

Excerpt from Chapter Six - Stress

Day 4

When we allow our lives to revolve around work, activities, and a to-do list, we're bound to experience stress. We never seem to have enough time to get everything done that we feel needs to be done.

The same holds true when we focus our lives on recreation. We ignore our to-do lists because we'd rather have fun, and the result is stress. We're always rushing around at the last minute to get things done, and we're frustrated when work gets in the way of pleasure.

The solution for stress isn't a change of lifestyle; it's a change of heart. Only when we live our lives for God, will we find peace. He wants us to focus our lives on loving Him and loving others, not on getting things done, having fun, or whatever else we may focus it on.

That said, there are some practical things we can do to reduce the stress in our lives. We'll spend the rest of the week discussing those things. Today we'll cover procrastination and perfectionism.

I think it's safe to say that we've all experienced one or the other at some point in our lives. Often it's the perfectionism that *causes* the procrastination. Because much of the stress in our lives can be linked to one or the other, I'd like us to take a look at them today.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is all about expectations—the expectations we have for others, the expectations we think others have for us, and the expectations we have for ourselves. What we're looking for is perfection. What we find is something else. And we think it's not enough.

So we spend our lives trying to change ourselves and others so that we can be happy. We say yes to things because we think others expect us to say yes. We have long to-do lists because we think certain things just have to get done. We get upset when others aren't doing their share of the work because it keeps us from reaching our own goals. In fact, our lives look a lot like Martha's from yesterday's lesson.

I really think Martha was a perfectionist. She had an idea of what should be happening, and it wasn't happening—which thoroughly annoyed her. According to the Greek, she was “anxious and agitated”. The Greek word for agitated is *turbazomai*. Think of turbulent.

Is your life ever turbulent when things don't go exactly the way you think they should go? Do you feel like things *have* to be done a certain way? If so, then you're probably a perfectionist. When we set our standards too high, we get stressed because we can't attain them. The standards become a burden.

Read Matthew 11:28-30 and picture Jesus saying those words to Martha. How would Martha's life change if she followed this advice? Would she feel more peaceful?

You may be striving to be perfect in an area God doesn't even care about. You might say, "Well, what about my testimony?" And I would say, a peaceful, joyful, loving heart focused on God and others is a much stronger testimony than a person who has a perfect house, perfect kids, and a perfect body, but is always stressed out because she's trying to keep everything that way!

- In what ways does perfectionism add stress to your life?

- Does your perfectionism ever cause you to eat for emotional reasons? Explain.

When we focus on what *has to get done*, rather than on what God wants us to do, we risk making an idol out of our to-do lists. We become too busy to spend time with God and often too busy to spend time with others as well.

Does your perfectionism hurt your relationship with God or keep you from ministering to others? In what way?

Perfectionism can also hurt the ones we love when we have unrealistic expectations for their behavior or when we become irritable because of our stress levels. How has your perfectionism hurt your family and friends?

- How would your life improve if you were able to stop being a perfectionist?

The question is, “How do you stop?” It’s hard to just turn off your mind and say, “I’m not going to let that bother me anymore.” If you struggle with perfectionism, only God can set you free.

There are many lies that feed into perfectionism. I’ll list some of those lies below. Circle the ones that you believe, and write in the truth below each lie. If you need help, look at what I wrote in Appendix B.

As you renew your mind and replace these lies with the truth on a regular basis, you’ll be working toward a more peaceful life focused on God and other people.

Lies that fuel perfectionism

1. This has to be perfect to be acceptable.

2. I am an idiot because I... (failed in some way.)

3. I can’t start this project until ... (the rest of my life is in order, I know exactly how to do it, I have a large block of time available for it, etc.)

4. If it can’t be done well, it’s not worth doing.

5. If I’m perfect, people will love me, admire me, accept me, etc. If I mess up, they’ll be mad at me.

6. It’s terrible if I make a mistake.

7. People expect that of me. I need to live up to their expectations.

8. If I want something done right, I need to do it myself.

9. I’m a bad Christian if... I’m a good Christian if...

10. I should have known better.

Truth is the answer to the lies of perfectionism. If you're still convinced that perfectionism is a good thing in your life, do some internet research on the topic. It will open your eyes to the problems of this way of thinking.

Before we leave this subject, I'd like to briefly discuss the added temptation we have as Christians in this area. There's a fine line to walk between trying to please God and feeling like He'll be mad at us if we're not perfect.

He wants to be first in our lives, and He expects us to be moving faithfully in that direction. But He doesn't demand that we become full-blown mature Christian in an instant. We mentioned Romans 8:1 earlier this week. What does it say?

If God doesn't condemn you, then don't condemn yourself! When you mess up, confess your sin and repent. Then accept His forgiveness and be thankful that He loves you no matter what. God is full of grace; He's not a critical parent demanding perfection.

The more you rest in His love, the more you will want to please Him in the way you live your life. Saturate yourself with His Word, and His power and truth will set you free from sin. Just remember, He sees you with eyes filled with mercy and love. Try to see yourself through His eyes.