

# When We Don't Measure Up

Escaping The Grip Of Guilt

by Jeff Olson

**K**elly couldn't sleep. Earlier in the evening her friend Joan called to ask if she would drive her to the store, but a dinner commitment made it impossible to meet Joan's request. Although Joan assured her that she understood, Kelly felt a wave of guilt for not being able to help.

Letting Joan down preoccupied Kelly's thoughts. Guilt whispered that she wasn't a good friend. Restless and worried, she began thinking of a way to make up for letting her friend down. While it didn't completely take away her guilty feelings, coming up with a way to make things right allowed her to finally get some sleep that night.

It wasn't unusual for Kelly to feel guilty over such a minor incident. She has battled with this pattern for most of her life. She has always hated saying no. Even the most trivial event can trigger overwhelming feelings of guilt and the need to make restitution for letting someone down.

**TOM** couldn't wait to tell his parents the exciting news. He had been accepted into a reputable trade school and was on his way to a career in engineering. But his dad's response crushed his excitement. "I thought I could count on you to stay and eventually take over the real-estate business, just as I did for my father," his dad sighed. "If you leave, who am I going to turn our family business over to?"

Tom felt terrible. He was hoping for a better response but shouldn't have been surprised. Even though he had shared his intentions on several occasions, his dad seemed to ignore him. Of course, Tom's dad never said it directly to him, but he expressed to other members of the family that he didn't want to sell a business he had poured so much of himself into. Because he had worked so hard to build the business, he wanted to keep

it in the family and turn the reins over to his son. But he was ignoring the fact that Tom was not cut out for his line of work nor was he interested in it.

Tom tried to dismiss his father's attitude and proceed with his plans, but he wanted so much for his dad to be proud of him. He couldn't bear the thought of experiencing his dad's disapproval again. Unable to shake the feelings of guilt for having failed his dad, he reluctantly put his plans on hold.

**ANN** was a busy woman. She was a mother of two active elementary school kids, assisted in their school 3 days a week, and kept the books for her father's insurance agency. She also taught the 4th grade girls' Sunday school class, hosted a Wednesday morning Bible study, and participated in a church drama group.

It wouldn't seem possible

to add one more activity to her already demanding schedule. But when asked if she would fill a temporary need in the church office, her prior commitments didn't stop her from saying yes. The additional work cut into her time with her family and overloaded her schedule, but guilt kept her from saying no. "It would be selfish of me to let my church down," she reasoned to herself. "What would the people at church think of me if I said no? That's not acceptable. It will be hectic, but I'll manage somehow. I always do."

Although there are several differences in their stories, Kelly, Tom, and Ann have one thing in common—they each were burdened by the guilt of not measuring up.

Some might argue that these individuals weren't motivated by guilt but by their desire to please God. For instance, didn't Kelly

feel bad and work so hard to make it up to her friend because she was just looking out for the interest of another? (Phil. 2:3-4). When Tom canceled his plans to leave his father's business, putting his own career interests on hold, wasn't he simply honoring his father? (Eph. 6:2). When Ann agreed to help out in the church office, wasn't she merely functioning as part of the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 12).

These questions can't be understood by looking at surface issues. Kelly, Tom, and Ann's actions are rooted in deeper motives and beliefs about life. When these elements are considered, a case might be made that these individuals were not focused on pleasing God. They may have been trying to do the right things for all the wrong reasons.

It's possible that Kelly was more compelled by an urgency to protect herself

from criticism than by a desire to help her friend. Perhaps Tom changed his choice for his life's career not because he was honoring his father but because he was afraid of his father's disapproval. In Ann's case, maybe she wasn't striving to fulfill her role in the body of Christ as much as she was motivated by a desire to gain the approval and avoid the rejection of others.

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Living to please people for personal gain or protection is an issue the Bible addresses. It is precisely the issue over which Paul confronted Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). Paul told Peter that he was "in the wrong" when he

stopped eating with the Gentiles because he was "afraid" of how a group of Jewish visitors might view him. Paul's point was simple: We are to be guided more by God than by the opinions of others.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about the danger of putting too much emphasis on human approval when he said of his critics:

*We do not dare to  
classify or compare  
ourselves with some who  
commend themselves.  
When they measure  
themselves by themselves  
and compare themselves  
with themselves, they are  
not wise (2 Cor. 10:12;  
see also 1 Cor. 4:3-4).*

Paul had in mind the pride that occurs when we make ourselves the standard of what is right. It is just as true that we are apt to feel a nagging sense of guilt when we are the ones who don't

measure up to someone else's standard.

Like Kelly, Tom, and Ann, many people are overloaded with and driven by guilt when they fail to please others. This can happen to friends who can't say no, or to an abused spouse, to a burned-out parent or employee, or to an adult child who can't do enough to satisfy a parent.

