

“Relief—that was my experience of reading this wonderful book. Faith has expertly weaved her personal struggles and cultural background together with gospel truth and historical example to produce a deeply comforting and fresh exploration of Christian perfectionism.”

Linda Allcock, Women’s Worker, The Globe Church, London

“New authors have a way of bringing fresh perspectives to stubborn struggles. That is what Faith Chang does with perfectionism. If you’ve found yourself pursuing a good goal (holiness) in an exhausting way (perfectionism), *Peace over Perfection* offers a fresh voice and fresh perspective. Through the hope of the gospel, you’ll learn to pursue godliness in a way that rests in the reality that God is for you—as a good Father. A book rooted in prayer, *Peace over Perfection* invites you to talk with God about your journey and enjoy his presence in your in-process life.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, NC; Author, *God’s Attributes: Rest for Life Struggles*

“Reading *Peace over Perfection* is like arriving at one of the ‘safe homes’ along the path in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—a place of sustenance and encouragement to shut out the terrors and temptations that haunt the ‘Christian perfectionist’ in their journey toward the heavenly rest of the Celestial City. Faith’s welcoming tone gives space to exhale and recalibrate, each chapter pairing a specific challenge of perfectionism with gospel help, proving she’s walked the hard paths too. And while reading this book will provide respite, it won’t leave you resting. The discussion questions and prayer prompts—if sincerely applied—will drive you out the door and on the road again, seeking out other pilgrims along the way.”

Josiah Pettit, Director, Westminster Bookstore

“Full of impactful quotes and anecdotes that will most definitely be shared from my pulpit for years to come, *Peace over Perfection* is written with authentic vulnerability, empathetic understanding, and a deep insight into the heart of God toward his bumbling yet beloved children. Writing as one who has walked and frequently fallen from the arduous tightrope so familiar to fellow perfectionists, Faith invites us off our tightropes altogether, offering us a far better vision that neither downplays our flaws nor cheapens God’s love, but locates us within the firm and tender (nail-pierced) hands of God in order that we might experience the true depths of our sin and yet never without the even higher heights of God’s grace.”

Rev. Andrew Ong, Pastor of Care and Discipleship,
Christ Church East Bay, Berkeley, CA

“Faith Chang is a natural storyteller, a gifted writer, and insightful and encouraging. In my anxious pursuit of perfection, Chang points me to Christ—the founder and perfecter of our faith—and his perfect love casts out my fear.”

Aaron Lee, Editorial Curator, SOLA Network; Social Media
Officer, First Chinese Baptist Church of Walnut, CA

“Reading this book is like sitting down in a comfortable room with your dear friend, both of you tired after a long day. Faith reminds you of how much you are loved and invites you to lean your head on her shoulder while you both take it all in—the weariness of your souls and the grace of your Savior. Accept this invitation to linger on the Lord’s love and rest.”

Remley Gorsuch, Westminster Kids Manager,
Westminster Bookstore; pastor’s wife

PEACE OVER



PERFECTION

To Jeff, for being my safe place.

To Mom and Dad, for your love.

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INTRODUCTION

*Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the
LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*

PSALM 116:7

As I write these words, my stomach is in knots. I have a vague feeling that I'm being neglectful of unspecified but important responsibilities. I'm afraid I'm getting these sentences wrong. I don't fear that my writing will be inconsequential or ignored as much as I fear that somehow my words *will* be read—and end up doing more harm than good. I distrust my motivations and question whether I'm being self-indulgent, or even sinning in putting these words out into the world.

This isn't merely writer's doubt. This is Christian perfectionism.

The thought comes to mind: *have I spent enough time in devotions today to justify spending time writing about God?* Behind the question is the insinuation that if I haven't read the Bible and prayed enough, I'm being a huge hypocrite right now, just writing empty words. It is an iteration of my deepest fear: that try as I might to obey God, I am actually doing wrong by him and bringing him deep displeasure. I don't hear that accusation as loudly as I used to, but it is still locked and loaded, my heart in its crosshairs.

Perhaps you are familiar with that voice of accusation and self-doubt. It's in the persistent, low-grade fear that you're about to unintentionally slip into sin; the constant discouragement that you're not as joyful, selfless, humble, or loving as you should be as a Christian; the feeling that no matter how hard you try, you'll never serve others, evangelize, or enjoy God enough.

