THE DEADLY PERFECTIONISM TRAP
and how to escape it

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Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from the King James version of the Bible.

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What is perfectionism and why does it matter?

Do you ever think you are too much of a perfectionist? Do you notice this tendency in other people? We are not talking here about anything healthy; this is no wholesome striving for excellence. Perfectionism is a compulsive, unrealistic drive to attain absolute flawlessness.

To confuse the matter, perfectionism comes in many unrecognized forms. You may be a perfectionist without knowing it. And if you do encounter it in yourself or another person, it can be very puzzling. What few people realize is that not only does it affect you in this world, but what is far worse, it can ruin eternity for you. It is more dangerous and prevalent than anyone might guess.

Plato and other philosophers have said that humans possess inborn ideals and standards of perfection. Is this why we are perfectionists? Partly. We are born with such standards, but we know it is impossible to meet them and sense there is a terrible consequence for that. Perfectionism arises out of a desperate, universal need to fend off a fate worse than death for anyone who is not perfect. That fate is eternal separation from God, and no human is exempt from it. Separation from God means that after death a person goes to hell, or the lake of fire.¹
Human nature is the problem. Only if humans were totally pure, sinless and unblemished from conception until death would they not be destined for eternal separation from God. No human can reach this level, nobody can hope to escape through their own efforts. Says Isaiah: “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” (Isaiah 64:6).

Perfectionism is not the answer; and its greatest evil is that it keeps people in the state of separation from God into which they were born; it distracts them from the one real solution. Only the Bible tells the whole story and offers a viable remedy. The God of the Bible, alone, has given us a means to escape the deadly consequence of being flawed. As an act of pure love, He commands us to cover ourselves with his own perfection. This is grace, or unearned favor from our Father, who wants His children to have eternal life in heaven, and not be “cast into everlasting fire” (Matthew 18:8).²

**Part One: the hidden origin of perfectionism**

Part One of this book explains the basis of perfectionism.

**Chapter One:**

**The sin=death/hell equation.** Perfectionism has deep roots generally hidden from view. It arises out of the universal *sin=death/hell equation* born in all of us. Humans may not be conscious of it, but they are innately aware that the slightest imperfection, or sin, separates them from the deity, and destines them for hell. So they try to do the *humanly* impossible: make themselves perfect.

The persistence and compulsiveness of perfectionism, plus some of the bizarre, self-destructive forms it takes—these things only make sense when we look at them as an attempt to deal with a deadly crisis in another world.
Chapter Two:
Defense mechanisms: how perfectionism might not look the way you expect it to. Sigmund Freud’s theory of unconscious conflict and defense help us see perfectionism for what it is: a complex set of armor and weaponry helping humans to both evade and fight the truth. This chapter shows how perfectionism can take many forms in its attempt to fend off the sin=death/hell equation.

Chapter Three:
What does perfectionism have to do with religion? Everything. All religions outside of God’s truth are based on the lie of perfectionism. This chapter looks at the fine print of the world’s major creeds. Without exception, they are founded on the sin=death/hell equation. Not all of them have a specific hell, but in every case they talk of a painful condition beyond this lifetime for anyone separated from deity.

To try to redress the situation, all religions except the Bible are perfectionist, telling humans to do the impossible. They say you must, and can, attain perfection and unite with the deity through your own efforts. Right wing ones say: “Earn it.” Left wing ones say: “Perceive it in yourself.” There is no viable remedy outside God’s Word.

Part Two: the worldly ills of perfectionism
Perfectionism is bad for us in every way. Not only does it keep us on the road to hell, but it impairs our functioning in this world. In Part Two of the book, the focus is on the worldly ills of perfectionism. Some of them have been investigated by secular researchers. By looking at these ills we can appreciate the desperate need filled by perfectionism, with its intense, painful and debilitating symptoms. People cling to perfectionism out of an urgent
need—a compulsion—to do something about the $sin=death/hell$ equation.

Chapter Four:
Worldly ills of perfectionism 1: How it impairs performance. The very act of trying to reach flawlessness can make perfectionists fail to achieve anything at all. This chapter looks at ways that the fear underlying performance-related perfectionism can spoil a person’s achievement.

Chapter Five:
Worldly ills of perfectionism 2: How it impairs a person’s social life. Perfectionism can make for an unhappy social life. This chapter looks at secular research on people-focused perfectionism which shows three distinct interpersonal styles. The three styles are connected with different types of social impairment, also varying in how effectively they ward off depression and anxiety.

Chapter Six:
Worldly ills of perfectionism 3: Psychiatric illnesses. This chapter looks at the way perfectionism is connected with mental illness, causing psychopathology both by its presence and by its absence. Perfectionist tendencies are intrinsically associated with many disorders, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and schizophrenia. But when perfectionist defenses are inoperative or break down under stress, a host of other maladies fly to the surface. These include anger, depression and anxiety.

Part Three: the eternal perspective
Part Three of the book looks at the God-given antidote to perfectionism, and draws important conclusions.
Chapter Seven:
Perfectionism and damnation: the eternal ill that really matters. This brief chapter on perfectionism and damnation points out the triviality of its worldly ills compared to the all-important eternal one.

Chapter Eight:
Grace, the certain cure of all the ills of perfectionism. This chapter talks about the only means of getting out of the perfectionism trap: grace, the unearned mercy of God. The cure is the gospel, the good news that God gives humans the right to cover themselves with His gift of the blood of Christ, the Perfect One.

When humans claim Christ’s perfection, God receives them; all their shortcomings are forgiven. Perfectionism becomes obsolete and loses its grip on them. Now they can experience the intense relief of knowing they have escaped the lake of fire. Heaven is what they can look forward to forever.

Chapter Nine:
Why the secular affirmations are useless before you are saved. Secular theorists recognize that perfectionism is bad for a person, so they have devised some anti-perfectionist affirmations to cure it. In this chapter we see why these ideas bounce off like water from a duck’s back until a person has internalized the gospel. However, they are useful afterwards.

Chapter Ten:
The joy of being a healthy striver. A person can strive for excellence in a healthy, non-neurotic way only after receiving the gift of salvation. This chapter describes the joy of healthy striving.
Chapter Eleven:
The whole story in a nutshell. This chapter sums up the deadly perfectionism trap and its one true remedy. Perfectionism offers false hope to people who sense that imperfection puts them in a situation worse than drowning. Due to ignorance or rebellion, many clutch at a straw that only keeps them on track for the lake of fire. This book has explored the desperation and its only cure: God’s gift is His own imputed perfection found only in the shed blood of Christ.
Part One

The hidden origin of perfectionism
Chapter One

The sin=death/hell equation
and perfectionism

Perfectionism is a deadly trap. It is an unrealistic, unhealthy compulsion to be absolutely flawless, very different from healthy striving for excellence, the subject of Chapter Ten in this book. It has a hidden root, a spiritual conflict concerning the eternal destiny of the entire human race.

Perfectionism arises out of a profound struggle in the psyche. When people make connections between certain inborn truths, the result is what we call the sin=death/hell equation. This equation lies at the bottom of all religions. It says: 1. humans are sinners (i.e., they are imperfect, flawed, or blemished), 2. imperfection separates them from the deity, and 3. this separation destines them for something horrible when they leave earth. The Bible calls it the lake of fire, i.e., hell; 3 other creeds have different names and concepts for it.

When people put these three things together—something they unconsciously try to avoid when they lack knowledge of the only viable solution—they realize they are damned. They are hit by the awful conclusion that eternity in hell lies ahead of them unless they can attain absolute perfection. Even though they sense it is impossible for them to make themselves flawless, the gravity of the situation forces them to try, and try, and try.
Chapter One: The sin=death/hell equation

The sin=death/hell equation fits the facts
This view of perfectionism may not sit well with secular researchers and theorists, or even many in the Bible-ignorant Christian church. However, the idea that perfectionism is caused by an inborn spiritual dilemma is consistent with the Bible and makes sense of the strange perfectionist behavior described in this book. If an inner voice tells you one flaw is all it takes to separate you forever from the deity and destine you for a bad eternity, it is understandable that you would organize your life around erasing all your imperfection, despite the impossibility of success.

So perfectionism is the result of a drive, a compulsion, to escape something worse than anything known in this world. However, thanks to an elaborate network of self-deceptions, a person can be running without even knowing it, blind to what they are running from. “And ye shall flee when none pursueth you” (Leviticus 26:17).

The sin=death/hell equation: a closer look
The vice grip of perfectionism comes from programming born into humans, hard-wired into the mind: the sin=death/hell equation. When humans connect the following three truths together, they know they are doomed:

1. The inherently corrupt human nature
Says David: “There is none that doeth good, no, not one” Psalm 53:3. Most people do not like the idea that human nature is inherently corrupt—especially when the word “sin” is used instead of “imperfection.” If sin is in our genes we cannot get rid of it; we are stuck with being flawed, and this is an idea that offends our pride. We want to look up to ourselves; we want others to do so. But how can that happen when if we are stuck with imperfection?
Sin can be tiny and amoral: There is a common misunderstanding about the nature of sin. It does not have to be serious, and it does not necessarily concern morality. Sin is a state of not reaching the absolute glory of God, to fall short of perfection by even the most infinitesimal degree. The eternal implication of this often unrecognized fact is a very scary one. No human can escape being a sinner; all enter this world on track for the lake of fire. But on the other hand, it can help a person admit the truth if being a sinner takes only one teeny flaw.

Inborn selfishness: However, an honest look at human nature shows it is far from hitting the mark; humans are riddled with flaws of all kinds. Let us just consider selfishness. We humans like to think we are selfless, kind and good, but when it comes right down to where the rubber meets the road, we make our own survival and well-being number one.

The fact that we humans are born selfish is well-established in research on child development. Though it is not generally considered sinful, selfishness goes against the rules God has given humans. The Law (which God gave to Moses, still in effect) boils down to two basic commands: love God (Deut 6:5; 11:1; 11:13; 30:20) and love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18; 19:34). Jesus said: “On these two commandments hang all the law” (Matthew 22:40). Selfishness is the opposite of loving God and your neighbor, meaning that human nature is sinful.

More than just selfish: What is more, we are a lot worse than just selfish. Jesus talked about a number of illicit qualities that come from within the human heart: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murder, thefts, covetousness,
wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.” (Mark 7:21-23). These qualities stop us coming even close to purity.

**Born separated from God:** It is horrible to have to admit that iniquity is the stuff humans are made of, but it is true. We are born with a corrupt nature that cannot be surgically removed without destroying a person. It would be like removing the drive mechanism from a car. Humans are stuck with falling short while they are in this world. It is not that we *do* anything to get ourselves divorced from God. Since the Fall the human race has been in this situation and our tainted nature makes it impossible to remedy it through our own efforts.

By the way, it is a mistake to think that when any human is described in the Bible as “perfect,” this means “sinless.” This is never the case. For example, Noah (Genesis 6:9) is said to be “perfect in his generations.” However, this is imputed perfection Noah gained by sacrificing animals to God. The fact is that Noah was a sinner like the rest of us.

2. **The moral code**
The second element of the equation is the moral code. In spite of the assumptions of many that it is acquired through the socialization process, some secular researchers have produced evidence that this code is inborn. That is just what the Bible says. Our friend Paul puts it: “For when the Gentiles...do by nature the things contained in the law...shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.” (Romans 2:14-15). Our moral code spells out right and wrong, good and bad. The problem is that it contains a terrifying message: that imperfection, or sin, separates us
from God eternally. We are born with this damning message printed in our hearts. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). This speaks of spiritual death and the lake of fire.