In any event, a life filled with guilt over not measuring up is no way to live. It can drain us spiritually, emotionally, and physically, and leave us enslaved to the opinions of others. Ultimately, those opinions hinder us from living as the men and women God designed us to be. If this kind of guilt characterizes your life, we hope the following pages will provide a growing understanding of its source and offer hope for a life of rest

and freedom from its exhausting grip.

## Expectations And Guilt

All of us live by expectations that are seldom expressed but always felt at some level. No one is exempt from expectations—nor do we want to be. A world without expectations would be a world of complacency without challenge or progress. Expectations have the potential to spur us on to higher levels of character and achievement.

Still, not all expectations carry the potential for good. Depending on why they are imposed or how accurately they are perceived, personal, family, and/or community expectations can be brutal demands that set the stage for a lifelong battle with unnecessary guilt.

The topic of expectations

is complicated. In most cases, we're not striving to meet just one kind of expectation. Many of our personal goals have their roots in family expectations. Likewise, most community standards work together with personal or family expectations. While there is overlap among the three categories, it's helpful to explore each one separately.

**Personal Expectations.** By definition, personal expectations are those we place on ourselves. Some people don't seem to be concerned about how well they perform or how they're seen. This is *not* true, however, of those who feel as if they don't measure up. Instead of lowering the bar, they raise it.

"Never offend anyone."  
"Always be pleasant." "Give people what they want when they are upset." These are common personal

expectations we sometimes place on ourselves. "Always be an asset to others and never be a burden" is another.

One man would never turn others down when they needed help fixing their car or repairing their home. He would go out of his way to help those in need. But it was a different story when *he* needed help. He would rarely ask for assistance. Although several of his friends and neighbors would have gladly given him a hand, he felt guilty for imposing on others. Asking for help would have violated his own expectation of never being a burden.

Kelly's story is another good illustration of a personal expectation. Her personal expectation was, "I must always please others." When she was unable to take her friend to the store, she felt guilty because she couldn't fulfill her own

expectation. Not even the best reasoning could have convinced her that she wasn't guilty. She had an expectation for herself and she clearly didn't meet it.

### **Family Expectations.**

Some people come from families where they are expected to *act* in a certain way or pressured to *be* something other than what God intended. Whether stated or implied, these expectations are clearly understood. While there are several sources of family expectations, parents are typically the primary source.

Consider the grown daughter who feels guilty if she goes against her mother's wishes. Her mother always expects things to be done her own way. If they're not, she accuses her daughter of not trusting her judgment or she questions her daughter's love. For instance, if Mom dictates that the family get-together

will be at the daughter's home, she'd feel guilty if she didn't comply, even though she's working fulltime and doesn't have enough time to prepare for company.

Tom's story is an example of a son who was forced into being something he was not. His talents and interests were in the field of electronics, but his father pressured him into real estate. Although he felt like a square peg being shoved into a round hole, he still felt guilty if he didn't live up to his dad's expectations.

### **Community Expectations.**

Where we live, where we work, the friends we associate with, and the church we attend are some of the elements that combine to form one's community. Within each community is a set of certain expectations.

All of us want to fit in and be accepted. It's not pleasant to be an outsider.

Yet within every community acceptance and approval is based on our ability to live up to stated or implied rules.

We may live in an area where the type of car we drive or the clothes we wear determine whether we are “in” or “out.” We might associate with a group of people where acceptance depends on the amount of money we make, our education, wit, humor, appearance, or willingness to run with the crowd.

Regrettably, church people are not exempt from this form of group pressure. Dress and appearance, family ties, profession, money, and level of service all have a way of becoming the basis of our approval. Sometimes these social or community standards are so closely identified with God that those who are not able to conform end up feeling like second-class Christians.

Ann felt this kind of

pressure the first time she declined to work in her church nursery. The director of the nursery found ways to make Ann feel guilty, even though the two had been friends. The director’s cold silence left Ann with the impression that she was a spiritual failure. Saddled with unnecessary and unhealthy guilt, despite a schedule saturated with responsibilities, Ann resolved never to fail anyone at church again.

Even though our preoccupation with the approval of others puts more distance between ourselves and God, we are apt to let others be the measure of how we feel about ourselves. Instead of bringing our *real* failures and guilt to a God who is waiting to comfort and forgive us, we continue to measure ourselves by ourselves and compare ourselves among ourselves (2 Cor. 10:12).

# Why Do So Many Of Us Feel Driven To Meet Unrealistic Expectations?

**G**uilt feelings over not measuring up can be harmful. They can lead to a number of destructive problems such as obsessive attempts to please, eating disorders, substance abuse, perfectionism, stress, and damaged relationships. But what compels us to ruin our lives in this way? Whatever the answer is, it is found inside of us. Jesus said the problems that devastate and corrupt our lives originate in our hearts (Mk. 7:20-23).