Many Christians, often without realizing it, struggle with a kind of spiritual perfectionism. I've seen it in college students gripped with anxiety about missing God's will and in faithful believers in their sixties who feel as though God is always unhappy with them. I've witnessed it in teens doubting the genuineness of their faith because they struggle with sin and in ministry leaders who are constantly suspicious of their own motives. It can manifest in something as subtle as minor decision-paralysis or intensify to the level of religious OCD. The specifics may vary, but the anxiety, guilt, and weariness are the same.

Theologian D.A. Carson describes this perfectionism:

Occasionally one finds Christians, pastors and theological students among them, who are afflicted with a similar species of discouragement. They are genuinely Christ-centered. They have a great grasp of the gospel and delight to share it. They are disciplined in prayer and service. On excellent theological grounds, they know that perfection awaits final glorification; but on equally excellent theological grounds, they know that every single sin to which a Christian falls prey is without excuse. Precisely because their consciences are sensitive, they are often ashamed by their own failures—the secret resentment that slips in, the unguarded word, the wandering eye, the pride of life, the self-focus that really does preclude

loving one's neighbor as oneself. To other believers who watch them, they are among the most intense, disciplined, and holy believers we know; to themselves, they are virulent failures, inconsistent followers, mere Peters who regularly betray their Master and weep bitterly.¹

You can sincerely believe the gospel and love Jesus while struggling, even to the point of despair, with never feeling good enough before God.

A few years ago, in a small corner of the internet, I wrote an article for believers struggling with this kind of Christian perfectionism. Much of what I'd read and heard addressed to Christians struggling with perpetual fear and guilt in their relationship with God had never really resonated with me. I'd read true biblical words by pastors and counselors about shame, anxiety, and perfectionism, but they never felt like they were *for me*. So I wrote some reflections on what I'd been learning, hoping to offer comfort and hope to other weary strugglers.

The article seemed to strike a chord. People let me know how they were helped—how they had the same anxiety and guilt but hadn't known how to address it. One reader commented, "This put into words something I struggled with, but was even unable to diagnose myself. I just had heard it equated to legalism, but I knew I was not justified by my works. So I was confused [about] what exactly was wrong with me and how to fix it." And another: "I am overwhelmed to hear that there may be rest for my soul, not just in the grace of salvation but in my struggle to love sincerely, to be joyful always, to delight myself in the Lord."

This book was born out of that blog post, except that now, several years later, I write with even more conviction that I'm not the only one who struggles as I do, and that God has

much to say to us about this “species of discouragement”—both in his word and through his people in generations past.

The preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, “You will glorify God by resting.”² He was referring to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 116:7:

*Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.*

This is the premise of this book: that there is a rest that God gives to Christians which is ours to return to again and again, and it is found in the way he interacts with us. Together, we’ll explore how God deals with us as imperfect people and find that he is far more merciful, righteous, loving, and gracious than we may have dared to believe. I have great hope that as we behold him and his ways with us, our souls will find the rest we desperately need.

I write as a student of God’s word with a background in Human Development. Where appropriate, I’ve gleaned important points from psychological research on perfectionism to help broaden our perspective as we consider what God has to say to us in the Scriptures. Between chapters, I’ve written out some prayers for different situations that Christian perfectionists often face. You can pray these as you finish each chapter or return to them as needed.

As perfectionism is not something we can work through alone, I’ve included questions for discussing each chapter in a group study or with a friend, as well as resources for further study (p 167). Some readers may also find it beneficial to meet with a mental-health professional if they find themselves needing different specific helps beyond the scope of this book. I’ve tried to note when this may be the case.

This book is for weary believers who strive to serve God but find themselves weeping bitterly over their failures more often than not. It's for those who have been told they are too hard on themselves but don't know how to pursue holiness without a self-berating inner voice. It's also for those who've become so burnt out by the impossibility of living up to God's standards that they are ready to give up. And it is for those who do not struggle in this way but want to understand and help those who do.

With fear and trembling, I offer these meditations for the weary, anxious, scrupulous, never-good-enough Christian perfectionist. I pray that through these pages, both I (writing now) and you (by God's providence reading) will see how God has dealt bountifully with us, so that our souls can return to their rest and, in resting, bring glory to him.

