

The Quest for Perfection:

Seeking to be better than well



*Grove Booklet E182*

*Study Guide*

## Introduction

The quest for perfection is all around us. Perfect bodies, perfect babies and perfect brains. The Grove Ethics Booklet E182: *The Quest for Perfection* explores this quest and its underlying drivers. It seeks to enable readers to identify and consider the quest for perfection in the context of society and in their own lives in the light of scripture. This study guide has been designed to accompany the Grove booklet and to aid individuals and groups to consider the material more deeply. It is divided into six sessions and includes the use of film and other media to help broaden discussion. Groups using this study guide will be encouraged to read relevant parts of both the Old and New Testaments as they work through the different sessions. Hyperlinks to Bible Gateway are included in the text.

Please feel free to circulate and copy this study guide. Copies of the booklet can be obtained from Grove Books at <https://grovebooks.co.uk/>. Grove Books aims to stimulate and equip the Christian community by providing clear, concise explorations of Christian living and ministry in print and e-books and all profits from the sale of this particular booklet will go straight back into the ministry of Grove Books.

## Session 1: The quest

### Before the session

- Read Genesis 1 and 2.
- Read Psalm 139 and Psalm 8.
- Read Chapters 1 and 2 of the Grove Booklet.
- On accepting the Carnegie Medal in 1996, Philip Pullman said "All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by."
  - How do you think stories in books, films and the media shape the world and can shape us as individuals and as a society?

### The session:

#### Opening exercise

- *Discuss:*
  - How do you think stories in books, films and the media shape the world?
  - How do they shape us as individuals and as a society?

#### Bible study

- Read Psalm 139 and Psalm 8.
  - What do they say about being human?
  - What do they say about God?

*Two stories to consider: Renée Zellweger and Justin Gatlin.*

#### *Renée Zellweger*

Read out the story of Renée Zellweger (below)

- What do you feel about the story?
  - What do you think about it?
  - What do you think about Zellweger's response?

## Renée Zellweger

"Did Renee Zellweger have surgery to disguise her ethnic roots?" So runs the Mail OnLine headline. "In having a suspected eye lift, Renee Zellweger has eradicated a key facial feature of her Norwegian Sami heritage to look more traditionally 'European', suggests a top professor of Finnish culture." Whether Zellweger did or did not have cosmetic surgery is the subject of online debate, but the visual evidence is that she looks different. As she states publicly, begging the question whether her happy life has resulted in her looking different or vice versa: "I'm glad folks think I look different. I'm loving a different, happy, more fulfilling life and I am thrilled that perhaps it shows."

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2811390/Did-Renee-Zellweger-surgery-disguise-ethnic-roots-Leading-professor-suggests-actress-Norwegian-descent-Michael-Jackson.html>

<http://www.people.com/article/renee-zellweger-speaks-out-different-look>

## *Justin Gatlin*

- Read out the story of Justin Gatlin (below)
  - What issues of justice and fairness does this story raise?
  - Why do you think sportspeople take drugs to enhance performance?
  - What does this say about society more generally?

## Justin Gatlin

While dietary modification and scientifically tested training regimes are all legal, doping in sport is not permitted and can result in a ban. The duration of a ban varies with different organisations. Concern has been expressed that the benefit to someone using anabolic steroid to improve muscle development outlasts the duration of most bans, and thus doping with anabolic steroids may in fact result in better long term sporting achievement than not doping.

Justin Gatlin is a classic example of someone who has been in the media on many occasions over the last few years, who has used doping to enhance his performance. An Olympic gold medallist, he:

- Tested positive for a banned substance in 2001, and was banned for 1 year
- Tested positive for a banned substance in 2006 and was banned for four years, losing his 100m world record
- In 2012 Olympics he won a bronze medal for the 100m final.

While Gatlin's individual drivers to succeed in this way are not known, the fact remains that the desire to win, to achieve the perfect time, has resulted in Gatlin using means frowned upon by the world of sport, to perfect his body as far as possible into the ultimate 100m and 200m running machine.