3. The lake of fire

The third element of the equation is the lake of fire. Humans’ separation from God would not be nearly as important if the “ugly place” on the other side of death did not exist. Not only is the lake of fire clearly defined throughout the Bible as the final destination for those who fall short of total purity. Its looming presence is central to religion and mythology all over the world. There would not be such smoke without the lake of fire.

The dread of hell and the sense of deserving it are present in the human unconscious from conception. This explains the persistence of the guilt psychoanalysts have noted ever since Sigmund Freud. The Bible-rejecting mental health profession fails to see that this guilt is nothing less than the sense of deserving eternal damnation. Anyone who has tried to erase existential guilt on a psychoanalyst’s couch has found it does not go away even after years of secular treatment. Without anyone telling them about it, humans know that they are unclean, that they qualify for the deadly penalty. This situation could only be avoided if they did what is humanly impossible: become completely pure and clean in every way from conception until death. Who can do it? No human.
Fear of eternal damnation leads to perfectionism
So, when the human mind unconsciously connects the three realities of the sin nature, the moral code and the lake of fire, the result is the sin=death/hell equation. This is the source of terrible internal conflict inside humans. Everyone has it, regardless of religion, culture, age, intelligence or any other characteristic, but some people are better than others at keeping it under wraps. No matter what their background, humans make this connection: I am a sinner, therefore I am sentenced to spiritual death in hell. Although psychological defense mechanisms fight to keep the sin=death/hell equation out of consciousness, it constantly rumbles under the surface. It is the subterranean engine that drives every religion.

When the defenses are not up to the job of hiding the conflict, people suffer anger, anxiety, hopelessness and depression, without knowing why. These painful emotions erupt even though a person may have no conscious sense of the terrible predicament underlying them.

How could humans withstand the daily grind of life, and “keep on keeping on” if they knew that one day they would burn in the lake of fire?

The sneaky human mind
Thanks to some cunning defense mechanisms, humans may have very little surface awareness of the sin=death/hell equation. The inborn material tells us we are doomed, but our minds run away from this painful knowledge. Dread of hell is the main reason, but pride also puts its wily little face into the picture. Pride makes us want to see ourselves as good people entitled to all the best things God has to offer.

The ego, the sin nature, and the moral code
Freud described three conflicting persons or voices inside
all of us: the ego (or decision maker and arbitrator), the id (or pleasure seeker), and the superego (or moral voice). This is a useful way for us to look at human functioning, except we call the trio the ego, the sin nature and the moral code. The negotiator ego wants to keep peace in its ranks, so it goes about the business of devising perfectionist defense mechanisms to quiet the conflict between the sin nature and the moral code.

The moral code says: *The way to connect with God and avoid eternal darkness is to be perfectly sinless.*

The sin nature chimes in: *Not with me around.*

The ego replies: *I’ve got to keep the peace. Both of you must leave. Get out of here. I can sink you!*

The moral code and the sin nature reply: *Not for long!*

Pride, a member of the sin nature “committee” comes forward: *Hey ego, how about some good deeds and penances? Let’s fix the situation...we can become perfect, we have the power to do it.*

Perfectionist defenses are the many different kinds of lies that enable people to think they are not damned. Satan and his minions are glad to help the ego in this process. He draws on the selfishness and pride in our nature, which is a lot more corrupt than Freud’s pleasure-seeking id. This was something he started back in the Garden: “Ye shall not surely die...and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4).
The basic toolbox: The ego develops a toolbox of ingenious psychological defenses to help us think we are avoiding the feared punishment and that all is well. The two main types of defense are: 1. massive repression, or hiding, so we can pretend to ourselves—and others—that we are not sinners; and 2. “pseudo-atonement,” actions that attempt to pay for sin. Neither of these methods relieves the guilt under the surface, but they produce superficial, temporary calm.

Psychological defense mechanisms and Christ
Outside of the grace of God, there are only bad choices for us to make. Perfectionism enables us to limp along from day to day, one person on the outside and another on the inside. Reality would be overwhelming otherwise. Rather than face the terrible truth, we cut off part of ourselves to hide from our flaws or try to eradicate them. As later chapters will show, the cost of the self-deceit is heavy; impeding our work life, relationships, and mental health. Sadly, our stupid pride can make us spit at the only viable remedy when it is offered to us. We refuse to hear of the one genuine, God-given means of escape in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Guilt, the Law, and perfectionism
Guilt is what drives perfectionism. What is guilt, exactly? Guilt is both the state and the feeling of deserving punishment for having broken a law or done something wrong. There is a difference between God’s moral laws and man’s ones. Many acts forbidden by God are not illegal under any civic or criminal codes—increasingly so these days. If you are a perpetrator, it is tempting think you have done nothing wrong. These days, cheating on your spouse would be an example of this—not illegal in the
human sense, but it still creates guilt because it is wrong in God’s eyes.

Actually, it is impossible for humans to transgress and not know it on some level, nor escape facing a consequence. The moral code has a sensory facet, the conscience, which keeps track of all wrongdoing. Corrupt thoughts ring the bell of the conscience, and not only that. God is able to listen in on them. This is something we humans sense but generally deny to ourselves. In fact, we refuse to believe He even exists except, perhaps, on Sundays for an hour or so.

Mark was driving home from the meditation center feeling good. He had a lovely experience there, relaxing deeply into a sense of the beauty of the universe. All his thoughts had become loving and peaceful towards his fellow men. He felt sure he would feel this way forever.

Sins of the mind
The Bible tells us God judges thoughts, not just behavior. Says Solomon: “Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the Lord pondereth the hearts.” (Proverbs 21:2). Our civil and criminal laws cannot apply to what is in our heads because nobody can police the human mind—that is, other than the thinker and God. But God’s laws certainly apply to our thoughts. “Thou shalt not covet” is a sin of the mind, one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5).

Three reasons why our thought process damns us
Our many psychological defenses suppress our awareness of how we think, talk and act; and they blind us to our
divine listener. Thus we can be unconscious of our corrupt thoughts and actions, and of our sense of accountability to God. However, God knows who we really are and, under the surface, we do too. What is more, we know He knows. Deep down we sense the uselessness of trying to blind ourselves to our wrongdoing.

Suddenly a car pulled in front of Mark and he almost had to swerve off the road. Before he realized it, he had shaken his fist at the driver and cursed him.

1. Lack of control
The problem is that the standard is perfection. When Jesus tells us, in the Sermon on the Mount, that it is unlawful to have lustful thoughts (Matthew 5:28), we should see that the standard is too high for us to keep. We lack the control that is necessary. Our thinking process is impossible for us to harness, particularly those deep currents from the heart that cannot be stopped. You can shove an impure thought aside once it enters your mind, but you cannot prevent it from popping up in the first place. In fact, the thought has to appear before you can corral it. And then, how about your adulterous or violent dreams? Regardless of the claims of proponents of “lucid” dreaming, humans have little control of imagery while asleep.

Garbage in, garbage out: There is some truth to the concept of “garbage in, garbage out.” It does help your mind to be cleaner if you avoid corrupt external influences, but it does not make it clean. Reducing the incoming garbage “turns down the volume” on the internal corruption

Says Jeremiah:
“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).
but does not eliminate it. Selfishness, envy, coveting and all the other impure tendencies are hard-wired into us. So the idea of bringing every thought into captivity is a good goal, but an impracticable one.

2. The entire record must be pure
The fact that our entire lifetime record must be unblemished makes the problem insoluble for us. Even if one could have totally purity in thought and action for one single moment—which is impossible, because the human mind has a selfish “operating system” running in the background—one would only be pure for that moment. What counts is the entire record from conception to death.

3. So much below the surface
What is more, the amount of our thought process lying below the surface of consciousness has been likened to the amount of an iceberg under the surface of water. There are simply too many thoughts for us to tackle, and all it takes is one little selfish glimmer to keep us damned.

Ignorance is no excuse
Another feature of God’s Law that tells us how hopeless it is for us to think we can ever make ourselves sinless is the fact that humans are punished for sins they do not know about. God’s Law says you are guilty whether or not you know the law. That is, you can be punished when ignorant of the law, and also when you know the law but do not realize you are breaking it (Lev 4:2, 13-21). It is like the traffic codes. Try telling a policeman you did not know you had to stop when you came to a red light. Or that you did not notice you ran a red light. This will not wash with the officer, and it will not wash with God, either.
Existential guilt
The point is, nobody can escape the indictment in the Law, and this is why humans have “existential guilt.” This is a specific type of guilt, a state and a sense of deserving eternal damnation for being imperfect, even to the slightest degree. It applies primarily to morality but, as we will see later in this chapter, God's Law applies to other forms of imperfection that have no moral aspect whatsoever. Existential guilt afflicts the entire human race because all humans are under the same sentence, damned by sin. All are born eternally separated from God due to imperfection, or sin. Everybody in the entire world—past, present or future—enters this world destined for the lake of fire.

God is pure, holy and undefiled but humans are not. Nobody can come near him in an unclean state, and deep down humans know it. No wonder existential guilt leads to despair, anger, depression, anxiety and so-called low-self-esteem. You sense you are lost and hate yourself for it without understanding why, wrongly blaming your parents or society for your bad self image.

A loser
You feel like a total loser, because you are one. You could be the richest, most powerful person in the whole world yet feel totally lacking in value, true because you cannot win the one battle that really counts. The sense of worthlessness commonly experienced by depressed people begins to make sense here. No human can make him- or herself worthy, or deserving, of salvation from hell. All humans are lost—without Christ, that is.

Your internal “committee members” never lose sight of the fact that you are lost. They are those parts of you sitting in the back row with their eyes open. In that lost state, unless you have some good defense mechanisms to blind yourself,
your motivation to live disappears. Even with good defenses, your life feels shallow and unsatisfying. You avoid thinking about the deeper issues that might open you up to your sense of being doomed.

**Varieties of perfectionism versus the one viable solution**

Everyone seeks a way to escape eternal damnation but perfectionists do not all do it in the same way. Perfectionism comes in many forms, because we humans have a big box of tools to choose from. Broad is the way to destruction and there are many wrong ways to go. All of them appeal to the human ego's desire to be in control of its eternal destiny, subservient to nobody.

As we will see later, one type of perfectionist tries to change, becoming rigid and non-spontaneous, given to obsessions and compulsions but still failing to reach an unreachable standard. Instead of trying to change, another type attempts to hide from the sense of being imperfect—and damned for it—by denial, by self-medication or by escapist behavior using gambling, over-eating, shopping, sex, risk-taking, fantasy or novelty-seeking. There is only one right way to go, a road that is narrow—and very specific—but open to all. Anyone *not* covered by the perfection of Christ cannot approach God, but anyone who puts on that cover can come to Him freely, now and forever. Christ’s perfection is our only remedy. Yet even when it is offered to us as a gift, we refuse to look at it.

A person is a sheep or a goat; either open to God or shut. Sadly, most people are shut. The problem is the barrier we erect against the extended hand of God. It is the human ego, dominated by pride in our nature.

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*Pride makes us say:* I don't need any higher power, thank you. I'll rely on myself.
Chapter One: The sin=death/hell equation

Sin is more than just moral failure
In case anyone still thinks humans can wipe themselves free of sin, let us explore what is really meant by the word.

