

You're
Loved
No Matter
What

*Freeing Your Heart
from the Need to Be Perfect*

Holley Gerth



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To My Heart Friends,

Who Love Me as I Am



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Introduction



Here's the scandalous truth: we can be loved, accepted, happy, and less stressed *without* being perfect. Truly. As women, we tend to look at “perfection” as a superpower. If we could only be perfect, then we could beat depression, banish anxiety, and create unbreakable relationships. Being perfect feels like the best protection in a world that demands we have it all together.

But chasing perfection has hidden dangers. What we believe will lead us out of depression and anxiety may actually be part of what got us there in the first place. And the pursuit of perfection can keep us from discovering God's purpose for our lives. It can distort who he created us to be, and then the world misses out on the gifts only we have to offer.

Here's the reality: *you're not supposed to be perfect*. You're supposed to be human. And humans are messy, flawed, glorious, and deeply loved. Jesus already knows all of that about you. He can handle who you are. He doesn't expect you to be perfect. And if he doesn't, then you don't need to expect perfection from yourself either. Yes, when you read that it probably sounds a bit scandalous too. That's because many of us have believed twisted truths about what God wants from us. Please hang in there with

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II

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me—I promise we will get to the doubts and questions that are probably popping into your mind right now.

For now it's time to lay down those unrealistic expectations that exhaust you.

It's time to embrace who you are—even the messy parts.

It's time to start living fully instead of just trying not to fail.

The pursuit of perfection keeps us from joy, love, peace, hope, and so many of the other gifts God intends for us. And here's the beautiful reality: you don't have to miss out any longer. Yes, embracing imperfection can be scary—especially when perfection has motivated us for a long time. But on the other side is freedom beyond what we could have imagined.

I speak about this from experience because I'm a recovering perfectionist. I know what it's like to trade law for grace and condemnation for love. And I'm more comfortable in my own skin and more in love with Jesus than ever before. Do I have it all together? Nope. And I'm okay with saying that out loud. Because I finally understand that I'm accepted anyway.

Let's stop trying to be perfect, friend. Instead let's be who God made us to be. Let's dare to live with joy. Let's embrace the freedom that is already ours through Jesus.

You don't have to be so tired anymore.

You don't have to live with a heart that's afraid.

You don't have to feel as if you're never enough.

Today can be a new beginning. Right here. Right now.

Are you ready?



Quick Quiz



Ways Your Life May Be Affected by the Pressure to Be Perfect

Place an X by each description you can relate to.

- ___ **Isolation or Loneliness**—When we believe we have to be perfect, we may hide our true selves from others. Even when we’re in a crowd, we can feel alone. We worry someone will discover “who we really are” and then we’ll be rejected.
- ___ **Anxiety**—Much of the anxiety we experience comes from worrying that we’ll fall short of the expectations of others, God, or ourselves. If we don’t live up to the standards we believe we must meet, then we become filled with fear.
- ___ **Depression**—As we try harder to be perfect and it doesn’t work, we begin to feel hopeless. And a loss of hope is at the heart of depression. We begin to feel weary and turn inward. We lose the desire even to make an effort anymore.
- ___ **Irritability**—When we believe perfection is vital to our lives, the actions of others that don’t line up with how we

think things should be feel like a threat. We may lash out, seek to manipulate their behavior, or be very critical.

_____ **Indecisiveness**—If every decision we make has to be perfect, then it can feel impossible to decide what to do. Even small choices can become sources of fear, anxiety, and frustration. We may feel discouraged as our dreams or purpose seem to slip by, but we feel paralyzed when we think about taking action.

_____ **Low Self-Worth**—Every person has a different definition of what “perfect” even means. We all carry around an internal checklist of what we must do in order to be an acceptable human being. When we fall short, the way we feel about ourselves plummets as well.

_____ **Ongoing Physical Symptoms**—Our bodies aren’t intended to bear the weight of perfection either. We may display our tension through frequent headaches, muscle aches, and fatigue. Our immune systems may be weakened in the short term and our overall health affected in the long term.