So let's begin to take a closer look at what's truly going on inside our hearts as we work so hard to fulfill expectations. As we start to peel back the layers, we will

first discover much fear and desperation.

**A Fearful Heart.** Near the core of our burden to please others is often a fear of disapproval or rejection. The apostle John recorded an example of this kind of fear at work in the parents of a son whose eyesight Jesus had miraculously restored (Jn. 9:1-23). When questioned about their son's healing, the parents pleaded ignorance and directed the Jewish leaders to talk to their son (vv.20-21). Why? They were *afraid* of being "put out of the synagogue" (vv.22-23). In other words, they didn't share their true opinion about the role Jesus played in their son's healing, for fear they might be disowned and disgraced by their religious community.

For many, this same kind of fear is rooted in early relationships where others regularly criticized

them for not measuring up. They were made to feel they weren't the right gender or weren't smart enough, athletic enough, or thin enough. Some were even made to feel as if their desires were wrong and selfish. Whether people expressed their disapproval with a glare, a put down, or a guilt trip, the message was loud and clear: "How can you be such a failure?" or "How dare you ask for so much?"

Harsh criticism affects people in a number of different ways. While it hardens some, it frightens others. The pain of criticism can cut so deep that it begins to shape a person's life. Out of fear, many vow never to feel this sort of pain again. The fear of more disapproval partially explains why we strive so hard to comply with what we think others expect of us.

For example, one woman who is driven to measure up

has always been terrified of her mother's harsh verbal reprimands. When she was growing up, her mother would scold and humiliate her nearly every time she

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made a mistake—big or small. Even if she made an innocent mistake or shared a different point of view, her mother assaulted her with criticism. Even though this woman is now married and has children of her own, she still avoids disagreeing with her mother and does whatever she can to do things her mother's way.

### **A Hungry Heart.**

Although we are afraid, our deep hunger for acceptance

and approval continues to long for attention. We continue to hunt for acceptance and approval like a starving person looks for food. In many ways, we are like those Jewish leaders whose greatest love was the praise of men (Jn. 12:42-43). Out of desperation, we secretly try to get what we want from people by living up to their expectations without letting them know what we're after or that we're even in need.

Our fear of disapproval and rejection and our desperate craving for acceptance is part of the reason we try so hard to live up to the expectations of others and feel so guilty when we don't. It's also part of the preoccupation that keeps us from experiencing the kind of full acceptance, forgiveness, and comfort that is available from God.

Before we take a closer look at the potential of that

relationship with God, let's examine more closely some of the common strategies we use to respond to the fear and hunger within.

## What Strategies Do We Use?

In response to disapproval or rejection already experienced, the tendency for many of us is to cover our disappointment and anger and let the fear of further pain take center stage. Internally, we cover what's stirring in our troubled hearts underneath a blanket of guilt or self-blame. Externally, however, we try to hide from what we fear, make up for our perceived flaws, and work to earn the acceptance and approval that our hearts desperately desire and demand.

**Our Internal Strategy.** Some people lash out when others criticize them. They carefully aim

their darts of contempt at the people who cut them down. Lashing out, however, is generally uncharacteristic of those of us who feel guilty for not measuring up. We may explode at others on occasion, but we generally aim our contempt at ourselves.

We can sum up our internal strategy with one word—*self-contempt*. Instead of being objective about the unrealistic expectations and unloving criticisms of others, we adopt the idea that we are at fault or somehow responsible for not being who others demand us to be. We often scold ourselves with statements like, “I should have done more or done a better job,” or “I was selfish for wanting their attention.”

Take, for example, the woman who painfully recalls an incident from her past that symbolized her relationship with her dad. She remembers arriving home from school one day

and telling her dad how a friend betrayed her earlier that morning. She was hoping that he would notice her heartache and console her. Unfortunately, he minimized her pain and lectured her for interrupting him (he was reading the newspaper). In her home, children did not speak unless they were spoken to. It wasn't the first time an event like this happened, nor was it the last. Unable to bear the pain or face the anger over her father's scorn, she concluded that her desire for comfort and concern was not only wrong, but that it was the reason her father ignored and seemed disgusted with her.

**Our External Strategies.** Self-contempt or self-imposed guilt convinces us that we are to blame for not being enough and, in turn, energizes our external strategies. While we are probably unaware of it,

believing that we are at fault allows us to redefine the problem in such a way that *we* can manage it. So we set out to hide our flaws and desires, to fix what is wrong, and to earn acceptance and approval.

### ***We Try To Hide Our Flaws And Desires.***

When we're terrified of what people may do if they see our deficiencies or our desires for approval, our tendency is to control how they perceive us. Many of us do this by making it look as if we have it all together and that we need nothing from them. We think that self-contempt authorizes us to use whatever resources are available to ensure that no one ever sees us as incompetent or needy men or women, husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters, professionals or friends.