What is sin?
The word for “sin” is hattath in the Hebrew, and hamartia in the Greek. Either way, it is a term taken from archery, meaning “to miss the mark,” or “to fall short.” People often make the mistake of thinking that if they hit the mark occasionally, this makes them a good person and qualifies them for God’s favor. However, the prophet Isaiah (64:6) says that all our actions or works done for the purpose of trying to save ourselves are “as filthy rags.” What is more, if a person wanted to avoid qualifying as a sinner, they would have to hit the target every single time from conception to death, not just occasionally, or even most of the time. Clearly, this is an impossible task for humans.

What mark?
Sin is more than immorality. The target or “mark” is not confined to moral purity in thought, word, or deed. Even an honest mistake is a sin, because it is not something God would do. Yet sin is even broader than that. In the Pentateuch, or Law, the first five books in the Bible that form the basis for the gospel, God shows us that sin goes beyond morality into other human characteristics.

Physical blemishes as sins
Our non-moral failings also separate us from God. Even a single blemish can do that. This is why a person can fret unduly over a tiny pimple. It is not just pride of appearance, although that is part of it. A pimple is also a reminder of the deadly consequence of imperfection.
Several pictures of this are in the Law God gave to Moses. Deuteronomy 15:21 says the sacrificed animal is to have no flaw. This does not just mean a behavioral flaw, a “bad” cow that kicks you every time you go near it. It also refers to physical characteristics. The sacrifice must not be “lame, blind, or have any ill blemish.” Leviticus 22:22 says the animal is not to be “broken, or maimed, wan, scurvy, or scabbed.” We can notice the picture of Christ here—he was unblemished, meaning sinless, and, unlike many others who were crucified, his legs were not broken. Aside from the fact that a sick animal is not truly a sacrifice, it is clear that God does not want blemishes of any kind, moral or physical, to be in the offering. In fact, God did not allow humans with certain physical blemishes to serve in the tabernacle or temple. In Leviticus 21 it says that Aaron's sons, the Levites, who were set aside (or sanctified) for service, were not to have blemishes, including blindness, lameness, a broken foot, dwarfism, or a flat nose if they were to serve in God's house. These blemishes are a form of imperfection, or sin.

The Law gives us a picture of the very separateness and holiness of God, contrasted with the thorough corruption of the Creation. The Fall caused a rupture between humans and God on every level, yet He is the only source of a remedy.

**God is holy and we are not**

God wants us to see ourselves accurately, so we will run to Him. He wants us to know it is absolutely impossible for us to

We are born blemished, stuck with falling short, unable to fix ourselves. We miss the mark in all ways imaginable. So we humans are separated from God, destined for eternal damnation if we reject the blood of Christ.
be acceptable to Him without the remedy He has provided. The entire Creation has been defiled. Nothing was unaffected by what happened in the Garden. Everything was contaminated, separated from God. The eternal consequence of sin is an inherent problem that humans are totally powerless to change.

Why should I be angry? No good reason. It is my fault if I stay between a rock and a hard place. The blood of Jesus is free for the claiming. It buys me out of eternal damnation and into fellowship with God. There's no better offer in the universe.

Existential anger
Many people are angered by this situation even though they are only dimly aware of it or why. A back row member of their internal committee says: I'm between a rock and a hard place for no fault of my own. No fair!

Their annoyance shows up in the form of road rage or some other worldly vexation. Towards whom is the anger? God, of course, but there is no valid reason for it. Quite the opposite. Most people refuse to look at the fact that He, alone, has provided—for free—a way for humans to attain perfection. He alone does not demand the impossible, that humans make themselves perfect.

The work of Satan
Now, if humans really listen to what they hear inside, they will sense they cannot make themselves perfect. But fear of hell makes one hide from the truth, not to mention pride. Satan mostly works with our pride keep to us on track for hell. He used our pride to manipulate us in the Garden so God would lose the people He made and loved. Now he
works hard to keep humans lost. He helps them think they can accomplish reconciliation with God through their own efforts. *Keep them busy trying to make themselves pure. Help them find good ways to hide. As long as they are occupied they will not see the truth. Keep them off track so they will not find their way to the God of the Bible.*

**Conclusions**

Perfectionism is caused by a dreadful situation: one flaw (or sin) separates humans from God and destines them for the lake of fire. This is what we call the *sin=death/hell equation*. On a deep level, humans sense that they are doomed by their very nature because the penalty for sin—any sin at all—is death and the lake of fire. Nobody has to teach them this; the elements of the equation are born into the human psyche.

The *sin=death/hell* equation causes a special kind of guilt—existential guilt, the universal, unconscious awareness of deserving eternal damnation. Without people realizing it, existential guilt drives them into perfectionism. However, the corruption, or sin, that separates us from God is pervasive. It applies to thoughts as well as behavior, and to every type of flaw. We humans sense that we cannot purify ourselves, yet it does not stop us from trying in ways that are irrational, obsessive, compulsive and harmful.

Perfectionism comes to exert a stronghold over us, a never ending vice grip. Through it, one can hide from the truth and achieve, at least, the illusion of making oneself perfect. This makes Satan happy; he is glad to help us delude ourselves that the situation is in our hands, that we can fix it, and that all is well. He wants to keep us running because he knows that if the terrible dread arising from the
sin=death/hell equation comes to the surface, it might spur us to find the truth about Christ.

Satan, eternally envious, got humans lost and he wants them to stay that way. He does his utmost to stop us discovering that God will impute His own perfection to those who claim Christ’s atoning death on the cross—the essential blood payment explained in Chapter Eight. He wants to drag us into the fire with him and not know how easy God made it to avoid this fate.
Chapter Two

Defense mechanisms: how perfectionism might not look the way you expect it to

Who can face the truth? It is terrible to be conscious that one’s slightest imperfection keeps one on track for the lake of fire. How could anyone get through the day thinking that? It would fill one with agonizing despair and kill the motivation to even get out of bed. So until people discover the one, genuine way out, they settle for something that keeps them blind to the truth. That is perfectionism, a massive constellation of defense mechanisms that are the subject of this chapter. Perfectionism enables humans to float above the sin=death/hell equation, but it can give rise to some very strange behavior. That is why this defense equipment does not always seem to fit its name.

There is a real, viable way out: God-given salvation through Christ. But until a person embraces it, they are driven to perfectionism. You put your head in the sand, or you try to shovel your way to freedom, or both, all the time knowing, deep down, that your efforts are futile. Like psychiatric medications, these tactics can keep people more or less sane, but they bend them out of shape. Many forms of perfectionism do not fit the common stereotypes, as the story of Ellen shows.

The story of Ellen: Ellen complains that other people are her biggest problem. She says she has no close friends. She is actually very lonely and somewhat depressed by this, but
she does not admit it to herself (denial/repression; isolation of affect, i.e., separating facts of her life from emotions). She says she is stressed out by other people and does not want to upset herself by being around them (denial, rationalization). Assistants in stores are rude and unhelpful. Businesses she calls on the phone only give her the runaround. Nobody these days is any good (projection, blaming, and devaluation). It is not like the old days when people had good manners and really cared (idealization of the past). Everyone is out for the money (projection of her own motives, devaluation).

Ellen states that she is not like other people at all. She has unusual powers that set her apart and make her superior to the rest of the world (delusions of grandiosity, omnipotence and godlike perfection countering a sense of sin and powerlessness). This, she says, is why she should not be expected to tolerate ordinary mortals (justification, grandiosity).

Ellen brags that she must be a martyr for allowing her elderly aunt to live with her, although she is not forthcoming about the fact that she collects an exorbitant rent from the old lady (grandiosity, denial of own greed, delusion of doing a morally good deed to pay for sin). The aunt spends all her time alone in her room watching TV, in a state of neglect.

In reality, the aunt has money tucked away in various bank accounts, Ellen is sole beneficiary, and she is afraid the old lady will spend it all if she does not keep her in her house (rationalization about her own selfish motive).

Sometimes she considers “helping” her aunt to leave this world, even to the point of seeking internet information on lethal drugs, yet she displays exaggerated affection towards the old lady (reaction formation, i.e., substituting behavior
diametrically opposed to sinful thoughts). Ellen says she set up this living arrangement to “assist” her “selfish” aunt, who, despite all Ellen’s efforts, is unfairly exploiting her. The aunt’s “meanness” is why Ellen avoids her whenever possible and ignores her basic needs (projective identification, falsely attributing one’s own sin to another person, then justifying wrongful behavior on the basis of this projection).

**Comment:** Ellen is a perfectionist, but she is not the stereotype who aims for perfect achievement. Her main goal—an unconscious one—is to be able to think she is not a sinner, i.e., that she is perfect, therefore not damned, because of what she is not, rather than what she is or has attained. To achieve that aim she is using several of the atypical perfectionist defense mechanisms to be discussed in this chapter, including a delusional form of grandiosity. Thanks to the defense of repression, the “cellar door” generally keeps her sense of being a sinner under the surface, but some of that awareness seeps upwards, needing other means of treatment. That is where Ellen's rationalizations, projections, delusions, reaction formations and all the other “second step” defenses come into play. Also we see here “other-oriented perfectionism,” discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. To protect her self-image, Ellen consistently sees herself in the right and others in the wrong, a stance motivated by both fear and pride.

**Perfectionism: a defense mechanism cocktail**
Defenses help us deceive ourselves in many ways: that there is no damning Law or hell, that we are not sinners, that our performance can be perfect, and that we can earn our way out of hell. Jeremiah told us: “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Defense mechanisms enable us to fool not only others but also ourselves.
A hydraulic conflict
The sin=death/hell equation continually tries to come up and out in the open. That is a “hydraulic” conflict, it has energy, it continually pushes upwards and outwards. God wants us to face reality, yet the truth of our situation is very threatening. We cannot fully face it until after receiving the gospel, yet we have to see at least a little bit of the truth to get saved. God is the one who can break through this “Catch 22" situation for us.

Two major types of defense mechanism
Exactly what are psychological defenses and how do they operate? This is where the work of Sigmund Freud is useful, despite his atheism. He clearly saw the many defense mechanisms, those subterfuges in the human mind—places or devices to hide in. They are there for a reason: to enable functioning in this world and avoid being crippled by what we know deep down inside.

In the box on the right, Sigmund Freud points out that there has to be some terrible threat underlying the anxiety psychoanalysts find in their patients. He admits that they have been unable to determine what it is through psychoanalysis.12 This is no surprise, considering that the psychoanalytic movement turned its back on the Bible. Freud was right about the hiding role of psychological defense mechanisms. Although some of his theories have been discredited, his ideas are useful if applied in a distinctly un-Freudian, biblical way. Freud's model helps us see

"What it is that the ego fears from the external and from the libidinal danger cannot be specified; we know that the fear is of being overwhelmed or annihilated, but it cannot be grasped analytically."
perfectionism as a screen, a network of armor and weapons helping humans to flee from truth too hard to face otherwise.

**Two tasks of defenses:** Perfectionist defense mechanisms achieve two main things. One is to provide armor that keeps people unconscious of the dread existential situation they are born into, so they can carry on as if nothing is the matter. The matter is sunk under the surface of consciousness, using what Freud called “repression” and other defenses we call *hiders* that keep people blind to the truth.

The second job of the defenses is to provide weapons, actually duds, to give the illusion a person is fixing the problem. They are what we call *pseudo-atoners*. They give the illusion of perfecting oneself or wiping out the penalty for sin through one’s own actions. In addition to these two major types, several “second step” *hider* defenses keep peace on the surface.

**A. Hiders: Repression and other defenses enabling us to avoid the truth**

People like Ellen who mostly use *hider* defenses are not the typical perfectionists who strive for flawless performance, yet they are definitely worthy of the name. They are driven by the same unrecognized need to escape the uncleanness leading to eternal damnation. The main difference is they are trying to hide from their imperfection rather than trying to be perfect. In one way or another, perfectionism is rejection of the “sinner” designation.