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Why You Really Don't Have to **Be Perfect**



She walks into the room with a smile, but I can see the weariness in her face, so I ask her how she's doing. With forced cheerfulness, she declares, "I'm fine!"

After she sits down across from me, I lean in, look her in the eyes, and gently inquire, "Okay, how are you *really* doing?"

She sighs and shifts her gaze downward. "I'm worn out," she replies. "I'm tired of trying so hard all the time."

She tells me about all the pressure in her life. Whether it's her looks, her relationships, or even her faith, it seems there's always a standard to meet. She carries an impossible to-do list in her heart that never gets completed. She lives in fear of letting someone down and yet at times resents the very same people she's trying to please. Sometimes she fantasizes about running away from her "blessed life" just so she can have some peace. She says it's been this way as long as she can remember, and she doesn't know how to live differently.

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I nod in understanding and think of how I've wrestled with the need to be "perfect" too. The struggle began in my teenage years when I realized there were expectations to be met in every area of my life—school, social relationships, and even spirituality. I learned to hold my true emotions inside and perform so that I would be accepted. On one particular day my boyfriend broke up with me, and I felt devastated. But I walked into my next class with a forced smile. Fortunately, someone loved me enough not to let me get away with it. A friend took me by the shoulders, looked straight at me, and said, "Holley, stop faking it."

That moment turned out to be life changing because of this: until then I didn't think anyone could tell when I was faking it. I had become an expert at going through the motions and trying not to let anyone down. I thought my performance had been believable. But now someone stood in front of me, cutting through the masquerade and saying, "It's okay to be real."

I desperately wanted to believe that truth. I didn't want to keep pretending, but I had no idea how to change. Even more than that, I was terrified that if I let my struggles and true emotions show, God would be disappointed in me. Fear held me back and held up the corners of my smile like strings on a puppet.

Although I made some progress, I never really figured out how to stop trying so hard in high school. By the time I graduated, I had come to believe I could never live up to the standards and expectations. So when I went to college, I took a chain saw to the pedestal I'd been placed on and completely rebelled. I made poor choices and ended up miserable. Then I truly felt trapped. I didn't want to be perfect, but I also knew my destructive way of living had to stop.

God began relentlessly pursuing my heart in that in-between place between law and grace. He sent people into my life who accepted me in all my brokenness. He caught me when I fell. He revealed the legalism and lies that had led me to this cage of desperation. I learned—or perhaps relearned—that walking with

Jesus is always first and foremost about a relationship. My heart had begun to heal.

Then I got married and began a career. In my midtwenties my husband and I decided to start a family. Only it didn't turn out the way we planned. Seven years of infertility and loss led me to struggle desperately for control of my life. I thought if I could just do everything right, then surely God would give me what I wanted. But he didn't. I fell into depression, and he met me again in that place. He showed me once more how hard I'd been trying to keep it all together. And in that season, I learned how love could hold me together even when my world fell apart.

God has continued to peel back layers of perfectionism in my life bit by bit. He's restored me in more ways than I even knew I needed, and he continues to do so. When I began working as a counselor and then a life coach, I discovered other women struggled with the need to be perfect too. And as I wrote about this on my blog as well as in books, I heard more of the same through comments and emails.

Here's the reality: I've yet to meet a woman who doesn't struggle with the pressure to be perfect. Even the ones who seem to have it all together. Maybe *especially* those who seem to have it all together. We are all in this battle, and we can help each other find victory. So on the day when yet another woman shared with me what I'd heard so many times before, I knew the time had come to write this book.

I reached across the table and touched her hand with newfound hope in my eyes. "You don't have to be tired anymore. Your life really can be different."

She looked up at me with a half smile. "I would love to believe that," she answered. "I think I'm too worn out to try anything else."

I smiled back at her and said, "Well, that's great news, because the first thing I want you to do is stop trying."