*Further discussion areas*<sup>1</sup>

- What do you mean by perfection?
- How important is appearance in society?
- What has your own attitude been towards your body and its appearance?
- How you might you feel and what might you do if you belonged to a competitive class in which over half the students were taking a drug to promote memory and wakefulness for study?
- How does society approach people with disabilities? What biblical stories illustrate Jesus' approach?
- Apart from better bodies, better brains and better babies, where else can you see the quest for perfection in society today?

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<sup>1</sup> Choose questions to discuss from the list below most appropriate for the make-up of your group. It might, for example, not be appropriate to discuss in the larger group the more personal questions, but to leave these for individual reflection or to discuss them in smaller groups.

## Session 2

This session is designed to be repeated using a different film. In doing this, different aspects of the quest for perfection will emerge.

### *Before this session*

- Read Daniel 1-3.
- Read Chapter 3 of the Grove Booklet.
- Ask the group to all watch one of the films below.

### *At the beginning of the session*

- Read Esther 2 and Genesis 29:15-20.
- What does the Bible say about beauty?

### *Discussion about the film*

- Use the film specific discussion questions outlined below.

### *At the end of the session consider the following questions*

- How might this film impact on the viewer's personal quest for perfection?
- How are we as Christians being called to swim against the flow?
- How might Daniel help to guide us?

## The films

- *The Devil Wears Prada*
  - a. What were your immediate reactions to this film?
  - b. Where can you see the quest for perfection in this film?
  - c. What is its impact on the characters?
  - d. What is the underlying message of the film?
  - e. How does your church favour the young and beautiful?
  - f. How might scripture help you explore this area?
- *Gattaca*

In this film, Anton is selected as an embryo using the process of Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD). This process is currently legal in the UK to screen out embryos with certain conditions, e.g. Down's Syndrome, or those who are at risk of certain conditions, e.g. breast cancer.

  - a. What were your immediate reactions to this film?
  - b. Why did Vincent's parents opt for PGD?
  - c. What societal pressures made PGD desirable?
  - d. What were the disadvantages to the genetic focus of the society in *Gattaca*?

- e. Who in our society are similarly disadvantaged?
- f. What do you think of the strap line on the original DVD box : 'There is no gene for the human spirit'?
- g. How might scripture help you explore this area?

### Session 3

This session uses film once more to broaden and deepen understanding of the issues raised in the quest for perfection.

#### *Before this session*

- Read 1 Corinthians 8: 24-27 and Galatians 5: 22-23.
- Read Chapter 3 of the Grove Booklet again.
- Ask the group to all watch one of films below.

#### *Discussion*

- Use the film specific discussion questions outlined below.

#### *At the end of the session/s consider the following questions*

- How might this film impact on the viewer's personal quest for perfection?
- What dangers are raised in the quest for perfection?
  - a. Consider dangers to body, soul (include mind and emotions) and spirit.
- How might the 1 Corinthians 8 and Galatians 5 passages guide us?

### The films

- *Chariots of Fire*
  - a. What are your immediate reactions to this film?
  - b. How is training different to the use of drugs to enhance performance?
  - c. How might a similar story play out if it were to take place today?
  - d. What is the difference between striving to be the best and doing your best?
  - e. When Eric Liddell ran, he felt God's pleasure. Why do you think this might have been?
  - f. How might scripture help you explore this area?
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
  - a. What were your immediate reactions to this film?
  - b. What are the possible advantages and dangers of tampering with memory, either with tablets or other interventions?
  - c. Might the possible advantages ever outweigh the disadvantages?
  - d. How is taking coffee to keep you awake different to taking brain enhancing pills?
  - e. What might be the difference in using drugs to help memory in someone with dementia as opposed to someone wanting to revise more effectively for an exam?
  - f. When does scientific development become 'playing god'?
  - g. How might scripture help you explore this area?