To the one who seeks to love the Father but has trouble sensing his delight.

To the one who trusts in the gospel of peace but is gripped with anxiety about making mistakes.

For the one whom the Spirit indwells yet who despairs about the slowness of her sanctification.

For the one who is deeply loved beyond his wildest dreams yet rarely feels that way.

These words are for you. These words are for us.

CHAPTER 1

THE PERFECTIONIST'S ACHE

*In this fallen world, sadness is an act of sanity,
our tears the testimony of the sane.*

ZACK ESWINE

“T*ell me a story ‘bout God.*” My little girl burrows into her bedsheets, looks up from her pillow, and waits. Taking her cue, I begin our usual pre-nap liturgy.

Me: “In the beginning God created the...”

Together: “... heavens and the earth.”

We speak of each day. The sun, moon, and “twinkle stars” on day four. Every animal we can think of on day six. It’s our own improvised bit of prose, punctuated with the poetry of our practiced refrain:

Me: “And God said it was...”

Her: “Good.”

Me: “And it was...”

Her: “Good.”

To be human is to inhabit God’s good earth. For me, it is to marvel at the generosity of the Creator as I put my toddler down for a nap. I brush her hair out of her face and nuzzle my nose into her belly. She laughs, loud and free. Man and woman were naked and unashamed in the garden (Genesis 2:25). “Behold,” the biblical writer says, “it was very good” (1:31).

My youngest is not yet old enough to understand what comes after our beloved creation story, but her brother is. Watching a video for Sunday school, my little guy twists around in his chair to look away from cartoon Adam and Eve. He is genuinely afraid because he knows the story and anticipates what's coming. "They're going to eat the fruit," he tells me, anxiously. It's not the serpent he's scared of. It's the disobedience.

I don't make him face the screen or say anything to make him feel better about the scene he dreads. That he feels a bit of the horror of the cosmic treason committed by our first parents is not wrong. He will not understand the world in which he's growing up in any other way. He will not understand himself either.

To be human is to inhabit God's good earth, yes—but with the knowledge that it is deeply broken, us included. It is to long for perfection, even as it lies beyond—and behind—us.

PERFECTIONISM'S TOUCH

What is perfectionism? Psychologists who study perfectionism define it as a personality disposition characterized by extremely high standards and overly critical self-evaluations.³ These two characteristics are known as "perfectionistic strivings" and "perfectionistic concerns."

Perfectionistic strivings—a person's high standards and drive for perfection—can be beneficial in circumstances where focused ambition and high standards of performance foster success. But the problem for perfectionists is that perfectionistic *strivings* are accompanied by perfectionistic *concerns*. These include (but aren't limited to) excessive concern about making mistakes, fear of negative evaluations, self-criticism, and doubts about actions.⁴

Most perfectionists don't experience these strivings and concerns in all areas of life. Rather, their perfectionism is focused on select domains such as sports, work, academics, relationships, physical appearance, or—as is my case, and perhaps yours since you've made your way to this book—spirituality.⁵

Growing up, because I wasn't a perfectionist in stereotypical ways, I didn't think I was one at all. I wasn't stressed about grades or overtly competitive with peers. I have never looked particularly put together, and I share pretty openly about my mistakes. Only in recent years have I come to see the way perfectionism has marked my walk with God for decades.

Here's what perfectionism in my spiritual life—what I'll be referring to as “Christian perfectionism” from here out—looks like for me.

Perfectionism is an anti-Midas, turning my moments dark at the slightest touch. I know it's not fair to expect, say, 19-year-old me to have acted as I would now, but when I think about my past, the predominant feeling is often regret. Especially regarding relationships, I'll wonder why I missed a need, or I'll wish I'd been a different person. *I should have cared more, been more attentive, known better.*

Perfectionism brushes up against the desires I have to do good, and what was once a joyful, exciting opportunity to love others becomes beset with self-doubt and questioning. *Am I doing this for the right reasons? Will I be able to do this well enough? Will this person really be helped? What if I do more harm than good?*

In the past, when I have suffered larger failures and committed bigger sins, I have been plunged into despair. *You will never be good enough. You're useless. You're fake. Are you sure*

you're a Christian? You don't love. See? You are so self-centered, even now in your supposed repentance.

