

trying too hard to get it RIGHT?

by Florence MacKenzie



“How are you getting along with your column for the next issue of *JBU*?” enquired my husband recently. “Well, I’ve made several changes to what I originally wrote, but I’m still not particularly happy with it”, I replied. “What’s it about?” he asked. “Perfectionism”, I responded. We both laughed as I thought, Am I a walking illustration, or what?

Like many people, I enjoy work that has been done to an excellent standard. I will spend many hours working on a project, tweaking and fine-tuning it until I’m satisfied with the finished product – in theory, at least. The reality is I’m rarely satisfied with my own work. I often think if I could just put a little more effort into preparing the ideal evening meal, make one more attempt getting my hair “just right” or, in this instance, spend a few more minutes tinkering with my magazine column, I’d be satisfied. So what if I am a perfectionist? Does this not make an excellent result more likely?

It has taken me a long time to realise that perfectionism is not the same as excellence, and I’m still learning what this difference looks like in practice. Generally speaking, the individual in pursuit of excellence is motivated by the desire to see a job well done and derives pleasure and satisfaction from this. Her goals are high, but achievable. By contrast, the perfectionist, refusing to be satisfied with anything unless it is done perfectly, tends to be driven by fear of failure and the need to avoid a negative outcome. Regrettably, her never-ending quest for perfection is a recipe for becoming stressed out, burnt out, and plain old worn out.

Perfectionists can be so critical of their own efforts that they sometimes opt to avoid doing anything that carries a risk of failing, with the outlook that if they don’t try, they don’t fail. Fear of failing to obtain a “perfect” outcome resulted in Karen being unwilling to apply for a job she had a good chance of getting. Her skills and experience would have been extremely valuable to a prospective employer and she could have done the job very competently, but her refusal to settle for anything less than the impossibly high standard of “perfection” meant she missed out on a potentially satisfying and rewarding job opportunity.

But perfectionism isn’t only self-imposed, it can also be imposed by other people. The maladaptive nature of this kind of perfectionism becomes evident

when we are so concerned about what people think of us that we allow their (sometimes unreasonable) expectations of our behaviour, appearance, parenting skills, etc to dictate the standard. Driven by a persistent fear of letting others down and an overwhelming desire to avoid disappointing them, we end up trying to be all things to all people. But, as someone has very wisely said, “You cannot be everything to everyone – and that’s OK.”

As I thought about this, I remembered incidents in Jesus’ ministry where He disappointed people. On one occasion a man asked Jesus to arbitrate between him and his brother but Jesus basically replied that this was not His job (Luke 12:13-14). Jesus was fully aware that His responsibility was to do only what His heavenly Father required and it seemed that intervening in a dispute between two brothers wasn’t part of this agenda. In another incident, Jesus disappointed a wealthy man by telling him something he didn’t want to hear (Mark 10:21-22). Jesus, the perfect God-man, knew that it was alright to disappoint people on occasions. I find this reassuring, and something of a relief, because it suggests that trying to please others doesn’t have to be my number one priority.

However, does Jesus not want His followers to be perfect? Matthew 5:48 seems to suggest He does, but unless we appreciate what the word means in this particular context, we’ll continue to beat ourselves up over our failure to “be perfect”. The sense of the word here is to be complete or mature; it doesn’t mean doing everything flawlessly or without error. Jesus seems to be exhorting His followers to grow up spiritually and emotionally, with perfection or maturity developing out of a vibrant relationship with Him. Only through being closely connected to Him can we “be perfect” without behaving perfectly. Perhaps we need to focus more on being than on doing! I’ll try to remember this next time I’m tempted to try and write a perfect column!