

I Thought I Had

by Kenneth Gible

When I was young, I thought that if I ever did something wrong, my parents, my teachers, my friends, wouldn't like me. I thought I had to be perfect in order to be loved."

Does that sound like something you might have said in a moment of ruthless honesty? "I thought I had to be perfect."

Maybe we've come to think of God mostly as a divine policeman, constantly on the lookout for wrongdoing.

A lot of us have that notion etched deeply into our brains.

There are a variety of ways we come by this standard of perfection. Some of it comes from our parents, who wanted us to be good girls and boys, who did everything they could so we would grow up to be mature, re-

sponsible, productive adults.

They set standards of behavior for us—keep your room neat, study hard and get good grades, don't lie, stay away from kids who get into trouble. In setting those standards for us, our parents were doing what good parents do. They taught us the difference between right and wrong.

But along the way, they may have been sending out a message they never wanted to send. Or maybe they weren't sending it at all; maybe we just seemed to hear it. But whether they intended to send it or whether they didn't, whether we really heard it or just thought we heard it, the message was this: *If you do well, if you are good, if you measure up—then you deserve to be loved.* If you do not do well, if you are bad, if you do not measure up—then you do *not* deserve to be loved.

I was blessed with a wonderful father and mother. The older I get,

the more I appreciate what they gave me. Like all kids, I sometimes fell short of their expectations for me.

I can still remember times when I was punished for some of those shortcomings. I remember their faces at those times, faces flushed with anger at my wrongdoing. I remember some of the details of the discipline I received. I remember my dad once saying, just before he administered a rare spanking, "Son, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." (Of course, I didn't believe a word of it at the time!)

I remember all that, but I wish I could also remember that when he finished what he saw as his parental duty, he had told me that—even though I had disappointed him, made him angry—I was still his son and that he loved me. I wish I could remember that. But I don't remember, because I don't believe it happened.

"I thought I had to be perfect." Maybe that message got implanted into your consciousness by teachers who took for granted everything you did right and concentrated on your mistakes, who highlighted your spelling errors in red ink but seldom offered words of praise or encouragement. I vividly remember one of my teachers, quivering with rage, announcing to our class, "I've been teaching for twenty years, and you are the worst group I have ever had."

The Message of Perfection

"I thought I had to be perfect." Does that message come to women from movies and fashion ads, featuring actresses and models with faces and figures unattainable by all but a few? Does the message of perfection come to men who are pushed to do more, earn more, who hear the constant emphasis on winning as a judgment on themselves as losers?

Maybe religion has played a part in our need to be perfect. Maybe

the message that keeps coming through is that God demands moral perfection, that no matter how hard we try to be good, it is impossible to make ourselves pleasing to God.

Maybe we've come to think of God mostly as a divine policeman, constantly on the lookout for wrongdoing. This God is a rigorous record-keeper, who's making a list and checking it, not just twice, but constantly, to find out all the ways we have messed up. Perhaps God has become the setter of an impossible standard for our behavior so that the predominant religious awareness we have is the awareness of our sinfulness.

Gerald May, who is both a therapist and a committed Christian, says this: "In all my experience as a psychiatrist and as a human being, the deepest, most pervasive pathology I have seen is the incredible harshness we have toward ourselves" (*The Ministry of Money* newsletter, July 3, 1997).

That is a strong statement. But he's on to something. I've seen it in so many people in the congregations I have served as pastor; I've seen it in my own life and the lives of family and friends; I've seen it and heard it as I've listened to people treating themselves with "incredible harshness."

This tendency to be so hard on ourselves seems to be a special problem for "good" people. And by "good" I mean the kind of people who are decent, fair and honest. They are men and women who can be described as "salt-of-the earth." They attend church regularly, give generously to their favorite charities. They often sacrifice their own desires and comforts for the good of their family, their community, their country. They are dependable, trustworthy and compassionate. They are usually much more accepting of faults and frailties in others than in themselves. And that is the great irony—that they have a much harder time loving themselves than

to Be Perfect

they do loving their family members, neighbors or friends.