Nowadays, my perfectionism tends to be more subtle: a low-level guilt or anxiety lurking in my gut when I'm trying to rest. The feeling at the end of the day that I didn't do all I should have, even when I'm not sure what I neglected.

Perhaps you are familiar with this anxiety and guilt, negative self-talk, rumination over mistakes, or decision-paralysis. These "perfectionistic concerns" crop up in your daily life as a follower of Christ.

Given how distressing our perfectionistic concerns are, it may seem fitting to start this book by saying that the problem lies upstream in our "perfectionistic strivings." That is, the problem is that we *want* to be perfect. And if the problem is our desire for perfection, then the solution to our guilt and anxiety seems simple enough: stop wanting to be perfect.

But is that really it? Are we wrong to want to be perfect? Is the pursuit of perfection a fool's errand—or, even worse, a symptom of people-pleasing, pride, or gospel-less religion, as some might suggest? Or could it be that something more is going on?

As much as it would be simpler to dismiss wholesale our perfectionistic strivings and concerns, the reality is more complicated than that. Our perfectionism hints at larger truths, and before we can find help for it, we need to pay attention to what it's telling us. Rather than silence our desire for perfection, we need to listen to its witness—which is what we'll be doing for the remainder of this chapter.

THE SANITY OF THE PERFECTIONIST'S LAMENT

To be clear, the drive to be perfect can be tied to sinful motives and behaviors. Perfectionism can be rooted in pride and lead

us to project a false image of ourselves for human praise. It also can stem from the false belief that our good deeds add to the finished work of Christ on the cross.

But in my experience, most Christian perfectionists buckling under the weight of a tortured conscience, sorrowful over even the smallest of sins, and desperately wanting to do right by God, do not merely want to be *appear* perfect. Nor are they trying to gain entrance into the kingdom of God with works they know are tainted. Rather, they are longing for a perfection commanded by God himself (Matthew 5:48). If this is you, hear this affirmation: *your desire for perfection is not wrong.*

Years ago, I stumbled upon an editorial by theologian D.A. Carson that shed much needed light on the heart of my own perfectionism. In the piece (which I quoted in the introduction), Carson describes genuine, Christ-centered believers who understand and love the gospel yet still struggle with despair over their sin. Up until then, I'd largely heard Christians address perfectionism in terms of pride or unbelief in the gospel. But Carson writes of a "species" of perfectionism that isn't a matter of ego or doctrine. Rather, those who struggle with this type of perfectionism are "so uncomfortable with their wrestlings [over sin] because they know they *ought* to be better."⁶

This is the crux of the Christian perfectionist's struggle. It isn't fundamentally a desire for praise or a lack of faith in the saving work of Christ. It is that we ought to be better—and we know it.

I feel this as a parent: the weight of my careless words, my snap judgments, my deferring of blame because *I'm the mom, and I'm doing so much for you already.* My grief over my failures to be or do as I ought isn't just about my sense of self. I know

my sin hurts those around me. Most grievously, it is an affront to the Father whom I am meant to image in my parenting.

Such are my deepest regrets, whether with regards to family, friendships, or ministry. They are bound not primarily to a sense of having failed but in how my failures hurt the ones I claim to love most deeply and how they grieve the God who has only ever been good to me.

We who have tasted the riches of God's mercy to us in Christ, who know the great price he paid to redeem us from our futile ways, know there is no excuse for continued acts of rebellion against our good and gracious King. Thus, it is appropriate to respond to our sin with great grief. "In this fallen world, sadness is an act of sanity, our tears the testimony of the sane," writes one of my favorite authors.⁷ Could it be that the Christian perfectionist's lament over imperfection is, in fact, an act of sanity?

I have a good friend who is the kind of Christ-follower I want to be. She is tender-hearted, generous, and compassionate. So when she says she's been convicted by God about being impatient with those around her, I wonder if she's being too hard on herself. Yet something strikes me as holy and sensible in her confessions. She is not trying to be justified before God through good behavior. She is walking in his light, and in her presence, my own rationales for being quick-tempered with my family are exposed as poor excuses. There is something orienting about speaking with a friend who grieves deeply over her sins.

The tears of the Christian perfectionist testify that something is *not* good in this world—that something is broken within us. We were meant to be different, and we know it deep down because this desire to be better—to be perfect—is rooted back in Eden's very good soil.