*Hider* defenses stuff painful truths “under the rug.” They keep the *sin=death/hell equation* out of consciousness using denial, suppression and repression of the truth. These three processes work from the surface of consciousness downwards (denial is generally semi-conscious) to keep one blind to
reality. The goal is to lie to oneself: *I am not a sinner*. This 
is done by deceiving yourself you do not break the rules, or 
that if you do it does not matter too much.

You might help yourself get there by pretending there is no 
binding Law, especially one that sends you to the lake of fire. 
On a more tricky level, you could deny being a sinner 
without denying the Law. You screen your eyes from your 
true nature and use some “second step” defenses like 
projection and displacement that deflect the hidden 
information. This lets you disown your sin and stick it on 
someone or something else.

A third category actually involves actually admitting one is a 
sinner but denying the reality of the moral code and hell. 
People hiding in addictions tend to fit this less common type: 
*I’m a sinner. So what? There’s no hell, I can get away with 
doing what I like.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The three <em>hider</em> lies:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So what if the law damns sinners? I know I'm not one. I'm a pretty decent person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't believe in morality. I just do what I like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of course there is no hell. That’s just an idea those religious nuts dreamed up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All you have to do is deceive yourself with the first of the 
three lies in the box above. It not only takes the teeth out of 
the other two but it appeals to the pride in human nature. 
Keep up the facade and you will be able to function relatively
well, except in a deep inner place in your psyche where there will be acute unrest. But up on the surface, everything can be relatively bland and calm. Hiders help you be an ostrich with your head in the sand. You keep the three key elements of the \( \text{sin} = \text{death/hell equation} \) out of sight below the level of active consciousness. As long as your mind can stay above the fray and not be bothered by anything underneath, you can feel somewhat safe, but you will not be at peace.

There is no peace because of the rumbling under the surface. The sense of deserving hell continues to exert upward pressure. Sooner or later it will seep out or break through the defense lid to cause problems unless “resurfacing” occurs.

When we look at perfectionist religions in the next chapter, we will see that several of them lean heavily on not only denial of sin, but also rejection of the Law and hell. This is particularly true of the left wing ones that reject the idea of a punishing deity. They include Zen Buddhism, Humanism, and the liberal forms of Christianity. Adherents in these groups say: \( \text{I'm not a sinner; I'm not under the Law; and there is no hell.} \)

**The big three: sin, the Law, and hell**

1. **Denial/suppression/repression of one's sin**
The very idea of being imperfect, i.e., a sinner, is threatening. It causes tremendous fear and hopelessness deep inside. So most types of perfectionism involve, at least, repression of the knowledge of being a sinner. We see this in Ellen.

**What are the bad effects of denial/repression of sin?**
Denying that you are a sinner stops you learning from mistakes. It ruins your work and personal life. You never learn to be a better employee or boss. Your marriage suffers
because you keep on making the same old mistakes (see Chapter Five). But the real damage is that denial of sin keeps you away on track for the lake of fire.

**Ninety nine percent perfectionism. A bit flawed?**
One interesting phenomenon is “ninety nine percent” perfectionism. Few people consciously think they are completely sinless, or that they truly ought to be for any reason. Most can admit to being at least a bit flawed. This is because they think God will let them into heaven as long as they have never robbed a bank. They even reckon they are so close to perfection that it will be easy to slough off that last little bit of dross. Thinking they are in no danger, they say: *I’m not perfect, just very, very good.*

As long as you are blind to the thoroughness of your depravity, you think you can step outside it and come out new and clean, like shedding the skin of a snake. The problem is, the corruption in human nature is much more than skin deep, and the back row of your unconscious mind, your internal committee, is aware of it.

The fact is, God is far more than “a reasonable sort” (see the box above). He is tough and unyielding in one sense, but merciful and loving in a far greater way. God makes a gift to us of the saving death of Christ that purchases our freedom—a present that cost Him dearly.
2. Denial of the Law
Perfectionists also hide from knowing there is a damming law (i.e., the Law). Since they cannot get rid of what is printed deep down in their hearts, they dumb down or outright deny the moral code, particularly the part of it that says the penalty for sin is eternal separation from God. “For the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23).

If there is no Law, there is no such thing as sin, or lawbreaking, and there is no punishment. The term for this is antinomianism, meaning “against the presence of a law.” When you do not know the forgiveness of God, you try to relieve guilt by loosening morality. Moral relativism is a form of antinomianism that says there are no moral absolutes. It is so popular today that it is taught in the public schools. Moral decisions are said to depend on the situation; there is flexibility in right and wrong, so even murder might be O.K. under the right circumstance. The Pied Piper is leading our children away.

Part of the hardening of the heart that the defense mechanisms achieve is sealing over the inborn moral code to stop people seeing the immorality of their actions. However, there is a natural moral law born in the human heart that cannot be purged from it, and that law specifies death and hell as the penalty for sin.

3. Denial of the lake of fire
Humans dare not believe in the lake of fire, so they avoid all mention of it except as an expletive or a joke—humor can be a pretty good defense mechanism. Yet Jesus mentioned hell several times, quoting from prophets such as Isaiah, who said: “And they shall look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring
unto all flesh.” (Isaiah 66:24) (see endnote #2). One can ask of doubters: You cannot be sure there is no hell, can you? Why is it featured in mythology and religions all over the world if there is no reality to it?

**Other truths commonly denied or repressed**

We have looked at denial, suppression and repression of 1. sin, 2. the Law, and 3. hell, the elements that add up to the *sin=death/hell equation*. Other parts of reality closely related to them also get pushed out of consciousness:

**Denial of death**: Several Freudian theorists have said that all mental illness comes from our denial of mortality.13 These theorists are on the right track but they do not go far enough. What matters is beyond physical death: the lake of fire.

**Denial of eternity**: Humans throw away their birthright for a mess of pottage just like Esau. Short as the life-span on this earth is, humans display a staggering lack of concern about what might lie beyond it. Why? Because they sense the lake of fire out there.

**Is whistling in the dark perfectionism?**

Of course not. The more you push the *sin=death/hell equation* below the surface of consciousness, the more of a stretch it is to describe what is happening as perfectionism. Beyond a certain point you are just whistling in the dark, refusing to know *anything* bad about your situation.

**Second step hiders**

What do you do after you sink the truth? You concoct a lie using “second step” hiders. This type of defense distorts the repressed information and sends it somewhere else.
Displacement
Displacement is a widely-used second step hider, similar to projection. First deny/repress the awareness of being a sinner, then displace your sin on something else, often a tangible thing you think you can control. For example, the anorexic displaces sin on body fat, and uses fasting as a way to try to get rid of sin (see Chapter Six).

Splitting
Good/bad splitting is another second step hider. A person who engages in splitting views situations or other people as either all good or all bad, black or white with no shade of grey. Generally this is in the sphere of morality or achievement, but it can be interpersonal, e.g., an unrealistic desire for another individual to always “be there for you.” Splitters reject that person the first time they are let down.

The splitter wants to believe there are perfect people in the world. He puts a person on a pedestal and thinks they can do no wrong until their inevitable first misstep, after which that person turns from white to black in their eyes. Once the god falls from the pedestal, he is to be shunned; there is no tolerable shade of grey; and no forgiveness. The ideal projected on that other person has proven false, so the splitter feels compelled to completely reject them. By doing so, splitters protect their belief in the possibility of human perfection.

Amnon and Tamar: Splitting occurs in the Old Testament account of the rape of Tamar by her half brother, Amnon (II Samuel 13). Amnon adores Tamar until he lures her into his house and rapes her. After this he unfairly subjects her to his contempt and rejection. In this instance, Amnon is using an additional defense mechanism—projection of his own
wrongdoing. He is projecting his sin on Tamar, making her the wrongdoer in his place.

Splitting is used for situations as well as people. Events are all good or all bad, especially outcomes of attempts at perfect performance. As soon as there is even a tiny failure, this ruins everything. All is lost; the absolutist all-or-nothing thinking of perfectionism takes over, reflecting the unconscious sense that it only takes one flaw to separate a person eternally from God.

**Projection**
This second step *hider* enables people to project their sin on others as if they were a movie screen. Other people are to blame, they become the bad guys, while the projectionist detaches from his sense of being a sinner and consciously thinks he is innocent.

What is more, finger-pointing is a sin. Jesus talks of the wrongness of pointing to the speck in your neighbor's eye while ignoring the beam in your own eye (Luke 6:41-42). Perfectionist religions are full of people who do this, and, ironically, grace-filled Christians who do not do it are often wrongfully portrayed this way in the media by finger-pointing journalists.

**Detachment**
Threatening material does not need to be completely hidden if it can be subjected to intellectual detachment, which separates emotions from reality. This defense is a goal of certain eastern religions and meditation techniques. A person can think of something potentially threatening and disconnect from an emotionally charged reaction. Sin is neither good nor bad, only neutral, and it has no bad consequence. “I’m a sinner and really it is O.K with me. The dark side is merely a
part of human nature that one should accept as a natural thing.”

Other second step *hider* defenses
There are many other second step defenses that come into play: rationalization—*well, everybody does it so it is not a sin*; intellectualization; justification; understatement—*just a tiny white fib*; reaction formation (Ellen); and compartmentalization, separating the elements of the *sin=death/hell equation*—no pain as long as the dots are not connected.

Delusions
Perfectionist delusions are a more extreme type of defense, a characteristic of psychosis, e.g., grandiosity—*I’m a god, perfect in every way*; delusions of having control—*I can make myself totally flawless*; or delusions of being controlled—*demons made do it, I’m not responsible*.

**Pseudo-atonement**

A major self-deceit is that you can escape the lake of fire by paying for your own sin: that is *pseudo-atonement*, fake self-justification.

A second type major type of perfectionist defense is *pseudo-atonement*. We call this “pseudo” because it fakes self-justification. The mirage is gained through a mixture of achievements, morally good deeds, self-cleansing and self-punishments. You deceive yourself that you are wiping your record clean and getting right with God.

*Pseudo-atonement* works in a way that is different from *hiding*, although the two operate hand-in-hand. Stuffing all your baggage in a cellar is not the best way to deal with it if
the door keeps trying to burst open. However, the pressure can be released when you deceive yourself you are earning your way out of the lake of fire. That way, less energy goes into pushing against the cellar door. So you use pseudo-atonement, a more mature, pointed type of defense that is action-oriented, targeting the source of the guilt.

Secular views of pseudo-atonement
Constructive forms of pseudo-atonement are known merely as “active perfectionism” in the secular field, which fails to recognize the goal of paying for one’s sins. Also, when certain researchers talk about an “adaptive” role for perfectionism, they mean forms of pseudo-atonement that can be useful to society. However, much pseudo-atonement, particularly the paradoxical self-punishing type we will look at later, serves no useful social purpose and is often highly destructive to both the individual and society.

Pseudo-atonement, Freud and sublimation
Pseudo-atonement is related to what Freud called sublimation. He pointed out that there are more mature, transformative, focused defenses than massive, global, repression which pushes threatening material “under the rug.” Freud theorized that the institutions of the civilized world came from mature transformation of the basic sex drive. This drive was threatening because it was forbidden by society. However, when channeled into creative action, it was good for mankind and no longer threatening to the individual.

