting disaster for her meal. She was eager to please. She wanted to get a good outcome on this dinner and be praised for it. She was afraid of people's opinion of her more than the Lord's pleasure at her company. She was going to look bad if the meal didn't come off without a hitch.

3. Troubled – "turbazo" turbulent, disturbed, upset

Verse 41b – "Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things."

The third word gives us insight into Martha's state of mind, her thoughts. Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things." The word Jesus used is the Greek word "turbazo" meaning turbulent, disturbed, upset, unsettled, or disquieted. Martha lost her peace. Martha's heart was not at peace. Perfectionists are not very peaceful. That's not their thing. They are into performance and achievements. They want to look good. Martha achieved neither.

There was some emotional investment on Martha's part. Her reputation was at stake and she felt out on a limb. She was afraid she was going to be embarrassed. Jesus wisely said, "You're worried Martha. I perceive you're upset." (What was your first clue, Jesus? Was it the yelling, scolding, accusing or demanding?) Obviously, everybody in the room knew she was a little more than upset. Others would have said she was stark raving mad.

Bossy

Martha was quite boisterous about it. When she got upset, she made sure everybody in the house knew she was upset. Think about that for a moment. She didn't sneak over to Jesus and whisper in his ear, "I'm all alone in the kitchen and I'd really be happy if you'd tell Mary to get in there and help me."

Accusative/ Mind reading

She came to the Lord, and she said, "Lord, don't you care?" Flip it around, and she said, "Lord, you don't care!" It's exactly what the disciples said when there was a storm on the sea and Jesus was asleep on a pillow in the front of the boat. They woke him up and said, "Master, don't you care that we perish?" They were irrational. Of course he cared. He was in the boat too. If it went down, so would he.

Martha showed her accusative spirit when Lazarus died as well. When Jesus arrived three days late for the funeral, Martha's first words were, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Those were piercing words. They were words meant to sting. It's who Martha was, a perfectionist.

Demanding

Finally, there was this demanding spirit when she said, "*Tell her to help me!*" Perfectionists become demanding people. It is good to remember that demanding perfection of others will not soothe your emotional upsets. Perfection is an illusion. It's not real. It's not even possible. It is a figment of your imagination. Things will never be perfect.

Your Symptoms

There are telltale signs that you are a perfectionist.

Characteristics of a Perfectionist

- You're a neat-nick
- You're in a hurry
- You worry
- You fear failure
- You're a list-maker
- You're a workaholic
- You're a critic
- You're competitive
- You're an adrenaline addict
- You're frustrated
- You're angry a lot
- You're a name caller
- You're driven
- You feel guilty when you relax
- You are demanding

Troubles Perfectionists Face

- Frustration and anger
- Feeling like a failure
- Fear of not being good enough
- Hating oneself
- Driven to perform
- Always trying hard
- Feels guilty when he relaxes
- Busy all the time
- Unhappy, complaining things are never right
- Lives by strict rules
- Demanding of others and self

Consequences of Perfectionism

- Hyperactivity – tends to ADHD
- Compulsive behavior – cleanliness and neatness
- Achievement addiction – work equals worth
- Procrastination – not yet perfect, so wait
- Low self-esteem – doesn't measure up
- Free-floating guilt – should be better
- Blame and Shame – not my fault
- Prone to Anger – easily upset
- Prone to Depression – easily discouraged

The Source of Perfectionism (causes)

Why did I walk you through Martha's story?

Because if you are astute and you have studied the 10 distorted thinking patterns, you would have seen 8 of those 10 Stinkin' Thinkin' thoughts in this story. You might even imagine a couple more. If you are a perfectionist, you are probably functioning on eight of ten dysfunctional thoughts. You're in trouble. (And so is everyone around you.)

PERFECTION IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

When I say perfectionism, some people misunderstand. They say, "You mean I think I'm perfect?" That's not what I mean. It's not that you think you are perfect. No, it's your frustration that you are not perfect.

