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INSIGHT INTO

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# PERFECTIONISM



WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES



INSIGHT INTO  
**PERFECTIONISM**

Chris Ledger and Wendy Bray

Foreword by Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Reading

**CWR**

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## **WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES**

The Waverley Abbey Insight Series has been developed in response to the great need to help people understand and face some key issues that many of us struggle with today. CWR's ministry spans teaching, training and publishing, and this series draws on all of these areas of ministry.

Sourced from material first presented on Insight Days by CWR at their base, Waverley Abbey House, presenters and authors have worked in close co-operation to bring this series together, offering clear insight, teaching and help on a broad range of subjects and issues. Bringing biblical understanding and godly insight, these books are written both for those who help others and those who face these issues themselves.



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## FOREWORD

G.K. Chesterton put it rather well: ‘If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly!’ By this I don’t think he meant you shouldn’t try to do the job well, nor that you shouldn’t always give it your best shot, it’s just that in all of life, and especially in the Christian life, thinking you should only do things if you can do them excellently is a recipe for disaster, and is one treacherous step away from that addiction to ‘being perfect’ that this book so eloquently analyses.

In this helpful and perceptive little book, and drawing on their own experience and study, Chris Ledger and Wendy Bray don’t only give insights into the nature of perfectionism; they give practical pointers to help people deal with it. You see we can’t all be excellent at everything. And even with the things we do well we can’t be excellent all the time. If we judge our self-worth on performance and by the accolades of others then the bar will keep on being raised and sooner or later we will fall. We will become addicted to praise; obsessed by criticism. We will be less like the people God intends us to be. At worst, we become the sort of person who doesn’t need God at all; after all we are striving to be perfect ourselves!

The Christian faith offers good news: I am loved and valued by God regardless of my performances or my reviews. God delights in the offerings we make because we make them honestly and humbly. God is not holding up score cards. There are no telephone votes in heaven. No eliminations. We are all included in; not because of our brilliance, but because of God’s love and of what He has won for us in Jesus Christ.

Of course we try to do the best we can with the gifts we’ve been

given, but we are set free from the nagging negativity which says that unless what we offer is the very best possible then it is not worth offering at all. Our God honours the widow's few pence just as much as the rich man's fat cheque.

Perfectionism never thinks being yourself is good enough, never thinks your offering is worthy enough. It always looks enviously on the gifts and achievements of others. The Christian way is different. God does want to change us – but not into someone else. God wants to change us into the person we are capable of becoming. And this means living with our limitations and offering all that we are to Him – warts included.

God has a picture in His heart of what we can become. His Spirit can renew and reform all those things in our life which confound and confuse this image. And when we fall, His arms are always there to hold us. So let this book help you let go of perfectionism and its false gods and take hold of grace which comes from the living God, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Stephen Cottrell  
Bishop of Reading

## INTRODUCTION

It was the actress Sadie Frost who said, ‘We are all so obsessed with the perfect pout, the perfect this, the perfect that. I myself used to be a chronic perfectionist. Perfection, I’ve learnt, doesn’t bring happiness. Perfection is a curse.’

The search for perfection never ends. Instead, it binds us into a no-win situation – often for life.

Society increasingly demands perfection. We must have the perfect home, be the perfect parent and live the perfect lifestyle.

Some of us will do things again and again in the search for perfection. We will start a letter, misspell a word halfway down the page and begin again, smudge the same word on our second attempt and reach for yet another sheet of crisp white paper, fearful of a third error. We find ourselves having to redo the simplest of tasks because what we do isn’t quite perfect. Whatever we achieve or accomplish, however great the accolades, success doesn’t feel quite good enough.

Others will feel under constant pressure to do everything right first time, *every* time and may even put off doing things, always procrastinating, fearing the end result won’t ‘make the grade’.

Because accomplishment and performance give us the feel-good factor, we reach an extreme in needing that feel-good buzz and end up wanting to do everything perfectly in order to maintain our position and retain the ‘buzz’.

Our desire for perfection can dominate our lives, especially when we project our perfectionism onto other people and demand perfection from them, too. Having a perfectionist in the family might keep our kitchen worktops tidy, but long term it can cause tension between family members, and even repeated conflict.