However, he was wrong in thinking that a threatening, immoral urge, i.e. a sin, could be transformed into a constructive one. An urge remains an urge, and a sin remains a sin. In reality, the constructive activity tries to pay the penalty for sin. It does not replace a sinful drive with a moral one. As stated above, not always is the activity constructive.
Suffering and self-punishment have the same underlying goal as constructive forms of \textit{pseudo-atonement}: paying the penalty for sin. This self-destructive type of defense often incurs considerable costs to the well-being of the individual and to society in the form of medical care, etc.

\textbf{Pseudo-atonement versus real atonement}

A person uses \textit{pseudo-atonement} to pretend they are reconciling with God and avoiding the lake of fire. They create the illusion or delusion of paying the eternal penalty for sin in this lifetime. However, no human effort in this world can make such a payment. In the Law, justification for sin is only satisfied by spiritual death—separation from God. Deep down humans know this. They sense the impossibility of earning their own release, but that does not stop them from trying. Of course, when humans rely on their own efforts to pay the penalty for their sins they suffer spiritual death in the lake of fire. Humans cannot pay \textit{and} escape that horrible place.

\textbf{Are people conscious of trying to pay for their sin?}

People can only be conscious of striving to pay for their sin if they are involved in a religion that makes this explicit. For people not in such a religion, \textit{pseudo-atonement} mostly operates below the surface of consciousness. The existential motive is unrecognized by the person, whose actions nevertheless try to fend off eternal damnation. However, in no case does this defensive behavior convince the deep members of a person’s internal committee, those commentators in the furthest region of the unconscious mind. The committee whispers: \textit{It’s all futile. You cannot cleanse yourself. You’re doomed.}
The three types of pseudo-atonement

*Pseudo-atonement* tries to gain the *reality* or at least the *illusion* of atonement with God. In other words, you trick yourself into trying to pay for sin, and you trick yourself that you are being successful at it. There are three major forms of *pseudo-atonement*: “good” works, self-cleansing, and suffering. People add them to *hiders* and second step defenses in creative combinations to make their own cocktail of self-tailored defenses.

1. “Good works”

Though “good works” might appear altruistic and generous, their aim is selfish. One purpose is to help you think you are transforming yourself into a good person. Another has a legal sense, the cancelling of debt created by bad deeds through doing good deeds. Whichever it is, you are doing “good works” unconsciously thinking they will enable you to avoid the lake of fire, deluding yourself that you are earning your way out of eternal separation from God. “Good works” cover a wide range of human activity and fall into two main camps: “flawless accomplishment” and moral types.

“Flawless accomplishment”

One type of “good work” is “flawless accomplishment”—of course, no human work can ever be flawless, but that is the goal. The concern might not be for moral value, so the task could be writing the perfect novel, playing the perfect piano solo, creating the perfectly clean floor, or even pulling the perfect bank heist, although there is usually a socially recognized purpose. Whatever it is, moral, immoral or amoral, the “good work” can have no blemish. This is what is typically understood as perfectionism, because its unrealistic goal of totally impeccable performance is what we commonly associate with the tendency.
Moral “good work”
Another type of “good work” is the moral kind, where the virtuous aspect is stressed more than flawless execution. All kinds of “good works” fit in here: charity efforts, donations, feeding the hungry, medical missions, etc. All involve apparently sacrificial actions or giving based on the false notion that such deeds cancel out the sin debt. A common mistake is the idea that as long as one’s good deeds weigh more heavily on the cosmic scale than one’s bad deeds, one will escape eternal punishment. What is wrong with this idea? We have to look at two things:

i. *Karma versus mercy:* Apparently God put the knowledge that humans reap what they sow in the human heart (Proverbs 22:8; Galatians 6:7). This is similar to the cosmic score card known as *karma* in the eastern religions. The law of *karma* is true in a worldly sense but not on the eternal level. Humans do reap what they sow in this world, but they are innately aware that their eternal destiny is *not* in their hands. If justice were applied, all humans would go to the lake of fire as sinners. Only through the *mercy* of God can we avoid this destination, which is the penalty for imperfection or sin. Mercy and justice are quite different, and the Bible is the only place one can go for mercy.

ii. The problem of intention in moral “good work:”
Intention is a huge problem when one is using moral “good works” as a means of trying to cleanse the record. For the sake of argument, let us say that *part* of your intention might be pure and altruistic. However, most of your motivation is selfish because its main purpose is for you to escape eternal separation from God. He is the one you are unconsciously trying to please, but only for your own benefit. If you are to think yourself successful at cleansing your record, you have to deny the fact that God looks not only at your actions but,
more importantly, at your intention. In other words, you must push your sense of God away, because He regards your selfish motive as another strike against you. Your heart is what counts, and your motives only become unselfish when you are inspired to do what pleases Him out of love for the One who rescued you.

Only when you know you are saved through the shed blood of Christ do you act out of unselfish motives. Then you will experience love and thankfulness towards God. And then you will love your neighbors and want them saved, too. Until then, your selfish nature dominates; you are out for yourself, consumed by the need to escape the lake of fire.

Human deeds cannot atone for sin, and their illusive power quickly wears off. A part of you still thinks: *that was not enough. I still didn’t hit the mark.* The unsaved “do-gooder” can never have more than temporary peace of mind. Soon the need to give more and give better will return.

2. Suffering and self-punishment
Another type of *pseudo-atonement* involves sacrifice, suffering and self-punishment. This type may seem out of place but it is nevertheless a common form of perfectionism, usually unconscious except in perfectionist religions. Those who go this route seek out opportunities to experience pain and deprivation. They cannot receive enough suffering, penances or punishment. Why? They rely on this to believe they are paying the penalty for sin, but part of them is unconvinced.

It is like sending yourself to jail. Internally, you know you deserve eternal punishment, so you try to pre-empt God by persecuting yourself in this world. If you are chastised enough before you die, you think He will not have to send
you to the lake of fire. You are wrong, and deep down you know it, but the illusion helps you feel all right for a while.

This form of pseudo-atonement is the unconscious motive for many behavior pathologies. These include masochistic behavior, self-defeating personality type, avoidance of success, self-sabotage, co-dependant relationships, choosing or remaining with an abusive partner or batterer, and self-harming behavior such as cutting and hair-plucking (Trichtillomania). Many of these pathologies appear in Borderline Personality Disorder (see Chapter Six).

“Cutting” involves making incisions in the skin that draw blood. What is interesting is that it appears to be a literal blood sacrifice. Why do cutters say they feel a sense of relief afterwards? If you ask them, they say they have no idea. It makes sense that a part of them knows God requires a blood payment as the penalty for sin. However, they are deluding themselves that their payment is acceptable to God. In the Law, God forbids the sacrificial blood to be of human origin—before Christ’s pure and sinless blood was shed, only the blood of “clean” animals was tolerable to God.

3. **Self-cleansing**

In the previous chapter, we saw how Mark was foiled in his attempt to cleanse his thoughts through meditation. From that example, it is clear that a person cannot fulfill a desire to cleanse their mind and think only positive thoughts.

Self-cleansing can involve actions that try to remove a proxy for sin rather than doing a good deed or paying a penalty. Sin is displaced on something else, which becomes the target of cleansing efforts. This form of pseudo-atonement is known in the secular world as the defense mechanism of “undoing,” although its spiritual goal is not recognized in that realm.
For example, we see the bulimic purging to gain the illusion of undoing the sin of binging; and the obsessive-compulsive, constantly washing hands.

**Why people choose suffering rather than good deeds**
What makes a person choose the suffering type of pseudo-atonement rather than the good deed type, when it would seem to make life so much harder? Anecdotal evidence from the author's practice suggests the role of early experience.

This odd form of perfectionism is likely to arise from abuse or excessive punishment in a person's childhood. It has been established in research that people who were abused as children by parents and others are likely to become abusers as adults. They are also likely to have—and be attracted to—partners who will abuse and mistreat them, a phenomenon that got much attention in the 1970s and led to a rash of books on women who “love too much,” etc. The fact that self-punishers seem to be drawn to the role of victims is usually explained by low self-esteem. This view does not go deep enough. The real reason is that self-punishment is a form of pseudo-atonement providing temporary relief from existential guilt.

**Standard explanation versus pseudo-atonement**
It is generally thought that the mechanism for a person's self concept is social learning: the looking-glass self. A typical explanation when this is applied to adults abused as children is that mistreatment causes the child to experience low self-esteem, which influences later behavior. The pathway would be: parents mistreat the child, parents must therefore see them as bad, they see themselves in their parents' eyes, therefore they believe they must be bad and deserving of punishment. They are unworthy of anything good in their own eyes, including a healthy relationship later in life.
However, a large body of research does not support strong relationships between adult self-esteem and parental treatment as a child, including being abused by parents.¹⁹

From our perspective, it is likely that there is a learning effect, but one that is very different. The sense of unworthiness does come into it, but only in that humans unconsciously know they are unworthy of escaping eternal separation from God. According to our concept of *pseudo-atonement*, the reason abused children seek punishment as adults is that they have become accustomed to its guilt-relieving effects through the mechanism of secondary reinforcement.

Existential guilt is present from infancy, because at no age is a person exempt from the sense of deserving eternal punishment. The *sin=death/hell equation* explains why children already see themselves as stained prior to being abused. The author's experience of therapy with children who are/have been abused is that they are conscious of being unworthy and deserving of maltreatment—they say they are abused and punished because they are “bad” kids. In reality this sense of deserving punishment is inborn existential guilt, which is relieved when the children are abused. The maltreatment then becomes a secondary reinforcer connected in the child’s mind with guilt relief; they unconsciously assume abuse by a parent is the anticipated, dread eternal punishment. This leads to the habit of seeking worldly punishment as *pseudo-atonement*.

This explains why adults abused as children have a pattern of seeking punishment rather than the more constructive forms of *pseudo-atonement*. The role of abusee has become familiar and paradoxically rewarding to them, even though their superficial reaction to it may be negative. On a
conscious level, they may hate it, but at an unconscious level they seek it because it offers temporary guilt-reduction, and this makes it strangely attractive.

Moreover, the fact that suffering alleviates guilt explains why a person would be drawn to increasingly painful forms of punishment. The greater the suffering, the more one can think the sin debt is paid off, and the greater the temporary relief afterwards.

The inner voice says: What a relief, I got that punishment I'm so afraid of. Now I'm free. God won't send me to the lake of fire.

Sadly, people commit suicide to gain martyrdom in certain perfectionist religions. They have been deceived by the myth that this completely covers their sin.

What makes people choose “good works” as a form of pseudo-atonement?
The author's clinical experience has been that people raised in families where high achievement and good works are modeled and valued are more likely to engage in a “good works” form of pseudo-atonement.

Initially, they perform for parents out of either love or fear of rejection and disapproval. Later they adopt this as a perfectionist defense, the illusion their works are paying the penalty for sin. They believe that either the attainment of perfection (amoral) in their work life or engaging in morally good deeds will clean their record in God's eyes and save them. The attraction to moral behavior is particularly strong in those raised in perfectionist religions steeped in the idea
that leading a life of giving and caring for others leads to salvation.

**The fine line between good deeds and suffering**

There is a fine line between good deeds and suffering. For example, perfectionists on the high achievement and moral “good deed” tracks often punish themselves by working too hard. They can drive themselves literally into illness and death.

People usually use a combination of works and suffering in an unconscious way. The exception to this is in perfectionist religions where “good” deeds and penances are an explicit part of the rituals that attempt to atone.

**When perfectionism works:** When perfectionist defenses are working well, a person can appear relatively sane. Nevertheless, there are painful “side effects” in personal relations, work and mental health, as later chapters will show. There has to be a powerful reason why the human ego chooses this pain over consciously facing the truth. Freud knew it was something terrifying, deep in the psyche, but only the Bible explains it.