The strategy to hide behind a facade of

competency is not to be mistaken for *legitimate* efforts to be a caring spouse or parent, to be a friend who listens, or to handle a task responsibly. It is an attempt never to allow ourselves to be in a position where our flaws or desires might be exposed in a way that risks additional ridicule or rejection.

Ann's life is a good illustration of the strategy to hide. She was a woman who flawlessly kept a busy schedule and was rarely a burden to others. In her mind, she couldn't risk being seen as a liability or needy. It was too dangerous.

Ann grew up with a mother who was not only a perfectionist but cold and distant. She learned at a very young age not to ask for love from anyone. Her mother, who herself grew up in a home marked by verbal and sexual abuse, taught Ann that the desire for love is a sign of weakness that others

will use to take advantage of her. This confused Ann at first, but regrettably, she came to accept it after tasting the bitterness of betrayal in her relationships. Additionally, her mother ruthlessly criticized her if she didn't live up to her idealistic standards. Her mother's verbal attacks slashed deep into her heart, but Ann agreed that her mother was right. She began to believe her mother's criticisms (notice her self-contempt) and that the desire for love was foolish. So she put on a mask of competency to keep others from seeing her imperfections and desires.

***We Try To Fix What Is Wrong.*** Self-contempt is always present to remind us that *we're* the problem. Since we see the problem as one of not measuring up, we try to fix it. We try to make up for our flaws by living up to the standards of others, especially those people

we don't want to be upset with us.

The expectations we've failed to meet often determine what we try to fix.

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If we're not thin enough for our parents, spouse, or peers, we'll lose some weight. If we're not intelligent enough, we'll study harder. If we're not successful enough, we'll push for a promotion or search for a better-paying job. If we're made to feel that we don't give enough money to the church, we'll increase our giving. We'll do whatever it takes to fix what we believe to be wrong with us.

Kelly's story portrays an example of the strategy to

fix what is wrong. Recall how guilty she felt for not being able to take her friend to the store. In her mind, she was a failure. She wasn't able to get any sleep until she came up with an idea for how to make it up to her friend. Her solution, motivated more out of fear than consideration, was to offer her friend a ride to the body shop when her car was ready to be picked up.

***We Try To Earn Acceptance And Approval.***

As we work to hide our flaws and work to fix what we view to be wrong with us, we are secretly attempting to earn the approval of others or trying to keep what little acceptance we may already have. We don't let others know what we're looking for. Often we are unaware of it ourselves. Whether we're aware of it or not, relationships are reduced to transactions where we use the currency of meeting

expectations to buy acceptance and approval.

We work hard to meet the expectations of those whose acceptance and approval we desperately crave. Some of us seek this from almost everyone with whom we come in contact. Whether it be a clerk at a store or a stranger we happen to be sitting next to on a bus or an airplane, we just can't stand the thought of anyone disliking us. For others, the desperate craving for approval is limited to a handful of individuals. The list might include a parent, a sibling, a child, a friend, a co-worker, a boss, or a teacher.

Tom's situation is a good example of the strategy to earn approval. There was no question that his dad would disapprove of him if he chose a career in engineering. Since his dad's approval was his highest priority, he believed he simply had no choice but to work for his dad and set

aside the career of his choice. It's the only way he could earn his dad's approval.

Efforts to blame ourselves, to fix what is wrong, to hide what we can't fix, and to earn acceptance and approval are all strategies that many of us resort to in differing degrees. For some, this is a serious problem, for others it is only an occasional issue. In any event, there's a payoff. We always get something out of our strategies.

## What Do We Gain From Our Strategies?

**O**ur strategies seem quite useful to us, otherwise we wouldn't expend so much energy on them. Let's take a brief look at what they accomplish for us. They help us:

**Lessen Our Disappointment.** *Self-contempt*, which is another word for much of the self-

imposed guilt we feel, helps to lessen our disappointment over the way others have treated us. Seeing ourselves as undeserving or as failures is ironically easier to accept than the painful fact that others are unwilling to give us the kind of approval we long for. Disappointment doesn't swallow us up if we embrace the idea that we are unworthy of their praise.

### **Protect Ourselves.**

Our strategies help to protect us from greater harm by defusing our anger and controlling how others perceive us. We feel legitimately angry when people mistreat us. But our anger frightens us. We don't know what would happen if we expressed it. Blaming ourselves prevents us from exploding at others, protecting us from further derision and disapproval. Likewise, appearing as if we are happy and content helps us control how others view

us. It allows us to masquerade as satisfied servants who don't need much of anything. By not troubling others with what we need or want, we shield ourselves from the threat of being put down for our desires .