I'm saying that to you today as well, friend. Before you read one more sentence in this book, please pause and promise this

one thing: you will stop trying to change on your own. Aren't you exhausted? Aren't you ready for a break? Then get off the treadmill of perfection. You have permission to do so. Because this book isn't about making yourself better. It's about learning to receive what's already yours. It's about knowing you're loved no matter what. It's about rest and grace and living in an entirely new way.

Yes, it's possible to overcome the trap of perfection. I can say with all my heart that I'm a freer woman today than ever before. I know who I am and what I'm called to do. My days are far more joyful. My anxiety is less than it's ever been. Yes, I will be in an ongoing process of healing until I get to heaven. I will have bad moments and messes. But that's okay. And I've discovered it's okay with God too. My life is not perfect, but it's better and fuller than it's ever been. Yours can be too. Truly.

Before we get free, we need to understand why perfection so quickly traps us in the first place. What makes us so willing to give up the wide-open spaces of grace?

The Lure of Perfection

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We're drawn to perfection like a magnet. Our hearts feel the pull from the time we're little girls. The new school year began here yesterday, and social media sites filled with photos of kids in their "first day of school" outfits. I remember that ritual well too. Every bow, backpack, and pair of shoes had to be just right. We do the same as grown women, only now it's our homes, careers, or faith we hope are perfectly put together. It seems that desire for a flawless first impression never goes away.

As I think about why those "first day of school" outfits mattered so much, it seems many of the heart needs we experience as children remain even when we're grown-ups. We want to be accepted. We want others to think favorably of us. We want to be safe and

avoid exclusion or hurt. I think at the root of every desire for perfection is simply this: *fear*. The way we battle fear as humans is through control. And being perfect is the ultimate expression of control.

The enemy knew that when he tempted Eve all the way back in the Garden of Eden. Every time I return to this story, I seem to discover something new about who we are as women. And as I did so today, this one phrase stood out to me: “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). The enemy spoke that false promise to Eve to tempt her. But why that line? He could have offered her many other things—riches, illicit pleasures, the chance to rule the earth. But he chose those words: “You will be like God.” In other words, *you will be perfect*.

What Eve in her innocence didn't realize is that she already *was* perfect. Yes, she was human rather than divine. But she was complete and whole in every way (which is the true definition of biblical perfection—we'll get to that later). She didn't lack anything. And yet, in his craftiness the enemy was able to convince her that she did. Friend, he still does the same with us today.

So how is “being like God” different than being human? What was so appealing about that to Eve? What does God have that we want for ourselves? I think there are five core answers:

Complete control—God has infinite power. Nothing is impossible for him. He's never surprised. Unlike us, he can do anything he wants whenever he wants.

Absolute knowledge—God understands everything. He can fathom more than we can even imagine. He never has to figure out a problem or search for a solution like we do.

Rightful glory—God alone deserves praise and honor because he created all things. He doesn't require affirmation to soothe his insecurities.

Self-sustaining love—God exists in perfect community within the Trinity. He doesn't have a “black hole” of love within him that he needs to have filled by anyone.

Secure identity—God's character does not change. He is who he is now and forever. Nothing can change or reduce him.

When women wrestle with trying to be perfect, it's related to one or more of the core needs above. We are trying to “be like God” in ways he never intended for us. We usually do so not out of arrogance but out of fear. Let's take a look at how that might unfold in a woman's life.

Complete control—Rachel grew up in a chaotic environment, so she learned to take charge. Now that she's a grown woman, that tendency shows in how she runs her home. As long as the house stays absolutely spotless and everything is in order, Rachel feels safe. Sometimes she's weary of trying so hard, but any alternative seems far too frightening.

Absolute knowledge—Kate doesn't know what's going to happen in her marriage. She senses a distance from her husband and once came across some inappropriate sites on his internet log. She tells herself, “If I can just do everything right as his wife, then he won't leave.” She wants to confront her husband but fears what might happen. So she plays the role of the ideal wife while she remains deeply lonely inside.