**When the defenses weaken or break down:** When perfectionist defenses break down, the person has a pathological reaction. Sometimes one setback, one mild failure, is all it takes to burst the perfectionism bubble. The details of the *sin=death/hell equation* may stay unconscious, but feelings about the situation flood up to the surface.

A person experiences a sense of being doomed without understanding why. Going along with this are feelings of worthlessness, depression, anxiety, and anger that are out of proportion to what seems to be the precipitating event. But
these emotions make perfect sense as reactions to the deeper issue that has been triggered.

**The curious forms of perfectionism**
Perfectionism is sneaky. Thanks to the variety of defense mechanisms coming out of God-given human ingenuity, perfection is sought through many apparently disparate means. It comes in forms that may not seem to deserve the name. However, the key word here is “seem.” All perfectionism involves self-deceit, and once you step away from the truth, you never know where you will go. As previously stated, the road to destruction is broad. Some of the major perfectionist types are described below, many of them not fitting the common perfectionist stereotype. In reality there is considerable overlap among them.

**Moral perfectionists:** There are the moral high achievers who gain the illusion they are paying the penalty for their sins by doing morally good deeds and charity work. This routinely occurs in perfectionist religious environments (discussed in Chapter Three). There are also “secular” saints, ranging from the responsible, private do-gooders who take care of others, to those who donate excessively to charity or volunteer in secular organizations such as hospitals, animal shelters, and old people’s homes.

**Typical “flawless performance” perfectionists**
Typical perfectionists—the ones everyone thinks of by the name—are the driven, high achievers who are never satisfied with their performance.

In this group, perfectionism is not confined to morality, but it involves some socially valued form of achievement. This type includes some of the so called “self-oriented perfectionists” discussed in Chapter Five. These are often
loners who climb higher and higher according to an idealized form of a recognized standard, aiming for the stars.

As long as the side effects of this defense are mild, people in this category can become high achievers. If not, their performance can be stymied by fear of making a mistake (see Chapter Four).

Non-sinner perfectionists
“*I’m not a sinner.*” Nobody is in hiding as much as the non-sinner perfectionists, who deeply repress the truth about their imperfection. In their opinion, they are never in the wrong. If they are accused of failure or malfeasance, they become defensive and emotionally unavailable. They may tend to avoid other people to preserve a facade of purity, like the socially-prescribed perfectionists discussed in Chapter Five. Or they might use second step defenses such as projection to stick their faults on other people like the other-oriented perfectionists (also seen in Chapter Five).

Often arrogant and proud, they are found in both left and right wing perfectionist religious environments (discussed in Chapter Three). The “non-sinners” are common in both the “normal” and the psychiatric populations. In that second group, this defense is typical of most personality-disordered individuals, especially psychopaths, who have a deeply repressed sense of being sinners and of the moral code, and act out in defiance. Also, people in a state of psychosis go way beyond denial of sin into grandiose or messianic delusions involving the claim of godlike perfection.

Interpersonal perfectionists
Some people act out their perfectionism in their relations with other people. There are three main tendencies; one is the so called “other oriented” perfectionist described in Chapter
Five. Their inability or refusal to see themselves in the wrong makes for poor interpersonal relations, but when coupled with some second step defenses like projection and blaming, it seems to be an effective way to maintain superficial sanity—judging by the relative lack of mental impairment in this group.

**Psychiatric perfectionists**
Several mental illnesses besides personality disorders have a strong element of perfectionism. They often involve obsessions and compulsive behavior or delusional thinking, as in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. These disorders are strongly characterized by self-cleansing as a form of pseudo-atonement.

For example, the anorexic obsesses about body fat; and a person with Body Dysmorphic Disorder can choose any aspect of the body as a target of loathing (see Chapter Six for a discussion of psychiatric disorders associated with perfectionism).

**Self-punishers and sufferers**
Self-punishment is not what one would normally think of as a form of perfectionism. However, this defense is a type of pseudo-atonement that goes in a destructive direction rather than a constructive one. It is found in those seeking to play the role of sufferer, in self-punishers, in doers of penances, in masochists and in seekers of others to be one's abuser.

Self-punishers display behavior pathology that tends to worsen as time goes on. They seek increasingly painful forms of suffering and new lows to inflict on themselves, just as “flawless” accomplished continually seek new heights to climb. This category includes co-dependent behavior, where
a person plays the role of the suffering martyr in a relationship with an addict, “sacrificially” putting their own needs aside to care for that person. It can involve staying in an exploitive, abusive work situation. Or it can involve deliberate harming of oneself, as in the case of Munchhausen syndrome—which is more than just an attention-getting ploy—and in the so-called borderline personality (see Chapter Six for a discussion of Borderline Personality Disorder).

Self-punishment tends to begin early in life, as we see in the case of the physical self-harming behavior of autistic children. The underlying purpose is to gain atonement with God, or at least acquire the illusion that the suffering pays the penalty for sin, providing temporary relief from the stab of guilt.

**Anyone in a false religion or cult**
All creeds that tell humans they can hit the mark by making themselves sinless are perfectionist (discussed in Chapter Three). The God of the Bible is the only One who does not require humans to attain this impossible feat. He alone imputes sinlessness to humans who cover themselves with His own perfection.

Not all false religions qualify as cults, which tend to be organized around the personality of one leader and offer the lure of strong social support. Cults can be seductive to dependent people who had inadequate parenting, because these organizations offer a quasi-familial, structured, total world. People are attracted because they want a direction in life and a sense of belonging and acceptance. They have little idea that this is spiritual hunger. Over time, the social motive for joining a cult gets overtaken by the illusion that membership enables a person to gain perfection. Members
are afraid to leave because they are told this will send them to hell, that only participation in this particular organization will make them acceptable to deity.

**Self-cleanser perfectionists**
Self-cleansing (or self-purification) has the same goal as other types of *pseudo-atonement*. First your unconscious mind represses the sense of being a sinner. Then sin gets displaced on something apparently more controllable that you try to get rid of or avoid, such as dirt or body fat. Or the focus might be on purifying your thought life; it can include meditation that attempts to erase “negative” thoughts and think only positive ones (see the box on “Mark” in Chapter One). Also typical: physical cleanliness to the point of obsession; fasting; special diets; colonics; and purging.

Self-cleansing is found in both left and right wing religions (see the next chapter). In the psychiatric population we see it in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and bulimia. OCD sufferers typically engage in constant hand-washing as they try to remove their sin and guilt. (Chapter Six discusses these two disorders). There is a picture of this in the blood-guilty Lady Macbeth: *Out, damned spot.*

*“For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord God.”* Jeremiah 2:22

**Conclusions**
The sense of deserving eternal damnation drives humans to seek refuge in the massive self-deceit of perfectionism. There are two main types of defense: *hiders* and *pseudo-atonement*. *Hider* defenses help humans avoid knowing that they are sinners, and that they are doomed. By keeping the facts under
cover, a person can have some semblance of sanity. *Pseudo-atonement* enables a person to gain the illusion of atonement with God through activity of some sort. Good works, self-cleansing and suffering all have that goal.

Whatever the method, the guilt- and anxiety-reducing effect of these defenses is at best only short-lived. Perfectionism usually operates below the surface of consciousness. However, at an even deeper level inside the human psyche, the *sin=death/hell equation* continues to produce existential guilt, the sense of deserving eternal damnation for falling short of perfection. In Part Two, we look at research showing that when perfectionist defenses break down or cannot push away reality, as in situations involving “hassles” and failure, perfectionists become depressed and anxious, often out of proportion to the worldly situation. That is because when the defenses malfunction, the sense of being damned surfaces.

The defenses need to be shored up and modified as time goes on, because reality keeps intruding and bending them out of shape. Freshness assists the self-deceit: a new project offers the possibility that *this time* one can reach the standard; a new way to suffer paradoxically offers renewed hope; a new self-cleansing ritual looks promising. Each newly discovered form of *hiding* or *pseudo-atonement* seems to offer the possibility of being *the* solution, but in time it loses its power to keep the anxiety at bay. This is most clearly seen in people with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, who find themselves having to continually add new rituals to their regimen.

**The only real defense:** There is only one defense that works, and it is not psychological, nor does it ever lose its power. That defense is the gospel, the good news that the death of sinless Christ atones—pays the penalty—for all past, present and future sins of the person who claims it as a cover. God
has committed himself in the Law to impute Christ’s perfection to that person and absolutely forgive them—that is the gospel. The gospel has to sink into those areas of the psyche below the surface, melting away perfectionism like a hot rock descending in an ocean full of icebergs.

All humans use perfectionism to some extent, and we will not stop feeling the pull of it even after availing ourselves of Christ. Our self-controlling nature does not go away; but the Holy Spirit helps us resist that pull.
Chapter Three

What does perfectionism have to do with religion?

What does perfectionism have to do with religion? Everything. In fact, all non-Bible religion is perfectionist. What is more, this chapter will make it clear that only the Bible offers grace, the opposite of perfectionism.

What the Bible shares with perfectionist religions

One thing the Bible does have in common with perfectionist religions is that all recognize that imperfection cuts a person off from the deity, a condition having a bad eternal consequence. This is the sin=death/hell equation outlined earlier.

Depending on the creed, the eternal “badness” ranges from having to keep reincarnating in this world of suffering, to burning endlessly in the lake of fire. This is what awaits humans on the other side of death if they do not gain perfection before they leave this world. As to eternal punishment, despite what is stated in the anti-Bible media, the concept of hell, the lake of fire, or eternal suffering, is not some peculiar and unreasonable idea only found in Christianity. Nor is it a fabrication of the church designed to keep people under its thumb. The “bad eternity” problem is acknowledged in all major religions.

Any speck of impurity keeps humans away from God and sends them into eternal darkness. The situation is dire because the tiniest flaw is all it takes and humans simply cannot make the grade.
Where does the Bible depart from perfectionism?
All the false religions tell humans they can make themselves perfect, but this is impossible. The God of the Bible alone tells us something different. He gives us a viable means of refuge when He tells us to cover ourselves with His perfection and offers it to us as a gift.

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

He went to great lengths to save humans from the lake of fire. It was a unilateral action on His part simply out of His love for us. God had sinless Jesus pay our penalty. He commands us to claim this payment as if we had earned it ourselves—and, of course, there is no way we could ever merit it. When we “cover” ourselves with the perfection of Jesus, God forgives all our sin; he looks at it no more. This promise is set in writing in the Law God gave to Moses and completely fulfilled in Christ. There is a vivid picture of this in the instructions for the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), when the sins of the people were confessed over the head of a scapegoat, who was led into the wilderness, never to return.

All religions outside the Bible are perfectionist. They are right about the fact that human imperfection has a devastating eternal consequence but from there they go wrong. They say that humans can attain perfection through their own efforts if they work hard enough at it.

Each religion claims to have the only feasible recipe. If you follow it perfectly, you will be able to purify yourself to the required standard, so they say. The problem is, in no case is it possible for humans to do this.
Defense mechanisms in false religions: When you belong to a false religion, your perfectionist defenses gradually conform to the doctrine of that religion. You change according to the religion’s form of perfectionism, its particular modes of repression and pseudo-atonement. This ranges from grinning “blissed out” left wingers to self-flagellating right wingers—and we use a non-political concept of “wings” here. The defenses suppress existential guilt and the pain of separation from God, replacing this ache with the illusion that one is remedying the situation by one’s own efforts.