### **Earn Acceptance.**

The payoff of fixing what is wrong and giving people what they expect is that it gives us the chance to get and maintain what we believe we must have. If we can make up for our perceived flaws and meet the expectations of others, we may win their acceptance and approval.

As children, we instinctively tried to figure out how to get our needs met and protect ourselves from further harm in a stingy and antagonistic world. While it's understandable for children to adopt these various strategies, it's wrong for us as adults to cling to them as

a drowning person would cling to a life preserver. We remain like foolish sheep who naturally try to find their own way without the guidance and strength of a caring Shepherd (Isa. 53:6). Let's examine more closely what is wrong with the strategies we use.

## **What's Wrong With Our Strategies?**

**A**s we're feeling hurt, angry, frightened, and empty inside, we are equally determined to search for our own ways to calm our troubling emotions and fill the void. But the strategies we've come up with are terribly flawed. If we're honest, we'd have to admit that they don't work very well and, most important, they are a distraction from and an expression of our *real* problem.

## **Our Strategies Fail**

**Us.** There's no doubt that our strategies work, but for how long and to what degree? Can we totally escape our disappointment and protect ourselves from what we fear? Can we actually earn enough acceptance and approval to fill the emptiness in our hearts?

The answer, of course, is no. Our strategies are a poor investment. We get little relief, shelter, or satisfaction compared to the amount of time and energy we invest in them. Even worse, they drive us to the brink of exhaustion. We rarely relax or deeply enjoy life. We live under a tremendous pressure to make sure we don't let others down or become a burden. But we can't keep it up. Inevitably, someone sees us as disappointing or needy. Our inability to measure up only gives us greater reason to blame ourselves and feel

guilty, which fuels more of the same foolish tactics that landed us at the edge of exhaustion in the first place.

Our strategies take us down a dead-end road to frustration and exhaustion. They may seem to work, but they only create more problems. It may seem that we're headed in the right direction, but we're not. It's difficult to detect partly because of the distracting nature of our plans.

## **Our Strategies Distract Us From Our Real Problem.**

Distractions mislead and draw attention away from what's most important. And that's exactly what our different tactics do when it comes to understanding our real problem.

Self-contempt, our *internal* strategy, reduces our problem to a workable level that we can repair with our *external* strategies. Consequently, we don't see

the real problem in our hearts because we're too preoccupied with a lesser, more manageable problem that our strategies both define and try to fix.

So then what is our real problem? Earlier, we probed and found several troubling issues lurking deep within our hearts. Our first incision revealed much disappointment, anger, fear, and hunger for acceptance and approval. But let's make another incision and go deeper to see more clearly what our real problem is and how it relates to the strategies we use.

## What Is Our Real Problem?

**W**e mistakenly believe that our number one problem is that we haven't measured up to certain expectations. A closer look, however, reveals our real

problem: We are staking our well-being on a god other than the God of the Bible. In other words, our real problem is a subtle form of *idolatry*.

Idolatry is present whenever we trust in or need someone or something more than God. Like the man who appealed to an image he fashioned out of wood, "Save me; you are my god" (Isa. 44:15-17), we are relying on a false god of *our own making* to keep us safe from what we fear the most.

Whether the idol is a person or one of our strategies, it may be hard for us to see and admit that our greatest problem is masked idolatry. But when we consider the problem mentioned earlier of pleasing other people for personal gain and protection instead of pleasing God, we can see that it is an example of trusting others for the kind of acceptance and

approval that only God Himself provides.

The apostle Paul, who was “greatly distressed” by the many idols in Athens, emphasized that it is in God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

When we ignore the one true God and consider the opinions and actions of others to be *more* important than Him, we are like the Athenians with their many gods. People become substitutes for the One who has made us for Himself.

In the same way, our strategies to protect ourselves from the pain of disapproval are often rooted in gods of our own making. For example, we may believe that we won't make it through the day unless we get the approval and acceptance of others. These seem as necessary as oxygen to sustain us.

Certainly it's okay to desire loving relationships

in which we are mutually accepted and encouraged (Rom. 1:12; Phil. 1:8; 4:1; 1 Th. 2:8). But when what we live for the most is the approval and acceptance of others (like Kelly did with her friend and Tom did with

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his dad), we make people into false gods. We are trusting not only in what people give us for our personal well-being, but also in our ability to earn it by pleasing them.

We can also see the principle of idolatry at work

in our strategies to hide our failures. Earlier we noticed our tendency to conceal our flaws to prevent people from attacking or disgracing us again. We just don't know if we can survive another round of their criticism or rejection. In doing so, we've made people into substitute gods by giving them, instead of God, the final say on whether or not we're okay as individuals. And to keep from disappointing others (as Ann did with the people in her church), we trust in the god of our efforts to hide and to please.

