

TIRED of TRYING to Measure Up

*Getting Free From the Demands, Expectations,
and Intimidation of Well-Meaning People*

Jeff VanVonderen



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Tired of Trying to Measure Up

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the folks at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church of the Open Door in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They are willing to risk admitting that they are tired. They share their wounds aloud with God and with one another, and are no longer willing to settle for anything or anyone but Jesus.

Special thanks to my wife, Holly, and my four daughters, Callie, Jesi, Erin, and Kara. In the most important ways my projects are really family projects. I couldn't do them without my family's love and understanding.

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Part I



Wounded by Shame

Introduction

Why Can't I Measure Up?

If Christianity is supposed to be a life filled with joy and meaning, why do I always feel as if I'm struggling—and tired of it? Why do I feel so guilty? Why is it so hard for me to rest, even when I need to? Why can't I stop all of my religious activity, even though it long ago ceased to be a joy? Why do I find myself repeating patterns I vowed I never would?

Do you, like hundreds of people who have come to me for pastoral counseling, ever ask these questions? Do you feel like you're slogging knee-deep through mud? Like you *never* measure up?

If so, then perhaps you will find the help you need in these chapters. I'm *not* offering you Ten Easy Steps on how to get yourself, friends, or family members to behave in a “Christian” manner. If trying hard were the key to the victorious Christian life, you'd probably be in the Hall of Fame by now! You don't need to learn more ways to try hard. Personal and pastoral discoveries have convinced me that Christians need to learn how to *rest*.

Tired of Trying to Measure Up springs from personal experience and concern over a frightening phenomenon. The great majority of the people I see in counseling are struggling with being tired. Not sleepy tired. They are emotionally, psychologically drained. More than that, they are *spiritually* tired, which is the most debilitating kind of “tired.” And it seems to me that most of the literature, seminars, sermons, and counseling available to Christians have one thing in common: They give already-tired people something more to *do*, which is exactly what they

do *not* need. “Come to me, all of you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest!” (Matthew 11:28, PHILLIPS). Jesus’ response to tired people is rest.

If rest sounds rather foreign to you, an idea too unrealistic or too good to be true, then somewhere in your life you’ve probably been involved in relationships that were based on “conditions.” I have learned by talking with countless folks who are weary from their inner struggles that most often, loving acceptance was held out like a carrot on a string—the tiniest “taste” dependent on their “good enough” performance, which never quite measured up.

Perhaps you, too, can still feel the lure of those dangled, emotional “carrots.” Unwritten expectations and rules gave you a sense of shame that you as a person are unacceptable. Perhaps you are still draining away your emotional and spiritual strength as you try constantly to measure up to standards that are higher than you can reach. These standards may have become so deeply ingrained that you are not even aware of them, let alone conscious of how to get free from their tyranny.

My purpose is to shine a light on the hurtful messages you once received that still play over and over like a recording in your soul. I want to help you recognize the source of those messages, what they *say*, and what they *mean*. I want to help you break away from unrealistic standards and leave them behind. I believe you will come to understand your life patterns—patterns you may hate but can’t seem to “will” yourself out of, patterns that make you weary.

At some point in our lives, each one of us struggles with wounds from hurtful relationships. Some people have been hurt more than others. Some struggle more than others. As you read on in this book, areas of your pain will be exposed and identified. The first step to healing is finding the wounds, and sometimes *finding* them hurts. I wish this were not so.

But here’s the good news—God loves you *unconditionally*. You have nothing to purchase or prove, no one to impress. What Jesus says about

WHY CAN'T I MEASURE UP?

you is your “bottom line.” You are loved, accepted, and not alone. You are considered worthwhile and capable—by the King of the Universe! What else, *who* else matters? Healthy behaviors *result* from an identity that’s healthy and fully based upon God’s performance on our behalf. You can learn to perform *out of* the fullness that is yours in Christ. While you’re on the way to discovering that abundant life, it’s okay to start asking, “Why do I do what I do?” You can also begin learning to rest because your identity—who you *are*—is settled in Christ. Your acceptance and value is settled. As a recipient of God’s grace, you have the resources you need in order to change. But, equally important, because of that grace you can take the time you need to do so.

That really is Good News!

1

How It All Began

The ancient myths tell of a man who was punished by the gods. They bound him and cursed him with a burning thirst, then held up a cup of cool water before him. But no matter how he struggled, the ropes merely cut deeper into his flesh and the soothing water remained a few tantalizing inches beyond his parched lips. *Pagan, you say?* What does that have to do with us today—and especially with Christians?

In my ministry as a pastoral counselor, I meet with countless men and women, young people and old, who are weary from their own struggle against invisible bonds. They see before them the promises Jesus made to all His followers: “. . . whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become . . . a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). “I am come that [you] might have life, and that [you] might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10b, KJV).

“What’s wrong with me?” a lot of these folks ask. “I know what the gospels say. And I’ve committed my life to Christ. But no matter how hard I try, I never seem to measure up.”