Rightful glory—Sarah learned early how good achievement made her feel. An A on a test or an extra point scored in a game earned her pats on the back from her peers and parents. It's not that she wants people to think she's awesome; it's just that she's afraid if she isn't, they won't think of her at all. So she focuses on winning in life, but a lot of times there's simply no joy in the game.

Self-sustaining love—Gloria has been meeting the needs of others for as long as she can remember. When the phone rings, she answers. When the committee meets, she volunteers. When the friend goes into crisis, she shows up. She thinks being needed is the same as being loved. If she ever said no or let someone down, then she'd be rejected. On

the outside she still wears a smile, but on the inside she's beginning to worry about the resentment she feels.

Secure identity—Krista has always felt like a bit of a chameleon. She can drift into a group and quickly learn what it takes to fit in. She embraces the phrases they use, the places they shop, and the values they hold highest. She's lived in so many different places that this kind of adaptation feels like a necessity. But sometimes she wonders who she could really become if she stopped pretending.

We can all relate to one or more of the descriptions above. If you felt a poke of guilt as you read those, swat it away. That's just perfection trying to get at you. God knows we are human and our hearts are drawn to what's not best for us. There is no condemnation for us in Jesus (see Rom. 8:1), and that means we're free to be honest so we can find healing. With that in mind, *which of those scenarios do you relate to most? Why?*

The reality is, we all have a little bit of each of these women in us. We're all fallen, broken, and searching for ways to fill the voids in our hearts. Like I just said, God understands and he doesn't condemn us. He sees how easily we can be trapped by the very things we think will set us free. He knows that we're tempted to try to be perfect so that we feel safe. He also knows that perfection is impossible for us. That's why he sent Jesus.

Here's the paradox: while we're *not able* to be perfect, we also *must* be perfect to stand in God's presence. We're born into sin, and none of us goes through life without messing up. Even if you're a really "good" person, that's not enough. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). We don't have any hope of

achieving perfection ourselves. So what does that mean? *We need Jesus to transfer his perfection to us because we can never be perfect on our own.*

When Jesus died on the cross, he took the punishment we deserved on himself and resolved our sin issue once and for all. That's why he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). When we believe in Jesus as our Savior, we receive not only salvation but also a new identity. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Jesus takes your sin and gives you his perfection in return. This truth is the center of the gospel. Without it, Christianity is no different than other religions, which tell people to try harder and do more good so they can get into heaven. *You do not have to live that way.*

The writer of Hebrews describes what Jesus did for us this way: "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (10:14). Through Jesus, we are given perfection that we could never have on our own. That's *positional* perfection, and it allows us to stand in right relationship with God.

Positional perfection can *only* be received. It can never be earned. When we try to do for ourselves what only Jesus can, we take the power out of what has been done on our behalf. God wants to set us free so our lives will no longer need to be about pursuing perfection. He wants us instead to be a people of grace, love, and joy.

You might ask, "But doesn't God care about what I do?" Yes, he does. And when we realize how much he truly loves us, we care more and more too. So there's a second part to perfection: it's the process of "being made holy" described in Hebrews 10:14. This simply means that throughout our lives, God wants us to become more like Jesus. At the same time, he also knows that the process will not be complete until heaven.

And God is the one who perfects us—we don't do it ourselves. Our role is to stay in close relationship with him. As we do so, the changes that need to happen in our lives naturally begin to

take place. Jesus said he's the Vine and we're the branches. Our role is simply to stay connected to him. Ironically, we stunt our spiritual growth when we're focused on making ourselves perfect.

We will go into much more detail about what I shared above throughout this book. We'll also talk about specific verses like "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) that can cause confusion about what God expects from us. But for now I want your heart to take hold of these two essential truths:

- You do not have to be perfect for God to love or accept you. When you receive Jesus as your Savior, his perfection is transferred to you, and you are in right relationship with God.
- Until you get to heaven, you will be in a process of being made holy by God (in other words, becoming more like Jesus). In the meantime, God wants you to focus on your relationship with him and not on changing outward behavior.

