

Cultivating Self-Compassion

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series based on Brené Brown's book called "The Gifts of Imperfection." This week we focused on perfectionism and how to overcome it.

1. Warm-up Question: Most all of us are perfectionist in at least some area of life. What's something you tend to be obsessively perfectionist about?
2. In her book, Brené Brown draws on years of sociological research to identify the chief characteristics (*i.e.*, Guideposts) of people who live wholeheartedly. On Sunday, we studied Guidepost No. 2: Cultivating self-compassion . . . by letting go of perfectionism. Perfectionism is a powerful, stressful felt-need to get things right, some of the time or all of the time. According to Brown, perfectionism usually arises out of a subconscious desire to avoid the pain of failure.
 - a. Think about a time in life when you failed miserably. Tell us what happened, and how you felt.
 - b. Imagine that friendly alien beings who do not experience emotions were to land on earth. How would you describe to them what the pain of failure feels like?
 - c. In what area of your life right now – work, relationships, spiritual, financial, home, appearance, parenting, etc. – do you feel like you are most failing – or at least falling way short?
3. Failure leads to blame, shame, and judgment – from others (external) and ourselves (internal). Subconsciously, we decide to avoid that pain by trying to do everything right. But that's impossible – perfection is unattainable. No matter how hard we try, we'll eventually mess up, which makes us even more tentative and cautious, instead of bold and brave, and can lead to "life paralysis," which Brown defines as:

"All the opportunities we miss because we're too afraid to put anything out in the world that could be imperfect. All the dreams we do not follow because of our deep fear of failing, making mistakes, and disappointing others."

Life paralysis represents the bottom of the slippery slope of perfectionism. When in your life have you experienced (or observed someone else experiencing) "life paralysis?"

4. Brené suggests three principles, each grounded in Scripture, that can help us tame perfectionism. **Principle No. 1 – Normalize Failure . . . by accepting that blame, shame, and judgment are an inevitable part of life.**
 - a. Read Romans 3:23 and I John 1:8. Although verses pronouncing all of us to be sinners are often seen as negative, Jeff suggested they're actually positive because they liberate us from the impossible task of never failing, freeing us to boldly

move forward without being overly tentative and cautious. Do you agree that the notion that we're all sinners is positive and freeing? Why or why not?

- b. When asked how it felt to fail at something 200 times, Jonas Salk said, "I've never failed at anything in my life. I simply discovered 200 ways not to make a vaccine for polio." In this quote, Salk demonstrates what Brown calls "shame resilience." What do you think "shame resilience" means? And why do you think it's so important?
 - c. Read together the long quote from atheist Alain de Botton on p. 3. Do you think this is a helpful way to look at people and relationships? Why or why not?
5. **Principle No. 2 – Practice Imperfection.** Brown recommends that we learn to recognize when we're feeling the pressure to be perfect and, in those moments, to deliberately practice pretending we don't care, so as to desensitize ourselves to the need to constantly appear to be perfect. In her book, she gave the example of joyfully welcoming unexpected guests into her home when everything was a mess. Simon Peter also gives us a great example of what it looks like to practice imperfection. Read Matthew 14:22-33.
- a. All the disciples shared this same experience, but only Peter was bold enough to try something incredibly daring, risk failure, and actually fail. How do you think Peter's "failure" here helped shape him into the foremost leader of the early Christian church? What can we learn from his example?
 - b. Think about some area of your life right now where you are feeling paralyzed by a sense of inadequacy. What might it look like for you to practice imperfection in that area of your life?
 - c. What's the difference between a healthy desire to excel in some aspect of your life (which Brown affirms) versus unhealthy perfectionism?
6. **Principle No. 3 – Cultivate Self-Compassion.**
- a. Think of a beloved pet you've had who messes up a lot. Describe some of your pet's shortcomings. How did those failures affect your feelings for your pet?
 - b. If we imperfect humans can love someone for who they are (not what they do), surely a perfect God can love us that much and more. Read John 8:2-11. What does this passage teach about how God feels about us when we fail and how we should feel about ourselves in those times?
 - c. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Mark 12:31. Why is self-compassion so important for each of us and for the people around us?
 - d. If time permits, as a group complete the Self-Compassion Assessment Exercise on p. 3.

Alain de Botton

“I love the Christian concept of ‘original sin,’ the idea that we’re all fundamentally broken and fundamentally incomplete. Imagine a relationship in which two people think they’re great – that’s going to lead to intolerance and terrible disappointment when they realize that they’re not perfect. Whereas imagine a relationship that begins with the idea that two people are quite broken and therefore they need forgiveness. The concept of original sin . . . basically says, ‘Look, when you meet someone new, just assume that something major has gone wrong here.’ Treat everybody you meet as though they’re laboring under some really big problem. That’s the starting point of any encounter.”

Do you think this is a helpful way to look at people and relationships? Why or why not?

Self-Compassion Assessment Exercise

- ✓ Take out your phone and go to <https://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are>.
- ✓ Take 5 minutes to do the self-compassion test. Make sure you scroll down to complete all 26 questions.
- ✓ Then hit “calculate score” at the bottom of the test.
- ✓ Does the result surprise you? What insights do you gain from this test?

If you want to grow your level of self-compassion, explore the practical exercises found at <https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#exercises>.