This is why research on religion and psychological adjustment has found that religiously-involved people of all stripes tend to have better psychological adjustment. This probably has little or nothing to do with grace, and much to do with hiding and pseudo-atonement.

Left and right wing religions
Perfectionist religions fall into two main camps: the left wing religions use more hiders; the right wing ones rely more on more pseudo-atonement. They employ either good works or suffering, giving the impression that a person is paying the penalty for sin and escaping damnation through their own efforts.

Left wingers say: You are not a sinner because there is no such thing as sin. Right wingers say: You are not a sinner because you keep the law.

Left wing religions
These are the “liberal” religions that minimize or ignore sin and punishment. The goal is to make you believe you are not separated from God. You draw heavily on “hiding” defenses: massive repression, suppression or denial of the
sin=death/hell equation. Either you believe you are keeping the Law, i.e., you qualify as “good" and not as a sinner, or that you are not under any law. Going along with this is rejection or minimization of the idea of punishment on the other side of death.

**Humanism**

Humanists make the mistake of proposing that people are fundamentally good. Although it is true that we are made in God's image, and do have some godly qualities, goodness is not our most basic attribute; selfishness is.

The religion of Humanism has infected the culture at large over that last sixty years. Part of its deception is to make a person believe it is not a religion, giving it an appeal to atheists and agnostics. However, many are surprised to find that the American Humanist Society is a chartered, tax-exempt religious organization.

Humanists may not use spiritual language, but when they talk about the natural goodness of humans, they are getting into a spiritual issue. To say that, deep down inside, humans are good is the same as saying they are gods.

Humanists say: Your flaws are not real, you simply need to perceive your inner beauty.

Humanists state that any evil found in humans is the result of outside influences; any guilt or low self-esteem they experience is caused by other people's wrongful, unloving attitudes towards them. Flaws a person exhibits are only on the surface. People must adopt only positive ideas and not judge themselves or others harshly. Humanism does not ask you to change yourself, but to change your perception
of yourself:  *you’re perfect as you are, you’re no sinner, you were born good*

So the task is not to *make* yourself perfect but to *recognize* that you are perfect already, and that you will happily live forever. In reality, you are hiding from the *sin=death/hell equation*, repressing your sense of being in a state of separation from God. In its place you try to create the delusion that there is nothing to fear and that you are good—very appealing to your pride. However, a part of you on the inside does not buy the idea there is nothing to fear, and that part of you is very afraid. Rejection of the concept of eternal punishment does not work for long.

**Atheism**

Most religions incorporate good works, suffering and punishments into their orthodoxy of actions aimed at gaining atonement with the deity. However, the same tendency is found in an unconscious way in individuals not involved in a religion, including those calling themselves agnostics or atheists. All are driven by the same unconscious need to escape eternal separation from God and the lake of fire.

Atheists are in the same *sin=death/hell* quandary as anyone else, so they also operate under perfectionism. This means, of course, that there is no such thing as a through-and-through atheist. Their unbelief is only on the surface; it is better described as “anti-belief in God.” Atheists repress the awareness of God, the Law and hell. However, their vehement protests against these realities give them away. Why resist so much unless you sense that God is real, and you have a bone to pick with him? Your bone is the same as Satan’s: envy and resentment of His power.
Zen Buddhism
Zen denies death and hell, the sin nature, and immorality. This philosophy promotes acceptance of things as they are, including human faults and flaws. You must stand outside your emotions and observe them in a state of non-judgmental detachment. In other words, you are to disconnect the elements of the sin=death/hell equation and “go with the flow.” There is no hell. Accept your sins. Give them a new name that will not trigger guilt. Like Humanists, Zen adherents engage in massive repression of sin, guilt, the sense of being damned, and the sense of being under the Law.

Zen philosophy advocates a type of myopia where one lives only in the present. But try as you might, you will not find yourself able to “live in the now,” and “be in the moment” when you are unsaved. This is because your inner self carries a load of painful baggage regarding your eternal destiny. A part of you knows you are on the road to hell, and that part cannot relax or be fully present. The effort to “go with the flow” is antithetical to the restfulness it demands, unless you are a dead fish.

Liberal Christianity
Liberal Christianity departs from the Bible in a significant way by diverting adherents from thinking of themselves as sinners. There is nothing to fear and no hell awaiting you, because God is love and He would never inflict punishment on His children. However, liberal Christians reveal their lack of assurance that there really is nothing to fear. Since they have no comprehension of the meaning of grace, they endlessly exhort adherents to be Christ-like and to industriously perform good works that unconsciously attempt to pay for sin.
You are a lovely and beautiful human being made in the image of God, getting more and more Christ-like every day.

Their primary defenses are *hiders*—I’m not a sinner; might have been one once but not any more—and *pseudo-atonement* in the form of moral “good works”—see what a good person I am, I feed and shelter the homeless. Bible study is replaced by busy activities like this—not that there is anything wrong with them *per se*—but the problem is that ignorance of grace in the Law perpetuates conscious reliance on them for salvation and denial of the inner turmoil.

**Right wing, merciless religions**

Unlike the left wing ones, right wing merciless religions affirm sin, law and punishment. They err in telling their adherents that if they stick to the beliefs and rules of the sect or denomination, they can avoid eternal punishment through their own efforts. In other words, salvation is through works, not grace.

Compared to unbelievers and left wingers, people in right wing religions are more likely to be conscious that perfection is essential and more enlightened about a bad place beyond death. That is because these truths are expressed—after a fashion—in their doctrine.

Instead of denying even the concept of sin and repressing a person’s sense of being corrupt, these things are very much part of their conversation, with more conscious emphasis on moral behavior and hell. This is because a person relies on *pseudo-atonement* more than *hiders*. Therefore they can admit some of their corruption and delude themselves they are paying the penalty for their sins.
As a participant, you think you are gaining justification through your own actions by partially repressing your awareness of your sinfulness; employing some “second steppers” like rationalization, justification, and reaction formation; and engaging in heavy pseudo-atonement in the form of “good” works and suffering.

**New laws**
One feature of the right wingers is that they fabricate a law that humans can, in theory, keep. They invent a set of doable codes, such as public prayer five times a day, church attendance several times a week and the avoidance of alcohol and smoking. If you keep their rules, they say, you can make yourself perfect; you have earned your way “in.” These codes carefully omit sins of the mind like envy, pride, lust and coveting that humans have no control over.

Each specific religion has its own recipe for getting right with the deity. Your good deeds and suffering in this world pay the penalty for sin, enabling you to escape eternal separation from God. It is a kind of pay as you play plan. You commit a sin, then you do a good deed or get punished to make your record clean again. The idea is appealing to the prideful “do-it-yourselfer” human nature that rejects the authority of God. You do not reckon that you are rotten to the core, and that God judges your thoughts (“thou shalt not covet” Exodus 20:17). Deep down you have no peace, because you know the standard is way above your “good deeds,” and that your works are tainted by the selfish purpose of trying to stay out of the lake of fire.
Works can temporarily reduce the painful emotions that go with existential guilt. However, that only applies to the conscious *feeling* of guilt. The actual guilt does not go away. Deep down you continue to sense that you deserve eternal separation from God.

The only effective remedy is humanly impossible: total purity from conception onwards. Nobody can change what happened in the past. Nor can any human control what goes on now in the heart and mind to any significant extent.

Yet as far as God's Law is concerned, what goes on inside your mind is as important as all your other actions. Love for God and love for your neighbor “twenty four seven” is the criterion. Under your skin you know you can never meet that standard, but your reject the voices of your internal committee. Outside of grace, lies are essential to your being able to function in this world, and Satan will do all he can to encourage them.

**Right wing merciless “Christianity”**

Right wing merciless Christianity says: *Yes, you are under the law of death and hell for sin, but you can and must work your way out of it.* The belief is that Jesus came to save you from being a sinner, not to pay the penalty for your sin. In other words, either Jesus came to show you how to earn salvation through your own efforts, or He paid for your sins only up to the time of salvation and now it is up to you to never sin again.

Merciless “Christian” creeds do not offer the comfort that humans thirst for. Jesus came to be the perfect sacrifice whose death paid the penalty on your behalf, acting as a covering for you, taking your sin away from the eyes of God. Never mind that you remain a sinner for the duration of your time in this world. You are forgiven, safe, loved.
The devil made me do it: is sin demon possession?
One defense used a lot in certain types of right wing Christianity is the attribution of personal flaws to demons. The mechanism is, first, hide from ownership of your sin nature, then, when you have sinful thoughts and behavior, project it all on “demons.” You are not in denial about your involvement in wrongdoing. You just refuse to own it. Demons must be possessing or oppressing you. You are not a sinner; the problem comes from ungodly spiritual entities that beset you.

The story of Elizabeth
A young student, Elizabeth, came for treatment for a harming tendency featured in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She would continually hear a voice in her head ordering her to tell people off, curse them, hit them, trip them up or run them down with her car.

She was very involved in her church on campus, and though her background was not Pentecostal, she wanted to believe that this was an evil spirit harassing her. Elizabeth did not want to think that this voice or the evil ideas were any part of her, because she was a “good Christian,” in her own eyes. If she was saved, she should be pure in thought, word and deed.

This denial of being a sinner is a very common mistake in the Christian church. The message people receive is that Jesus came to make you sinless, period, not just sinless in God’s eyes when you cover yourself with the clean white linen of His innocence. The pride in our nature makes us want to believe this, and it does great damage. By the way, this is not to deny the work of the Holy Spirit after you are saved. The Spirit works on the conscience, making you want to please God by keeping His commandments, and strengthening you; but your sin nature remains.
Elizabeth needed to acknowledge this obsessive voice as a part of herself, confess it to God, and experience forgiveness for it. The more she did this, the less often she heard it. Each time it rang in her head, she thanked God and Christ for paying for her sins. Her real problem had been that she did not want to see herself as a sinner, maybe due to a perfectionist message in her church, and maybe due to the innate pride in humans that makes us want to think we are good.

So you might say that God used this obsession to show Elizabeth who she really is: a sinner. Her perfectionist denial of this was making her dysfunctional. At first she was angry about the idea that this was a facet of her own nature that had taken on an obsessive quality. Elizabeth would go back and forth between acceptance and rejection of this evil part of herself.

She would sometimes get angry with me for telling her the source of the problem was within her—shooting the messenger is a common defense mechanism—but the fact of the matter is that she got better when she started taking responsibility for the violence in her own nature.

The idea that you should no longer be a sinner after you are saved is a common one in the Christian church and it is very dangerous because it sets up a false expectation. When that anticipation is inevitably unfulfilled, you go into deeper denial and doubt that you are saved. You feel cheated and guilty and become cynical. A new, hard shell can make you resist ever revisiting the truth that saves you.

**Traditional Buddhism**
Many eastern religions assist perfectionism by bringing in the lie of reincarnation. If you think you can keep coming
back, then there is plenty of time to make yourself perfect, as many lifetimes as you need. No need to worry.

As long as you come closer to perfection by the end of one incarnation, you step out on a higher plane in the next one, leaving behind your past baggage. On that higher plane, if your good deeds exceed your bad ones again, your next incarnation will be even better, and on and on until you reach the godhead and the desired state of peaceful non-being or nirvana from which imperfection separates you.

Of course, you go backwards if you commit more wrong in the next incarnation, and might even wake up in one of the many hells, but they are temporary, they last only one lifetime. For a Buddhist, the hells are not the problem; the trouble is this world and its pain. The goal is to attain a state of non-being, to erase the personal ego, thereby escaping this world. However, the idea that a person has nothing to fear because they can go on trying indefinitely is from the father of lies. “Thou shalt not surely die,” said Satan in the Garden, denying what God had told our forefathers (Genesis 3:4).