The Deadly Trap of Perfectionism

As I have listened to members of my parish talk about their failings, I have often felt frustrated. Despite my assurances that they are loved by God, they frequently have a hard time accepting what I say. If I ask them to tell me some good things about themselves, they stop after mentioning only a few admirable qualities.

“But aren’t you a good parent to your children?” I might ask. “Oh well, I guess so,” comes the reluctant response. “But yesterday, I got angry with my son for no good reason. He was playing his music so loud, and I just lost it. I yelled at him.”

Where does this “incredible harshness” Gerald May describes come from? As May puts it, “Our harshness...comes from a basic mistrust of our goodness, of our beauty and value as children of God.”

Right there is a clue to the answer to this deadly trap of perfectionism. It’s an answer rooted in Scripture.

In the Bible there are frequent recitals of people’s sins. Here’s a sample from the book of Hosea:

“Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed’” (Hosea 4:1-2).

With such wickedness in evidence, you would think that God would finally say: “I give up on you. You can no longer be my people.” But instead, we come to the 11th chapter of Hosea and find God saying:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me...It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking

them by the arms....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused” (Hosea 11:1-3, 8).

God Doesn’t Expect Us to Be Perfect!

These words demonstrate the matchless love of God. The Lord is like a compassionate father, like a loving mother, to the people of Israel, even though they have broken the commandments again and again.

This same kind of love radiated from Jesus. Time after time his disciples disappointed him. They quarreled with each other about who was the most important; they misunderstood his mission; at the moment of crisis, they deserted him. Yet he never stopped loving them.

Luke’s gospel tells us that when Jesus approached Jerusalem on the last time he would come to that city, he wept over it. Why? Because he loved the city and the people who lived there, and he could foresee the disaster that would come to them.

This is how God feels toward you and me—loving us so much, aching with us, wishing we could feel that love and trust it. God knows we are not perfect. God doesn’t expect us to be perfect.

But what about that verse in Matthew where Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This verse is a summary statement, a review of what Jesus has been talking about in what has been called “the Sermon on the Mount.” Jesus has just told his listeners that they should love not just their neighbors but also their enemies: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” (Matthew 5:46).

The word usually translated “perfect” is the Greek word *teleios*, a word meaning mature, fully developed. It doesn’t refer to moral perfection, but to the kind of love that is like God’s love—mature, complete, open-hearted to all, full of

blessing. In Luke’s version of this teaching, Jesus says, “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). So the words in Matthew: “You must be perfect,” mean we are to love as God loves. Eugene Peterson’s translation of this verse (in *The Message*) gives us the essential meaning. Jesus says, “Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

God’s Unconditional Love

God wants only the best for you and me. And God knows that the best gift we can receive is the deep-down awareness that we are loved unconditionally. Even though we mess up, even though we hurt others and hurt ourselves, even though we disappoint others and disappoint God, there is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us.

Yes, that’s right! *There is nothing you have done in your life, nothing you ever will do in your life, that is so terrible that God will stop loving you.* If that isn’t good news, I don’t know what is! It’s news that is so good, we can put an end to the “incredible harshness we have toward ourselves.”

Because God treats you with such tenderness, you can let go of the lie that you’ve been telling yourself—the lie that you have to be perfect to be loved. You can accept the gift of gentleness that God holds out to you—a free gift, no strings attached.

You can accept it just as you are—not perfect as a friend or as a spouse or as a parent or as a child. It’s okay not to be perfect. Not perfect in faith, not perfect in behavior, not perfect in countless ways. But loved...loved immeasurably, loved unconditionally by the One who *is* perfect, by the One who wants to give you life—abundant, joyous, eternal life. □

Kenneth Gibble is a freelance writer whose writing credits include articles, interviews, essays and eight books. He is a church pastor and currently lives in Pennsylvania.