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Perfectionism may even have been bred within our family, where the mantra upholds its demands: ‘Sit up straight’; ‘Be a good girl’; ‘You can do better than that!’ Even collective wisdom and fable tell us to improve: ‘If a job is worth doing ... it is worth doing well’; ‘If at first you don’t succeed ... try, try again’.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with aiming for the best. But if we have grown up experiencing too much emphasis on how our behaviour is evaluated, corrected and rewarded, we soon learn that in order to obtain approval, we must attain certain standards. The pressure to meet those standards will inevitably leave us striving to be perfect. The child becomes the adult, the adult becomes the worker and partner and so our perfectionism follows us into our adult homes, relationships, marriages and workplaces like a demanding and unwanted visitor.

But perfectionism is not all bad. If perfectionism is a burden for us we can lighten its load. We can learn to apply some balance so that we pursue the search for excellence in a healthy way.

This book aims to help us find that balance; to share understanding of perfectionism, and to introduce skills to help bring about change. It considers the way perfectionism shapes our lives and how it influences our behaviour and emotions. Most importantly, it offers insight into what God says about striving for perfection and reminds us that we are each a ‘work in progress’.

Chris Ledger and Wendy Bray

Note: The reflections and activities at the end of each chapter are designed for the reader who wants to work through perfectionism in his or her own life, but they could be adapted to be used by someone accompanying another person in their journey.



## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

### HOW IS PERFECTIONISM DEFINED?

The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that perfectionism is ‘the uncompromising pursuit of excellence’,<sup>1</sup> while psychiatrist David Burns, in an article in *Psychology Today*, defined perfectionists as people ‘whose standards are high beyond reach or reason ... who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment’.

The psychologist Don E. Hamachek describes two types of perfectionists. First, the ‘Normal’ or the ‘Healthy Perfectionists’ who derive ‘a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort’. By contrast, the ‘Neurotic Perfectionists’ exhibit perfectionist behaviour which is unhealthy. They become neurotic and ‘unable to feel satisfaction because in their own

eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling'.<sup>2</sup>

Wendy Roedell argues that

In its positive form, perfectionism can provide the driving energy which leads to great achievement. The meticulous attention to detail necessary for scientific investigation, the commitment which pushes composers to keep working through until the music realises the glorious sounds playing in the imagination, and the persistence which keeps great artists at their easels until their creation matches their conception all result from perfectionism.<sup>3</sup>

While on holiday in New York, Wendy (Bray) visited an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The curators had gathered more of Turner's paintings together than had ever been seen before. Each individual painting boldly championed the skill and genius of the artist. Yet the exhibition notes described how Turner was never satisfied with what he produced, returning again and again to the same exercises in order to perfect the painting of a cloud or the turn of a tide. When gazing at his work, so breathtakingly displayed, such perfectionism was hard to understand. It had produced brilliance and wonder but had also left the artist less than happy in his search for artistic perfection. Turner was often depressed, anxious and highly demanding of self, unable to work for long periods, becoming increasingly eccentric and depressed. Yet his artistic genius – however tortured by perfectionism – leaves a beautiful legacy for us to enjoy.

Robert Slaney, an American counselling psychologist at Penn State College of Education, researched around the negative aspects of perfectionism. He developed a test which placed individuals

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on various scales with regard to Standards, Order, Anxiety and Procrastination. In conclusion, he remarked that 'Both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists rate high in Standards and Order but maladaptive perfectionists also rate high in Anxiety and Procrastination'.<sup>4</sup>

The negative aspects of perfectionism in its pathological state often take the form of procrastination: 'I can't start my project until I know the right way to do it'; 'I daren't start to write this book because I might fail.' And self-deprecation: 'I must be stupid! How on earth can I not be able to do this?'

Procrastination and self-deprecation induced by unhealthy perfectionism can be devastating and paralysing. They may result in low self-esteem, underachievement and, in the workplace, low productivity. Workplace colleagues can feel alienated by a workmate who seems unwilling or unable to 'pull their weight' or who, while hampered by doubts, loses time on small details of a project. As the perfectionist constantly needs to check and re-check every detail, their experience of work can lead to depression, and even to a higher risk of workplace accidents.

Adderholt-Eliot describes five characteristics of perfectionist students and teachers which contribute to underachievement: procrastination, fear of failure, the all-or-nothing mindset, paralysed perfectionism and workaholism.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the positive, adaptive perfectionist may work harder for longer hours but achieve higher than average results.

