

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: Our 12-year-old daughter is becoming quite the perfectionist in her academics. She is so hard on herself. My wife and I don't demand this kind of behavior of our children. Where does it come from and what concerns should we have?

ANSWER: Before you apply this word to your daughter's behavior, let's define "perfectionism." Since perfectionism is not really a clinical term or mental disorder (although it could be used to describe, in a limited way, certain types of obsessive/compulsive behaviors), it means different things to different people. Perfectionism runs the spectrum from taking care and finding pleasure in doing things flawlessly to experiencing profound anxiety and dissatisfaction when things are not done flawlessly. Where a person falls on this spectrum can mean the difference between a high achiever who continuously strives for excellence, and a frustrated and angry failure who is immobilized by an inability to complete tasks.

All behaviors have functions; perfectionism is no different. In women (daughters), perfectionism is usually **a way of controlling life**. Everyone learns early and continues to learn that life is dangerous and hurtful. Women usually handle this reality by using some measure of control in both situations and relationships. (Men usually handle this reality by a measure of avoidance. Perfectionism in men is motivated by avoidance in areas where they know they don't succeed.) On the outside, perfectionism in both men and women looks very much the same; the difference is in the motivation.

Remember, **behaviors result from the three basic longings/needs of a child's heart: love, security and purpose**. Somewhere along the road of life, your daughter decided that **perfectionism would help her obtain what her heart longs for**. This often isn't an overtly conscious choice, but she has learned and felt the connection between her action (perfectionism or doing things flawlessly) and the result (fulfillment of longings).

It is not hard to see how doing things perfectly might improve her chances at receiving: loving reinforcement, praise, honor, and admiration at home and/or at school; a secure place, position, and relationship in the classroom, family or future workplace; and a sense of purpose, meaning, impact, uniqueness, and superiority through accomplishment. We all desire

love, security and meaning. These are good longings in and of themselves. God desires to have these longings met in a relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ. There's the concern.

As a loving parent whose **primary** goal is to draw your daughter into an ever-deeper relationship with the Savior, you need to understand the **theological implications** of this behavior. You will need to have some heart-to-heart talks and prayers with her about: dependence on God rather than dependence on self, finding her heart longings first and foremost in God, and the function of her perfectionism.

With God, motive is crucial. **Motive determines the difference between a righteous act and sin.** The real danger in this behavior is not the anxiety perfectionism might produce, but the idolatry it might reinforce. Help her understand the difference between doing an excellent job (because whatever we do, we should do as if doing it for the Lord), and using perfectionism to provide things for ourselves that God wants to provide for us through a relationship with Christ.

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