Consciously or unconsciously, there is a direct link between our overdependence on people and our various strategies. But a more fundamental question is, *Why do we trust our strategies more than we trust God?* Why do we have such a strong commitment to forget God and live independently of Him? Paul

leaves no doubt that idolatry has its roots in our refusal to recognize God as God (Rom. 1:18-23). Rather than giving God the honor and thanks that He deserves, we often become angry and suspicious. Buried underneath the feelings of guilt over not measuring up, many of us harbor a complaint against heaven for allowing us to be so mistreated. The cry of our hearts often goes something like this: "If God is good, then why did He allow others to cut me to shreds with their words?" We're not so sure He's trustworthy. In fact, we're upset with Him because He had the power to prevent it, and He didn't! We think, "I can do a better job of protecting myself—and I will!"

Whether we know it or not, this hidden complaint in our hearts is the main reason we resort to our idolatrous strategies to rebel against God. Our

complaint justifies our rebellion.

It's crucial that we accurately see that our real problem is false trusts, which may be rooted in anger and distrust toward God. Understanding the tendency within all of us toward idolatry allows us to better see what we should truly feel guilty for! Once we see our *genuine* guilt, we can approach God on proper terms, pleading for mercy and accepting His cleansing forgiveness for what really needs to be forgiven. This kind of guilt is legitimate and good. Self-imposed guilt, on the other hand, is illegitimate and is part of an ongoing commitment to find our way through the minefields of life without God. Instead of leading to confession, forgiveness, and freedom, it leads toward greater self-condemnation, pressure, and bondage.

Our tendency may be

to try to fix our idolatrous hearts. But as hard as we may try, we are facing a problem we can't fix or merely readjust on our own. Our only hope to escape the penalty and power of sin is in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Ti. 2:14; 3:3-5). Only God's grace has the power to save and transform our angry, arrogant hearts.

*Freedom from  
the power of sin  
is a process of  
a lifetime.*

Salvation and deliverance from the penalty of our sin happens instantly when we place our faith in Christ alone (Acts 16:31). But freedom from the power of sin is a process of a lifetime that will culminate when we see Christ. Then we will

finally be as He is (1 Jn. 3:2). But until then, any transformation that takes place in us is progressive.

Before taking a closer look at the hope-filled process that leads to forgiveness and greater levels of freedom, rest, and joy, let's briefly consider some of the obstacles that hinder us from entering and living in this life-changing process.

## The Obstacles To Change

Three of the main barriers within our hearts that keep us from the process of becoming more like Christ are denial, self-reliance, and self-absorption.

**The Obstacle Of Denial.** Denial is our way of avoiding that which is too painful to face. Like the homeowner who hopes that shutting the bathroom door will make the leak in the

faucet stop, we hope that if we deny the deep hurts of life they will eventually go away. Denial says that we don't hurt. It settles for a peace that is based on pretense, and resists the peace of God that sustains us while we face whatever may be true of ourselves or our world (Phil. 4:6-7).

We are equally unwilling to face our questions and doubts about God. We often fail to see as Gideon did that our questions about God can actually bring us closer to Him (Jud. 6:12-16). Whether we deny the deep pain of relationships or our struggles with God, it blocks the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts. Ultimately, denial keeps us from seeing the depth of our rebellion and enjoying the life-changing forgiveness of God (Mk. 4:12).

**The Obstacle Of Self-Reliance.** Denial of our real problem often leads

to self-reliance. The arrogant assumption of self-reliance is that *we* can fix what is wrong with us. *We* can do better. If we are just angry, we can control our temper. If we're merely a pushover, we can force ourselves to be stronger. Whether it's accompanied by a dejected self-contempt or a smug self-confidence, self-reliance is our attempt to whip back into place any part of our lives that seems out of order. In this way, self-reliance hinders the biblical process to change. We may trust in God for our salvation, but we tend to rely on our own "foolish" efforts to complete a work that the Spirit of God began in us (Gal. 3:3).

The main focus of self-reliance is our *exterior*. It puts the cart before the horse by placing greater importance on how we look and what we do than on our motives and the object of our trust. While it may appear to

be good, it inevitably leads to an enslaving self-absorption (Col. 2:20-23).

**The Obstacle Of Self-Absorption.** One of the major problems with self-reliance is that we can't move beyond ourselves. If we fail, it leads only to the kind of guilt that produces more pressure to be better. If we succeed, we become proud. In either case, everything revolves around us and what we can do or get. And the great tragedy is that the work of God is ignored. It may not look like it at first glance, but we tend to expend most of our time and energy trying to make ourselves look better and therefore feel better. However, our efforts can never satisfy our appetites (Eccl. 6:7). They only lead to further self-absorption and away from knowing the freedom of forgiveness and the joy of love.

Denial, self-reliance, and

self-absorption are at least three obstacles that get in our way of humbly relying on God to change us. How do we overcome these obstacles? To answer that question, let's turn our attention to the main elements in the process of growth and change: a commitment to truth, an appreciation of forgiveness, and a freedom to love.