In personal relationships, neurotic perfectionists often make unrealistic and unhealthy demands on family and friends and may sacrifice family and social activities in their quest for their goals, whilst in the most intimate relationships unrealistic expectations can cause significant dissatisfaction for both

partners. None are helped by the demands and media messages of a 'Be the Best' world.

### **LIFE DEMANDS PERFECTION**

Increasingly, life demands perfection. Top academic students find that it's not enough to get ten A\*s at GCSE and four As at A level. They now need 'Value Added' experience which proves they are the best of the very best. No wonder high-achieving students sometimes crack emotionally under the pressure to be 'perfect'. Sport also demands the perfect ten as coaches want their teams to be top of the table. Teenagers want to be first – with the latest designer label, or the lowest – in weight.

Increasingly in the competitive worlds of sport, business and entertainment, perfection is the aim. It is not enough to take part – you have to win! At what cost? Sometimes health, sometimes money: the Beijing Olympics cost the equivalent of £12 million for every gold medal awarded!

TV, film and media encourage us to have the perfect body, the perfect teeth and the perfect skin. The search for the perfect body leads to eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression, with many young girls feeling as if they can never make the grade.

Perfection is something that is constantly fed to us by a success-hungry sector of society. It is sold as a way to find control over chaos in the belief that perfection gives a sense of security. Military training and many strict educational institutions lay down very high standards and strict boundaries to shape behaviour in order to have discipline and order in these establishments. Any vulnerability to perfectionism can be intensified by such an experience, sometimes producing a demanding, perfectionist boss who might say, 'Boarding school/the army never did me any

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harm!' The misguided equation then sometimes becomes heavy discipline = order = perfection = sense of security.

Wendy recognised a different kind of link between perfectionism and security as she recovered from two separate cancers. Increasingly she found that she was demanding (mostly subconsciously) that life, in all kinds of detail – the state of a room, the timing of a friend's arrival, a meal in a restaurant – be perfect. This was not because she expected much of others or insisted on the best that life could offer materially; no, making sure things were 'right' or 'perfect' suggested the security of life itself. If life wasn't 'wrong' (less than perfect) it couldn't 'go wrong' (be imperfect by the cancer coming back) once again.

In a similar way, feeling or looking less than perfect can make us think we have lost control. We end up feeling unacceptable; a failure. Women, and men, often become overly house-proud, sometimes developing obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Such obsessive behaviour develops from a thought pattern which says, 'I must make this house perfect, otherwise I'm a terrible mother/wife/man ...' To someone caught up in such perfectionist obsession, even a spot of dust means that the whole house will become chaotic and out of control. And when it is out of control: 'I don't feel good about myself'; 'My husband will feel I'm a rotten wife, my kids will be ashamed of me'; 'The neighbours will talk about me behind my back.' In reality, the demonstration of a bit of relaxation on the housework front often means the very opposite. Through it, we may give others permission to relax.

In the workplace, a perfectionist will perceive their lack of perfection as a disaster. It will lead to a lack of self-value because 'If my work isn't perfect that means I will not be valued – I'm a useless employee.' Or, 'I am not being valued at work because I am

not doing a perfect job. Actually, I am a failure.’ No consideration will be given to the idea that ‘I’m in the wrong job’ or ‘Maybe the amount of work I am being given is humanly impossible’. A perfectionist who is capable of doing the job will see things differently, saying, ‘I am no good because I’m not perfect enough, therefore I have got to work harder.’

### **UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF PERFECTIONISM**

There are several ways in which the nature of perfectionism is classified and understood. Some researchers characterise perfectionism as a single concept or dimension; others suggest that perfectionism consists of several related dimensions.

Canadian psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett<sup>6</sup> suggest that there are three kinds of perfectionists.

1. *Self-orientated perfectionists* are those who set standards that are unrealistically high and impossible to attain. These standards are self-imposed and perfectionists use them to evaluate their own performance. When this is linked to perceived failure and negative life events, the tendency can lead to depression.
2. *Other-orientated perfectionists* set unrealistic and high standards for other people and place importance on their being perfect, with stringent evaluation. Such perfectionists may find it difficult to delegate for fear of being let down by others and may have problems with relationships and excessive anger.
3. *Socially-prescribed perfectionists* believe that high standards are imposed upon them by others. Their perception that these high standards are impossible to meet leads to social anxiety because of a real fear of being judged and then, possibly, rejected.