

Melva's Corner

The Simplified Soul & Healthy Expectations

March 7, 2005

Bible Text: Psalm 139: 13-17, I Thessalonians 2:4

Central Truth: God's Word is an oasis for your Soul.

Most stressed - out people struggle with inappropriate expectations. Inappropriate expectations come in three forms; comparison, people pleasing, and perfectionism. Let's look at each one.

Comparison

Comparing yourself to others is dangerous, especially when you are on the verge of being worn out. As your stress increases, you tend to become more self-critical. Whoever you are, there are others who are better at some things than you, and comparisons can cause envy, competitiveness, and dissatisfaction.

When you compare yourself to others, you actually stop seeing yourself. All you see is how you measure up to your perception of someone else. Comparisons accomplish nothing except to increase expectations. This saps your energy and kills your morale. It is one more standard to live up to and one more burden to bear.

The most common areas in which people compare themselves can be thought of as the "six As":

Appearance—how we look. "I would do anything to have thighs that slim."

Articulation—how we speak. "He's always quick with an answer while I'm just fumbling for words."

Attitude—how we think. "It's easy for her to be upbeat; she's just naturally good natured."

Accomplishments—what we do. "Yeah, I could finish my degree too if I didn't have to work full-time."

Acquisition—what we have. "Well, it's obvious she never has to shop at Bargain Store. Some people have all the luck."

Ability—where we excel. "Even if I practiced, I could never play the piano like He does. He's just a natural."

In these areas of comparison, most of us tend to exaggerate the other person's qualities while minimizing our own. Occasionally we might try to bolster our self-confidence by flaunting one quality, hoping no one will notice our perceived deficiencies. Either way, we put unnecessary stress on ourselves.

How can we fight this natural tendency to compare ourselves with others? The best antidote is a healthy dose of reality. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "Try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities." Each person is unique, with a specific God-given set of attributes and abilities. Each of us has areas where we can grow and improve, but in God's eyes, comparisons between people are like comparisons between roses and lilies—both are beautiful.

In any given area, someone will always be better or worse than we are. In an overall comparison, we are simply individual and therefore incomparable. More important, we are each infinitely precious to our heavenly Father. He sees us as we are and still loves us. When we truly take this to heart, we will have far less need to compare ourselves with others.

Resolve to start accepting yourself, respecting yourself, loving yourself, and thanking God for how He made you. We all need to spend less time looking around at others and more time looking at Jesus who is our ultimate role model.

People Pleasing

Many people, especially women, have a bad case of what has been popularly called the "disease to please"—and it's an energy-sapping issue. If you're not sure whether you're a people pleaser, ask yourself these questions:

Do I work overtime to impress those around me?

Do I often say yes when I really want to say no?

Do I depend too much on compliments and affirmations to feel good?

Do I let others schedule my priorities or activities?

Do I try too hard to be nice?

Do I take criticism too personally?

Do I find it hard to be firm?

Do I feel very bad when someone is upset at me?

Do I constantly apologize when I don't need to?

Do I bend over backward for other people, even when part of me is protesting and resentful?

Don't misunderstand. Nothing is inherently wrong with being nice or accommodating, unless it's for the wrong reasons. If you're accommodating others because you fear they won't like you or will reject you, that's the wrong reason. People pleasing essentially means letting other people's imagined expectations control your answers. Trying to do that on a consistent basis will simply wear you out.

Constantly trying to please others is not only draining; it is also an impossible task. What makes some people happy makes others angry. What makes some applaud alienates others. You might try to please, only to find you have offended. Seeking to please is like trying to catch a snowflake on your tongue; even if you can do it, it doesn't last very long.

There is another problem with people pleasing. If you take extraordinary measures and succeed in pleasing them, they'll expect extraordinary measures and more the next time. When you work harder and longer, they again raise their standards. Trying to please and to meet the expectations of others can quickly become

a vicious cycle.

It's natural to want people to like you. It's natural to want them to respect and think well of you. But if this desire drives you to be a stressed-out person, it's time to stop. Remember that your physical, emotional, and spiritual health is more important than temporarily pleasing someone else. Scripture reminds us that "our purpose is to please God, not people."

May years ago a friend once shared with me her life's philosophy: "I realize that everybody has a plan for my life and talents, but my only pursuit needs to be that which God has planned for me. Some people won't like it, but I don't lose any sleep over it." If you can get to the point where you can say that honestly, you'll cut your stress dramatically. Pleasing people can lead you astray, but pleasing God never will.

Perfectionism

Many people secretly believe they must be perfect, or nearly perfect, in everything they do. They may give lip service to "nobody's perfect," but the despair they feel when they fail reveals their desire for perfectionism. Perfectionists strive for the unattainable. **They need to be first or best and try never to make a mistake, which they see as a sign of failure and unworthiness.** Because of this, perfectionists are rarely happy. They frequently slip into depression and are often disappointed. Sometimes they're so worn out by their own expectations that they fail to do anything at all.

At the heart of perfectionism is fear—fear of making a mistake and being judged, fear of failure and rejection. The faulty belief underlying perfectionist behavior is this: If I could get everything right, life would be good. People would love me, and then I could finally love myself. The problem is that as soon as you think you have everything right, something goes wrong.

At an even deeper level, perfectionism reveals a lack of faith. In a sense, perfectionism is really a way of playing God with our own lives. Instead of trusting God to keep His promise to redeem us and mature us, instead of walking in obedience, we try to preempt His work and get it right without His help. No wonder we're exhausted!

It's true that some translations of certain verses of the Bible (such as James 1:4) exhort us to "be perfect." But if you read these verses in context, you'll see that "perfect" is used in the sense of being complete or mature, not never making mistakes. And these verses also make it clear that achieving this kind of "perfection" is a gradual process achieved by the Holy Spirit working in us. It's not something we're supposed to achieve on our own, and trying will only wear us out.

Giving up perfectionism isn't easy. **Sometimes the distinction between unhealthy perfectionism and healthy high standards is hard to see.** But the advantages of Spiritual Maturity are so strong that overcoming perfectionism is worth the effort.

As you begin letting go of your drive for perfection, you might be amazed at the results. As you accept your own humanity and begin to lean on God, you will start to relax and enjoy life. Your relationships will improve as you erase your perfectionism standards for others. And interestingly enough, as you learn from your failings, you may find yourself achieving far more than you ever could before.

Living with Expectations

Life will always be full of expectations, your own and others. How you respond to them will determine how stressed out you become. The key, of course, is to stop letting others control you through their expectations. Instead, you should listen to God, trust Him, obey Him, and be guided by His expectations. He is the one who knows all things, understands all things, and can help you through all things — the only one who can keep inappropriate expectations off your back, What a God! . . . What a relief!

Memory Text:

"13 For You did form my inward parts; You did knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I will confess and praise You for You are fearful and wonderful and for the awful wonder of my birth! Wonderful are Your works, and that my inner self knows right well.

15 My frame was not hidden from You when I was being formed in secret [and] intricately and curiously wrought [as if embroidered with various colors] in the depths of the earth [a region of darkness and mystery].

16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance, and in Your book all the days [of my life] were written before ever they took shape, when as yet there was none of them.

17 How precious and weighty also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” (Psalm 139:13-16) Amplified