Perfectionism is the attitude in which someone irrationally believes that they can attain perfection by trying harder. Can any of you attain perfection in anything by working harder? You can better yourself, but you will not attain perfection in any pursuit.

You can try all you want to be an outstanding golfer. Is Tiger Woods perfect at golf? No. Are any baseball players perfect hitters? No. Even the best baseball players and home run kings are also the strikeout kings. If anyone bats 500, that would be a phenomenal achievement. That's getting a hit just half the times you stand at the plate.

As I went through personal counseling, it became apparent that I was a consummate perfectionist. I tried hard to be the very best at what I did. I confessed to my counselor that I felt like a failure as a preacher. I would often finish preaching and once everyone left the building, I would go to my study, fall on my knees and cry out to God because I was such a poor preacher. In our next session, he said, "Dick, I checked with your elders. They say you are an excellent preacher. In fact, they said you are the best they've ever heard."

He tried to encourage me to stop expecting to hit a home run every time I preach. He even suggested that instead of trying for an A+ every time that I would aim for a B or B+. He said it was unrealistic to expect to get an A+ every time. He said, "Aim at 80 or 90 on your preaching instead of 100." I was appalled by that. That would be lazy. He smiled and said, "Did you hear it? That's an all-or-nothing statement." He encouraged me to be consistently adequate instead of aiming at perfection. Aim at excellence, not perfection. You know, I took that to heart and I felt better about my preaching. It actually improved.

This World is "Very Good"—not Perfect

Perfection is not of this world. It's an illusion. Listen to me, perfection is not of this world. It doesn't exist here on planet earth. God showed me Genesis chapter one. God created everything and after He created each day He said, "*It was very good.*" He did not say it was perfect. Did you catch that? Why wouldn't God create something and say that it's perfect?

Because He didn't create it to be perfect. He created it to be very good. Perfection is only found in heaven, not on earth. Even the very best on earth is not perfection. That's why God gave us a description of heaven in the book of Revelation. In heaven, everything will be perfect. All the wrongs will be made right. It won't happen here, no matter how hard you try.

Perfection is reserved for heaven and there's a reason for that.

I call it the pining after paradise that God put in the heart of every man. Every one of us has that inbuilt desire for perfection. It doesn't exist here. So where did we get the idea of perfection? God put it into us as part of his character built within our soul, a longing after that fulfillment of being complete and everything being right. It's only going to take place in heaven. God put it in our hearts so we would long for heaven. He didn't put it in our hearts to frustrate us here.

Martha was a dysfunctional perfectionist. She wasn't just striving to make the best food in the house. She was striving to do everything perfectly and everybody else had to line up with what she thought was right, good, and perfect, and if they didn't, they were going to hear about it from her. That's the way perfectionists do things.

Married to a Perfectionist

If you are married, one of you might be a perfectionist. One of you is probably the opposite. Opposites attract. You saw some traits in them you don't have. You're a laid back person and they're not. You saw that as a good thing, because they'll make up for your lack of perfection. They get things done. You thought that would be cool. You'd like someone to keep the house neat and clean and take care of all the details of life that you hate doing. So you married that perfectionist. Then you found out all the dysfunctions that come with a perfectionist and you got frustrated and angry.

Opposites attract, but they also repel. You probably married a slouch because he helps you have fun and relax. But it is that same relaxed husband that won't put the toilet seat down, though you have reminded him a thousand times. He just can't do it. It is unimportant to him. What you thought would balance you out becomes the thing that aggravates you. Opposites attract, and opposites attack.

If a perfectionist marries another perfectionist, you'll really have trouble. You'll be griping all the time at each other's perfectionism that doesn't match your own. It won't be a happy marriage. When I do premarital counseling, one thing I look for is whether you are marrying a perfectionist and you are a perfectionist. If so you're marrying a mirror image of yourself. If that's your plan, then you'd be better off living by yourself. You'll have less frustration.

Sayings (self-talk)

The Perfectionist thinks life is an endless report card.