## Overcoming The Obstacles

**T**ruth, forgiveness, and love not only make up the path toward change, but they provide the force to break through the barriers that stand between us and a dramatic work of God in our lives.

**A Commitment To Truth.** God wants us to know the truth (Ps. 51:6). Truth is an effective piece of armor in the battle against the evil one (Eph. 6:14).

It is also an aspect of the powerful sword that cuts through the denial in our hearts (Heb. 4:12), clearing a path to freedom through the jungle of sin (Jn. 8:31-32).

To know what is true but choose to ignore it is to engage in denial. If we are to deal with our feelings of unnecessary guilt and idolatry, we need to commit to facing the important truths about ourselves and ask God to help us in our search (Ps. 139:23).

For those of us who are burdened with a sense of never measuring up, we can start facing the truth by admitting that while we have our faults, we have also been harshly and unjustly criticized by significant people in our lives, *and* that their mistreatment has deeply affected us. As a result, we struggle with fears and disappointments that otherwise would not be

present to the degree that they are.

Some of us may scoff at or dread facing disappointment and what scares us. As foolish or overwhelming as it may seem, facing our emptiness can reveal a deep hunger within us that no person or object can ever begin to satisfy. Only God Himself can fill this hunger (Dt. 8:3). Likewise, admitting our fears is an important step to overcoming them. It helps us take responsibility for how we've allowed fear to control us.

Another element of facing the truth is owning up to the selfish strategies we've used to ease our disappointment, protect ourselves, and get what we demand from people. While we certainly do some things with a sincere motive to serve others, we must also face the humbling truth that many of our words and efforts to please are

actually attempts to get the acceptance we demand and to protect ourselves from potential harm. Further, when we allow others to become more important to us than God, we not only give them too much power over us but we lose the power to relate to them out of love. Instead, we relate to them mostly out of fear.

*✿ Admitting our fears is an important step to overcoming them. ✿*

One last vital part of facing the truth is admitting that we are idolaters who struggle with trusting the provision and protection of God. Instead of denying that the struggle exists, we need to be up front about it with ourselves and with God. His desire is for us to be honest

(Ps. 51:6). Honest struggle doesn't take away all of our doubts, but it gives God the opportunity to increase our confidence in Him. As we confront Him with our doubts and anger, we learn to be silent before Him. Then we can come to a place, like Job, where we are left speechless (Job 41-42). This is when God reveals Himself to us and we begin to realize, like Peter, that there's nowhere to turn but to Him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).

Facing the truth is the only way we can begin to move beyond a life that is characterized by guilt and controlled by fear. But let's be honest. It is not easy to face the truth. At one level, most of us would prefer to forget how deeply we've been hurt and the harm we've caused ourselves and others in response to being hurt. Although a

commitment to the truth requires us to admit enormous pain and to be humbled and saddened by the extent of our selfishness and rebellion, it opens doors (which denial never can) that take us into a greater appreciation for forgiveness. God's grace is where hope is found for deep, lasting transformation in our character.

### **An Appreciation For Forgiveness.**

A commitment to truth enables us to see a lot about ourselves. Not only have we been hurt beyond words, but we've discovered that we're angry and determined to handle our fear and hunger without God's help. We have viewed people as enemies to defend ourselves against or resources to get what we demand. Although we've done some good things, we have come to see that we are far more guilty of not loving people and rebelling against

God than we ever could have imagined.

What's most surprising, however, is not just the extent of our sin but God's response to it. We approached God with our doubts and rage. He's aware of our idolatrous attempts to rebel against Him and use people. But unlike others we've encountered, He doesn't shame or reject us. Amazingly, He responded to our rebellion long ago by turning on His Son and punishing Him on the cross for our sake. Our sins were paid for when God publicly disgraced and cursed His Son for us (Gal. 3:13). For some, seeing God's gracious response to their sin may be the first time the gospel has overwhelmed their hearts. For those of us who are Christians, it's another opportunity to see God for who He really is and to accept and appreciate

another dimension of His grace.

Consider the scene of the cross for a moment. Matthew's account tells us that as Jesus struggled to breathe while bearing the shame of our sins, many bystanders began to hurl insults at Him. The two thieves who were being crucified next to Him initially began insulting Him as well (Mt. 27:44).

Luke sheds further light on the story by describing a radical shift in the attitude of one of the thieves. As the thief watched Jesus suffer enormous physical and emotional pain, he noticed something different about Him that stunned him. Jesus wasn't angry with His executioners. He desired to see them forgiven (Lk. 23:34). He didn't resist the unthinkable torture. Nor did He retaliate. He willingly suffered. We don't know if the thief fully understood

that Jesus was suffering for him, but Jesus' quiet humility and kindness drew him out of his own anger and selfish preoccupation. Something began to soften in his heart and he expressed his desire for a Savior (Lk. 23:40-42).