## Session 4

### Before the session

- If possible read all of the book of Ecclesiastes at one sitting.
- Read Philippians 3:12-21.
- Read Chapter 4 of the Grove Booklet.
- Consider: according to Ecclesiastes, what makes life pointless, and what gives life its point?

### Discussion starters<sup>2</sup>

1. Robert Edwards declared (chapter 3 page 11) 'God is not in charge, we are.'
  - a. How true is this claim?
  - b. In what areas is mankind in control?
  - c. What areas are out of mankind's control?
2. What reflections do you have on the quote from CS Lewis on page 14?
3. 'Turn, turn, turn.' Which area disturbs you most in Chapter 4?
  - a. A turning from God: becoming 'gods'.
  - b. A turning from human dignity: idolatry.
  - c. A turning from transformed life: meaningless strife.
4. Reflections on Ecclesiastes:
  - a. How would you summarise the book of Ecclesiastes?
  - b. How topical is it for society today?
  - c. What do you think it has to say to those in pursuit of the quest for perfection?
  - d. What does Ecclesiastes have to say to:
    - The culture of perfectionism.
    - The culture of self-esteem.
    - The culture of individualism.
    - The intolerance of imperfection.
    - The technological imperative.
    - The end justifying the means.
    - Outdated Christianity.
5. Look at the image of the [Tower of Babel by Peter Bruegel](#).<sup>3</sup>
  - a. What aspect of the story in Genesis does this picture capture?

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<sup>2</sup> Feel free to spread this session over two sessions, or select the discussion starters most relevant to your group.

<sup>3</sup> Someone should be able to access this on an electronic device and show it round the group at the meeting.

- b. What aspects does it exclude?
- c. What are your idols and do you try to play God on a daily basis?
- d. How can we avoid idolatry and the desire to displace and play God?

## Session 5

### *Before this session*

Ask each group member to bring along one of the following which relates to the quest for perfection:

- a newspaper article.
- a book.
- a film.
- a web page.

Ask each group member to bring three or four verses from a Psalm that they have found helpful in knowing how much they are loved by God.

### *At the beginning of the session*

- Ask everyone to share the article / book / film that they have brought and why they have brought it.

### *Discussion starters – consider the following*

- How might scripture help you in supporting a friend who is going for major facial surgery to make her look younger?
- How might scripture help you support a friend wanting to have PGD to screen out an embryo with a higher than average risk of breast cancer?
- What might you say to a single parent you know is overdosing on caffeine to stay awake and study for exams to enable them to get a better paid job to support the family? Might this be different if they were using Ritalin? (see page 8)

### *At the end of the session*

- Ask everyone to share the Psalm verses they have brought and why they have brought them.

## Session 6

### *Before the session*

- Read [2 Corinthians 4-5](#).
- Read Chapters 5 and 6 of the Grove Booklet.
- Ask everyone to bring along an image or a sculpture that reminds them of the work God has done and is doing in their lives.

### *Discussion starters*

1. Ask everyone who wishes to do so to share about the work of art that they have brought along.
2. What do you think of the slogan 'Be Patient: God hasn't finished with me yet!'
3. What does it feel like to be a work in progress?
4. What key things has God been teaching you through the study of this booklet?
5. Read [Isaiah 53:1-3](#). How does this passage speak into the quest for perfection?
6. Read [Proverbs 31:10-31](#). How does this passage speak into the quest for perfection?
7. Read [Romans 12:2](#). How does this passage speak into the quest for perfection?
8. How are you driving yourself to perfection and how is God drawing you into wholeness?

### *Question to meditate on as people go home at the end of the study*

Jesus came that we might have abundant life ([John 10:10](#)). We are to be perfect (complete) as our heavenly Father is perfect. God's peace, **Shalom**, is the way things ought to be. What needs to change in your life to enable God to grow in you His **Shalom**? Ask God to continue to be with you and to transform you into the likeness of Jesus.