- Fear of failure
- Fear of mistakes
- Fear of disapproval
- Need for affirmation
- Need to win (or not play)
- Need to achieve more and more
- Need for order
- Need for neatness
- List making
- Minor details are important
- Touchy defensiveness
- Unmet goals equals failure
- Hurry, feeling rushed
- Time consciousness
- Low self-esteem
- Critical of others
- Unrealistic expectations
- Anger at interruptions
- Feeling unworthy
- Need of control
- Angry at others
- Easily frustrated
- Guilt over things not done
- Excessive counting
- Excessive cleanliness
- Can't handle criticism
- Difficulty delegating
- Never satisfied
- Disqualify compliments
- Self-critical
- Achievement addiction
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Check out your own thought patterns. Read through the most common “*Lies We Tell Ourselves*” in our Appendix. Check off what you have been thinking that causes you distress.

Ten Distorted Thought Patterns

Untruthful Thoughts (lies of Satan)

Perfectionists are regularly hitting 8 to 10 of the dysfunctional thoughts. Check out your own thinking patterns.

1. All-or-Nothing (expecting perfection)
2. Overgeneralization (Murphy's law, pessimism)
3. Mental Filter (gloom and doom)
4. Disqualifying Positives (minimizing good things)
5. Mind Reading (reading people's thoughts, motives)
6. Fortune Telling (predicting disaster)
7. Magnification (dwelling on small things, blowing them up)
8. Should-itis (demanding fairness, blame and shame)
9. Name Calling / Labeling (derogatory name calling)
10. Personalizing Everything (feeling responsible, pity party)

In our Appendix, we have included highlights and biblical references. We have also written two books on this theme, *Who I Am Before the Throne*, and a devotional on the same theme. Both are available online at www.PrayerToday.org.

Exercises and Self-Evaluation

Be sure to visit the Appendix for exercises and helps in overcoming perfectionism. Also, our website has full 8 ½ x 11 PDF pages for you to download. www.PrayerToday.org

- Are You a Perfectionist?
- Lies We Tell Ourselves
- I Feel... (checklist)
- Who I Am in Christ
- Attitude Check-up

The Solution for Perfectionism (God's truth)

Jesus said clearly, *"You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Truth sets us free from the bondage of perfectionism. The only cure is to believe God's word, not your feelings.

The Bible says perfection is the work of Christ.

Therefore, we need to internalize these truths.

- Philippians 3:12 – *"Not as though I had already attained, neither were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."*
- Colossians 1:28 – *"We teach to present every man perfect in Christ."*
- 1 Peter 5:10 – *"But the God of all grace, who has called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that you have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you."*
- Hebrews 13:21 – *"Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."*
- Hebrews 12:23 – *"To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect."*
- Ephesians 5:27 – *"That he might present it to himself a glorious church, **not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish**."*
- Jude 1:24 – *"Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."*

The point of these Scriptures is to remind us that it is the work of Jesus Christ to make us perfect. He is not finished with you yet.

Stop Here!

Don't read any further until you have digested, applied, and used what you've just read.

Avoid overload. Read only one chapter a week.

Personal Response to Perfectionism

1. How did this subject make you feel? Sad, confused, upset, depressed, guilty, condemned, enlightened, happy, hopeful, etc.?
2. Was this chapter helpful in identifying some of your own Stinkin' Thinkin'? If so what specifically?
3. What 3 negative thoughts do you need to change? What are they and why are they distortions of truth?
4. What 3 or more biblical truths, verses, or promises do you need to digest and make a firm part of your thoughts and beliefs?

Group Discussion Questions

1. Are you OCD, obsessive about checking and double checking locked doors, gas off, lights off, alarm set, etc.? What do you do most often?
2. What waiting really ticks you off? Traffic lights, doctor's office, etc.?
3. When are you most impatient? What do you have no patience with?

Download our helps and tools at go to www.PrayerToday.org/Stinkin.htm

10 Sermons on Stinkin' Thinkin'
365 Promises of God
Exercises & Forms in 8.5x11 PDF format