You may be wondering, "But what do I do when I sin?" You can simply go to God and say, "I was wrong, I'm sorry, and I'm ready to change. Will you please forgive me and help me?" Then move forward knowing God loves you just as much in your worst moments as he does in your best.

The enemy told Eve, "You can be like God through your own efforts." Eve bought into that lie, and the story of humanity changed for all of history.

Jesus says instead, "You can only be like me through receiving what I did for you." And when we believe that truth, our lives are changed for all eternity.

Let's Pause for a Minute

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Maybe as you're reading this you're thinking, "I always believed being a Christian was about leading a good life." If so, you're not

alone. A lot of people have done the same. But that's not what Jesus tells us. He offers us far more! You don't have to try to be a "good" person so hopefully you can get into heaven. Instead you can receive what God has done for you right here, right now. Simply tell him:

Lord, I believe you died for me and you alone are my Savior. I ask your forgiveness for my sins. I receive all you have for me—including a new identity and a secure eternity with you! Amen.

If you prayed that for the first time, write today's date below, because it's now your spiritual birthday! And tell someone this wonderful news. This is a reason to celebrate!

Where Does Our Desire for Perfection Come From?

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If it's not humanly possible to be perfect, why do we feel so strongly that it's what we *have* to do? The pressure to be perfect can ambush us from several different places. These are four of the most common:

Our hearts—God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Eccles. 3:11). In other words, there's a part of us that knows there's more than this world and we are not yet all we will be. We're aware of our sin and the ways we fall short. God places “eternity” within us so that we seek out a Savior. That's a good thing. But when we decide to try to perfect ourselves, that need gets distorted.

Legalistic authority figures—Whether they're parents, church leaders, teachers, or coaches, those in authority over us have a tremendous impact on our view of the world. When we believe

we have to perform perfectly to be loved by these people, we can begin applying the same approach to other areas of our lives as well. Rather than becoming bitter, it's important to recognize these legalistic authority figures are probably even more trapped than we are by the lie of perfection.

Painful childhood experiences—When we encounter anything that hurts us as children, our natural response is to make sure it never happens again. So if our clothes got made fun of at school, we might try to have just the right wardrobe as a grown-up. If we got yelled at by a parent for our messy room, we may feel anxiety if our house isn't spotless. If a teacher treated us harshly, we may work overtime to please our boss. What helped us adapt as children can actually harm us in later life until we learn new patterns.

Personal triggers—Think about an area of your life where you feel the need to be perfect. As you think about what might be the source of that feeling, is there a specific memory that comes to mind? When did you decide that being perfect in that area would keep you safe in some way? It can help to identify your personal triggers for feeling pressure to be perfect.

Like we talked about before, perfectionism is ultimately about self-protection. Once we recognize the source of our wound, we can ask God to come and heal it rather than continuing to try to do so ourselves. Think about where your hurts came from, and talk to Jesus about it through this prayer:

Lord, I realize that I've been trying to be perfect in certain areas of my life. I'm doing that because I feel afraid deep down inside. I thought if I could be perfect, then I would be safe. I wouldn't be rejected or hurt. I realize now that's not true. I need your healing instead. I need you to be the Protector of my heart. Please give me the courage to believe I don't have to be perfect to be loved because your grace is enough for me. I want to learn to live in a new way. Amen.

Is there anything else you want to add to this prayer as you share your heart with God?



Perfection is the stuff of divinity, not humanity. Its weight is far too much for us. You've probably been trying to carry the burden of perfection for a long time. It's time to set it down and let it go. Can you picture yourself doing that now?

Close your eyes and imagine standing before Jesus. Place your perfectionism at his feet. What does your heart feel as you do so? What is Jesus saying to you?

Now imagine stretching out your hands to receive what Jesus has for you instead. What does he want to give you? Who does he say you really are?

From now on, when someone asks you how you are, you don't have to settle for "I'm fine." Your heart can answer with what it has longed to say for so long: "*I'm free!*"