In our own less-than-obvious ways, we too have questioned and even raged against God. We've excused our rebellion because of what has happened to us or what may happen to us. But as we honestly approach Him, we too can gain a greater appreciation for His remarkably kind response to our rebellion. His mercy can soften our anger and quiet our doubts. As we stand before Him sinful and without excuse, we can experience how He "gives grace to the humble" (Prov. 3:34). As we see our rebellion more clearly, we can be overwhelmed and captivated by the "riches of

His kindness" (Rom. 2:4).

The psalmist's faith in God was restored as he remembered and meditated on the "miracles of long ago" (Ps. 77:10-20). In a similar way, it's the memory and increasing awareness of our "exodus" from the bondage of sin that restores our confidence in God when it looks as though there is little reason to believe that He is for us. If we are not increasingly overwhelmed by His grace—that the Innocent One paid the price for the guilty—then we will be unable to see past our own emptiness, rage, or fear. But as God's forgiveness increasingly becomes our greatest treasure, it will give us the faith to keep moving forward and it will liberate our desire to love (Lk. 7:47).

### **A Freedom To Love.**

We will continue to struggle with disappointment, anger, and fear. Change doesn't

mean that these realities will disappear. Instead, change means that we will become less controlled by these realities and more controlled by a renewed freedom and passion to be concerned for the welfare of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Change won't happen overnight, but imagine how different we could be in time. Imagine the rest and sheer delight of loving others that could replace the exhaustion and drudgery of measuring up to unrealistic expectations. This can happen once we become saddened over the harm we've caused by living independently of God, and then learn to throw ourselves into the arms of our merciful and loving God.

Let's return to our opening stories to get a glimpse of what the freedom to love could look like:

Kelly could have *felt*

*sorrow* instead of guilt over not being able to help her friend. Blaming herself left her preoccupied with looking out for herself because she thought she had so many flaws to fix or hide. But if sadness over her limitations could replace her self-imposed guilt, she could discover the deeper desire and freedom to be concerned about what others actually need as opposed to the drudgery of measuring up to expectations for herself. A restored confidence in the goodness of God and a growing belief that He often redeems good out of tragedy could have kept the sorrows of life from controlling her (Gen. 50:20).

In Tom's case, he could have honestly *confronted* his dad's manipulation instead of caving in to the fear of disapproval. Although sharing his true feelings may have upset his dad, it clearly would have been a

response that lovingly exposed the truth about his father's selfish heart. His courage to speak the truth out of concern for his dad could have come from the growing conviction that "whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Prov. 29:25).

Ann could have graciously *declined* instead of agreeing to help out in the church office. She could have portrayed the freedom we have in Christ to say no when confronted with our limitations. Saying no at times keeps us from being stretched beyond reasonable limits where we are of no good to anyone. Of course, it would have been wrong for Ann (or for any of us) to say no out of an "I don't care what people think" attitude. Paul wrote that we should never use our freedom to serve ourselves, but rather to "serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13).

The freedom to love is

actually the freedom to exist as the man or woman God meant for us to be. Under the influence of denial and self-imposed guilt, we may think that our true feelings or opinions don't matter. Some of us even feel guilty just for existing. Under the influence of truth and forgiveness, however, we have the freedom to exist. We begin to see that we have something special and valuable to offer. We don't have to waste so much time trying to hide or fix ourselves. We can give of ourselves in ways that can radically affect the lives of others for the glory of God. The more we get a sweet taste of living out our true identity in Christ, the more we will be excited about the prospect of imitating God in our lives (Eph. 5:1-2). 🌿

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

*The Pressure's Off* by Larry Crabb (Waterbrook Press, 2002).

*Bold Love* by Dan Allender (NavPress, 1993).

*Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Zondervan, 1992).

*Repentance & 20th Century Man* by C. John Miller (Christian Literature Crusade, 2000).

## OTHER RBC COUNSELING BOOKLETS

*When Help Is Needed*—a biblical view of counseling (CB931).

*When Anger Burns*—dealing with angry emotions (CB942).

*When Violence Comes Home*—help for victims of spouse abuse (CB951).

*When Trust Is Lost*—healing for victims of sexual abuse (CB922).

*How Can I Live With My Loss*—the process of dealing with grief and loss (CB921).

*When Forgiveness Seems Impossible*—knowing when and how to forgive (CB941).

*When We Just Can't Stop*—overcoming addiction (CB961).

*When Passions Are Confused*—understanding homosexuality (CB962).

*When We Love Too Much*—escaping the control of codependency (CB021).

*When Hope Is Lost*—dealing with depression (CB973).

**The complete text of all the RBC booklets is available at [www.discoveryseries.org](http://www.discoveryseries.org).**

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