For some, it’s a matter of trying to stop sinful and damaging behaviors, only to find themselves falling again and again. Others have a sense that they have given all they can give, served all they can serve—and still something’s wrong. They feel defective. Some have gone off into obvious sin, found themselves more bitter and empty than ever, and then tried to come back to their faith for one more weary “go” at it. Most have

been worn down with trying so hard, while the abundant flow of living water that was promised is still tantalizing inches beyond the reach of their dry, thirsty souls.

“The worst part of it,” some tell me, “is that I can’t talk to my pastor or Christian friends about this emptiness. They’ll give me one more ‘formula’ to follow, and I’m already too tired of trying.”

If you are one of these folks, I want to assure you: Hope *is* within your reach! And you don’t even have to embark upon a new program of spiritual push-ups and jumping-jacks.

That’s not just good news—it’s great news! How well I know, because I went through the same kind of struggle myself. And I discovered the problem that lies at the root of our battle—it’s called *shame*.

When You Have to Measure Up

When I was a young Christian—all of seventeen—I had no way of knowing that I was about to turn away from almost everything I believed in—from all that people saw of me from the outside. At that time, in fact, I was president of my church youth group and avoided the guys who looked and acted like I would—just a few years later. But time was not the only factor: there was a deep, massive void within me. I could actually feel it sometimes, but didn’t know what it was.

You see, I grew up in a small farming community in northeastern Wisconsin, where my family attended an independent, strong fundamentalist church. Like many churches or Christian groups, ours had a definite character: guys wore their hair a certain length; girls knew that hemlines and necklines didn’t rise above or fall below certain limits. There were acceptable things you just did and unacceptable things you just didn’t do. Even though my folks were a little less demanding about these standards, I seemed to thrive in this environment. In fact, when it came to measuring up, I was a real trophy.

There was a nursing home near our town: I visited the people there

regularly. There were Bible verses to be memorized: I could rapid-fire them aloud by the dozen. If I'd worn all my perfect attendance pins from Sunday school on the same day, I'd have touched off every metal detector within a 50-mile radius. My goal was to be the best, most positive person I could be.

There were, however, some “cracks” in my performance. Like the fact that, inside, I really wanted to stay home and watch Walt Disney on Sunday evenings instead of attending church. Or the fact that I could never wait to get out of that nursing home, with its medicinal-smelling old people. And no one else knew that I'd only run for youth group president because I thought it would attract the attention of the girls. But I thought that if I kept at it long enough, I'd acquire a taste for all these good things. Maybe the worst part was that, inwardly, no matter how much I did, I still had the sense that God was disappointed in me. I couldn't have put it into words, but it was like waiting for someone to tell me I'd fulfilled an unwritten quota and could take a breather—or like waiting for the empty spaces inside to fill in.

There was one skill I did acquire by the time I left home for college: how to please people. I learned how to “read” any group I was with and determine what the standards were that would gain my acceptance. During my four years of college and a brief stint in the army, I learned that each group—whether a family, church, or social clique—had its own standard of acceptance. So I found myself striving to earn the same sense of being “special” from any new company I was keeping. There was just one big problem: The standards had changed dramatically from what I had known.

In order to “make it” in college and with my army buddies, I had to be the worst, most negative-type person I could be. At first it was kind of bewildering to me to discover that I had so little inner strength, so little sense of individual identity—and pitifully little resistance to falling in with what everyone else was doing. After all, I *had* been a youth leader.

By the time I reached my early twenties, I had a full-blown addiction

to drugs and alcohol. I was sick and tired of “doing good,” so I gave up entirely. I burned out my physical body, not to mention my money, family, and friends. I’d become the total opposite of everything I’d stood for—in just a few short years. I no longer even tried to understand why all the good things I’d done—all those scriptures I’d planted in my brain, and all the commitments I’d made to God—had so little power to keep me from sinking into this mess.

I decided it had to be something about me. There was some kind of defect that had been there all along and was just now coming out. If Christianity could be compared to an assembly line, then I was a reject on God’s conveyor-belt. Whatever I’d done to be a good Christian, it hadn’t been enough to keep me that way. I was at the lowest point of my life.

I won’t go into all the external details of what brought me to a major turning point one night; those are important only to me. It’s what took place on the inside that matters—the peace and completeness that began to filter in after all those years of struggle.

As Christians, you and I might be quick to say that I finally came to repentance. By that, we normally would mean that I made a 180-degree turn away from sin and bad behavior, and started behaving like a Christian again. But that’s not exactly what happened.

The truth is, the prospect of once again becoming a pillar in the religious community and starting to perform in a positive way left the taste of dust in my mouth. It felt like going back to prison. Besides that, I knew it wouldn’t work. I’d been good and positive in the first place, and that only wore me down; it gave me no real life inside. No, that night I saw something else.

The first thing I came face-to-face with was my deep, abiding sense of defectiveness, which now I would identify as a sense of shame.

Let me clarify something. Shame is often confused with guilt. But they’re not the same. God created you and me so that when we do something wrong we experience a sense of guilt. Guilt is like a spiritual nerve-response to sin, an emotion in response to wrong behavior (“I

acted in a way that was wrong, and I feel guilty”). Those uncomfortable impulses that stab our conscience are meant to turn us away from the wrong we’re doing and turn us back to God. In that sense, guilt is a healthy thing. Because guilt comes as a result of something you and I do, we can do something about it—change our behavior—and the guilty feeling will go away.

Shame, on the other hand, is not just a feeling, though we often speak of it that way (“You ought to feel ashamed of yourself”). Shame is the belief or mindset that something is wrong with you. It’s something you can live with and not necessarily be aware of it. It’s not that you feel bad about your behavior, it’s that you sense or believe you are deficient, defective, or worthless as a human being.

Consequently, you develop a shame-based way of looking at yourself. You accept the view that others might slip up and make mistakes once in a while, but they’re still basically worthwhile people. You, however, are like a mirror image of that: No matter how many times you get it right (whatever it is, according to the standards of your environment) you will never be acceptable. Deep down, you believe something is wrong with you.

Because you and I are not isolated persons, we can also build shame-based systems. A shame-based system can be a family, a school, a church, or Christian group in which the authority figures demand a certain level of performance, whether spoken or implied. If you don’t live up to the standard of the system, messages that are either subtle or overt will tell you that you are not good enough—you simply do not measure up (“Shame on you!”).

But that’s not even the saddest part.

The Worst of All

Worst of all, a sense of shame can keep you at a distance from God. It keeps you from praying because, “Why would God want to hear from

someone like me?” Or, if He does incline His ear (condescendingly), why would He answer? “I don’t come close to living up to His standards. He doesn’t really want to answer my prayers. He doesn’t even want to be around me. At best, I’m just a spiritual step-child.”

After realizing the sense of shame I’d had for so long, the second thing I saw on the night my life began to change was this: All my life—and mostly without even knowing it—I’d been trying to measure up to the standards of other people, including my own family and my Christian environment.

Even tougher, I’d been trying to live up to the standards of an utterly holy God who, I was so often reminded, could not tolerate even one whiff of sin. Hadn’t He laid the sins of the whole world on His own Son on the cross, and then turned His face away? If that was true, I’d thought, then God’s stomach must turn every time He even thought about me with all the secret sins and inconsistencies in my life.

Living with that continuous sense of shame, I’d entered into a process that involved three steps: trying, trying harder, and trying my hardest. Did I say three steps? Actually, there were four: I gave up—or at least I switched the standards by which I was trying to measure myself. True, the alcohol and drugs could have killed me physically, but to be honest, even though I had been a Christian, I was already nearly dead inside.

The solution to my pattern of living was not to repent—that is, it wasn’t to start over and begin to live a good life. No, the solution was found in something else—something that tasted like cool clear water to my soul; and it tasted like life.

It was freedom from shame! Wouldn’t you like a drink from the same well?

Take a Good Look

Have you ever felt like you were almost at the end of yourself?

You’d tried so hard to be good—to do the right thing, not the wrong

thing—only to fail, for—what was it?—the ten-thousandth time? And even if you'd made yourself believe God forgave you 9,999 times, surely this was the one that tipped the scales.

Or maybe for you it's just the opposite. You've been the best Christian mom, dad, son, daughter, Sunday school teacher, youth leader, or pastor. You read your Bible, pray, tithe faithfully—but you have yet to lay your finger on the one button that's going to make God smile.

Some women strive to keep the neatest home, have the best-behaved kids, and have the most neatly pressed-and-creased husband on the block. Others try to keep themselves a step ahead of the men at the office. But there's always one more smudge, an embarrassing volley of sibling name-calling in front of guests, and always one more wrinkle. And then some man always takes the credit for your good work at the office.

Many men shadow-box their way through life: pastors fall into the "I-and-my-flock-must-become-more-'on-fire'-for-Christ" trap; businessmen become slaves to the race for a more prestigious job, a better home in a more exclusive community—with the nagging question as to why each milestone was supposed to be so important, or why it's not enough once they've reached it.

Do you feel like you want to call it quits? Maybe you've even tried giving up for a while—just long enough to give yourself a pep talk, or a brow-beating. You struggle to your feet—you can hardly believe it—one more time! After all, didn't your mom or dad tell you, "Nobody likes a quitter"? You begin to hardly recognize yourself.

In order to understand the deep effects shame has on an individual, it's necessary to go through a process—one that's similar to cutting through the layers of a flower bulb to expose the living core. We'll have to look at the answers to some questions, such as:

- To what extent has your personality been shaped by a sense of shame?

- To what degree have your views about life and other people been affected?
- How much does a sense of shame limit you—dictating what you do or don't do?
- Has shame caused you to become a victim, always at the mercy of people who are demanding, authoritative?

The first step toward a new life is to gather up all those fragments of confusing thoughts and actions and examine them in a new light. You will discover how a sense of shame took control in the first place. Only then can you see how to loosen its hold.

For now, let's begin with a deeper look inside of you.