“Right thinking” is part of the eight-fold path of righteousness that you must follow to a level of absolute perfection. Human expectations, or desires, cause suffering, so you have to get rid of them, along with all the other imperfections of the self. Then you can escape the samsara, or painful wheel of life, with its endless process of death and reincarnation.
Sound easy? It might until you try, and there is the previously-mentioned problem: selfish intention. Why do you care about right thinking? The reason is your unrighteous, selfish desire to reach nirvana.

Also, there is a crazy-making conflict in the fact that you have to desire to reach the state of not desiring; and that you must use your ego in the process of trying to get rid of your ego. This is a quandary making you a dog chasing its own tail.

**Hinduism**

Hinduism is an offshoot of Buddhism, similar except for the addition of a pantheon of good and evil gods. They help or hinder you in your journey towards the perfection that enables you to escape the “wheel of life.” Once you have reached the essential state of total perfection because your karmic debt has been erased, you escape this world and enter bliss.

**Islam**

Union with the deity is to be attained in this monotheistic religion by making your “good” deeds exceed your bad ones. If you attain this before death, you will be able to cross the razor sharp bridge over the lake of fire instead of falling into it. Thus you enter Paradise, where seventy two doe-eyed virgins wait for every man. But if your good deeds do not add up highly enough, you fail to cross that bridge and drop, instead, into hell for all eternity.

It must be pointed out here that salvation through performing more good deeds than bad deeds is not peculiar to Islam. It is found in many religions, and it might sound more doable than attaining absolute perfection. However, human corruption is so deep that this is just as impossible, especially considering the matter of selfish intention.
Conclusions

All the religions outside of God's Word are perfectionist. They start out in the right place by acknowledging that imperfection separates humans from the deity, and that there is something very bad about that on the eternal level. Therefore, all religions have the same basic goal we find in the Bible: to attain the essential state of perfection that enables humans to reconcile with deity and avoid the “bad place.”

From that true starting point, all the other religions go wrong. They go into perfectionism, which is the doctrine that you, the human, can make yourself sinless through your own efforts.

The left wing ones say: You are not a sinner. Under your skin, you are perfect already. All you need do is believe it. Follow our recipe and you will be able to see this. The right wing ones say: You are a sinner but you can cleanse yourself. Follow our recipe and make yourself flawless through good deeds, suffering, or self-purification.

In both cases, the task is to be accomplished by you. Either you must believe you are already flawless, or you must make yourself flawless. The first recipe involves telling yourself a terrible lie. The second recipe involves lying to yourself plus striving to achieve an impossible task.

There is no permanent or genuine peace of mind under perfectionist doctrines. They only intensify the existential guilt coming from the sin=death/hell equation. None offers a viable means to reconcile with God. Only the substitutionary blood atonement covenant in the Law does that. God will impute, or attribute, to humans the perfection of Christ if they claim coverage of his shed
blood. The writer of the following verse from the book of Hebrews is basing the following statement on Leviticus 17:11, quoted elsewhere in this book: “Without the shedding of blood is no remission of sin” (Hebrews 9:22).

The concept of Christ as the One who paid the penalty on our behalf is of supreme importance. Martin Luther was reading the book of Romans when he discovered this liberating truth at a time when the church was “selling” salvation for money. Paul, the writer of Romans, got his knowledge from a thorough grounding in the Pentateuch, the Law God gave to Moses.

The Law specifies that God will accept the death of a substitute for the human sinner. Before Christ, the acceptable substitute was a “clean” animal (chewed the cud, parted the hoof, etc.). Now Christ has taken our punishment and we are saved by claiming the payment He made for us.

**Christ is as pure as His Father**

Only the death of a non-sinner can pay for the sins of a sinner. Many people are unclear about the purity of Christ: he was/is human so how could he not be a sinner? Well, with God all things are possible, and Jesus was/is God in human flesh. He is completely pure, holy and undefiled.

If Christ had sinned in any way, he would die and go to hell just like all sinners. And if he were a regular human, but somehow sinless, he could avoid death and hell for himself, but he could not cover anyone else's sin.

Only because He is infinite, God in human form, can His death pay the penalty for infinite amounts of sin for infinite numbers of humans. He charges between us and Satan to provide the covering that makes us invulnerable to the fate
our enemy planned for us. Jesus is our rescuer, our only hope. In this lifetime we humans never stop sinning, but His atoning death never stops paying, and paying, and paying.
Part Two

The worldly ills of perfectionism

In this section of the book we look at some of the ways perfectionism interferes with a person’s well-being in this world. Why? To show that perfectionism is full of bad side effects in this world alone, not to mention its eternal deadliness. The fact that people are addicted to it makes no sense unless there is a powerful unseen purpose: to fight or hide from the sin=death/hell equation. Humans are driven to perfectionism because they are innately aware that one sin destines them for the lake of fire.
Chapter Four

Worldly ills of perfectionism 1: How it impairs performance

All of us have probably noticed that the more anxious you are to do a job perfectly, the more likely you are to ruin it. This is the particular irony facing “flawless accomplishment” perfectionists—perhaps a tendency all humans display to some degree, but some carry it to an extreme. These are people who subconsciously deceive themselves they are earning their way out of damnation through “perfect” achievement. They strive for an unreachable standard of performance, often punishing themselves in the process, thus combining two forms of the unconscious perfectionist defense of pseudo-atonement (see Chapter Two).

“Flawless accomplishes” tend to be compulsive in their performance of a task as long as they think they can reach the mark of perfection. But when reality hits them and they realize they might not/will not succeed, they can be paralyzed and unable to perform. Fear puts them in a fight/flight state.

They react to failure with depression and anxiety, often reaching a clinical level (see Chapter Six). This is because failure causes a breach in their defense system, allowing the terrible truth to seep into consciousness. They can become impaired or unable to function when emotional reactions to the sin=death/hell equation take over, although rarely are they conscious of the source. As we will see in this chapter,
this can apply not only to work life but also to sexual performance.

“Flawless accomplishment” perfectionists
Several fictional illustrations are based on observations from the author's practice:

Work-related attitudes: Della
Della had an assignment to finish for her boss. Even though he only wanted a rough draft by the end of the week, she insisted on staying after work every day so she could produce something that looked finished. She got by on coffee and stale sandwiches from the vending machine and was exhausted by the time Friday rolled around.

This state was not unusual for her; it was how she functioned at work, often running herself into the ground. She knew she needed a medical check-up but there was never enough time. The assignment she handed her boss before she went home—and practically collapsed—on Friday looked professional and complete. When he reviewed it, he was very pleased, and he told her so. Nevertheless, she was, as usual, disappointed. It was still not as polished as she wanted it to be.

Comment: Perfectionists tend to work too hard. They harder they try to do the job right, the more faults they find in their efforts, the less satisfaction they experience, and the more they cannot stop. There is a self-punishing aspect to their work behavior: too many hours, too little sleep, and poor nutrition. Even when they attain, or even exceed, some desired criterion and the boss is ecstatic, they still feel uneasy because they have an inner standard that is never reached. That criterion is total perfection. They cannot tell themselves
their work is good at less than absolute flawlessness, and they know they never reach it.

Perfectionists will attach a criterion even to mundane, everyday activities because they are constantly judging themselves. Since the standard is absolute, they can never reach it, so they cannot feel satisfied. While they are working on a task, they feel relatively calm, telling themselves they really can attain perfection. When the task is finished, they once again face the reality of having failed to do it just right. Anxiety or depression start taking over if they do not begin a new assignment soon enough.

**Perfectionism and procrastination: Jim**

Jim was an undergraduate student who never once completed a term-paper. He would have brilliant ideas and an excellent grasp of the topic, yet he was unable to get past the beginning of any writing project. His shelves piled up with more and more half-finished work, while the days, months, and years rolled by. Eventually his financial aid expired, meaning he was no longer eligible to remain in school, so he left before finishing his degree.

**Comment:** Another typical characteristic of “flawless accomplishment” types is that they cannot get anything finished. Even though they may have high ability, they drop out of school or lose jobs because they find themselves unable to complete a task. Why? To finish a task would force them to face the fact that their work does not reach the standard of perfection. So they procrastinate, dawdle, and do not get things done. On the surface, this looks like laziness, but the motive is preservation of the false belief that it is possible for them to reach the pinnacle of perfection. One of the many defense mechanisms used by perfectionists,
procrastination is a second step after denial/repression of the sense of being imperfect.

**Perfectionism and stifled creativity: Janet**  
Janet sat in her art class and stared at the empty sheet of paper, afraid to mar it by the first stroke of charcoal. She knew she could erase the charcoal if she did not like her drawing, but still she felt paralyzed.

**Comment:** A further step down the road is the perfectionist who cannot even start a task. Perfectionism will destroy the excitement in any creative urge, bogging it down by the fear of making the very first mistake.

**Perfectionism and indecisiveness: Joe**  
Joe was voted most likely to succeed in high school. He was a brilliant student who excelled in both science and humanities. Accepted at several very good universities, he was unable to choose which one to go to, so his parents made the choice for him. Once he was there, he could not decide upon a career, and was unable to choose a major. He took courses in many different subjects but ended up dropping most of them. Eventually he left school and got a job in a hardware store, an environment where he had to make very few independent decisions. This was a “temporary” job that lasted many years while he stayed in a state of indecision about where to go next.

**Comment:** Fear of not making the perfect decision can stop a person from making any decision at all.

**Perfectionism and failure: Alex**  
Alex worked two jobs that involved considerable responsibility. One position was to teach computer science at a community college several evenings a week, where he was
Chapter Four: Worldly ills of perfectionism

extremely popular and loved by students. His day job was to run a computer lab in a private firm. During the process of planning the perfect wedding for his marriage, he fell behind in his work. His supervisor at the lab gave him a warning, the first he had ever received. This sent Alex into a tailspin. He became depressed. Then he could not get his student assignments graded in time, and suddenly quit the teaching job in mid-term after having had it for seven years. He was obsessed with the idea that he had ruined his record and would never be able to return to teaching. The result was that he became more depressed and entered a state of breakdown, unable to get out of bed in the mornings to go to his day job. His boss allowed Alex a medical leave, during which he was treated for major depression accompanied by anxiety symptoms.

Comment: Perfectionists who use “flawless performance” as a form of pseudo-atonement need constant success and positive feedback to keep them functioning. They can be so floored by a single criticism that it precipitates a downward spiral into clinical depression and anxiety.

Perfectionism and sexual performance: Henry

Henry’s wife had hugged him extra hard before he left for work in the morning. She told him she wanted them to be intimate later on that day. It had been some time since this had happened, and even though Henry usually welcomed the experience, he had a fearful reaction. He started feeling nervous from the time his wife mentioned it, and had increasing feelings of apprehension during the day. Would he be able to perform?

Comment: There is a reason why the word “performance” is used in connection with sexuality. There can be as much emotional investment in good performance in this area as
there is in other areas of achievement. The fear of not being a perfect performer can lead to a host of sexual dysfunctions among perfectionists.

The physiological aspect is that fear initiates the fight-flight response. This shuts down the parasympathetic nervous system responsible for penile erection and glandular secretions.

As the performance fear becomes ingrained over time, it affects all phases of sexual response, including arousal and desire. For perfectionists, it is not unusual for an “approach/avoid” conflict to develop around sexuality.

**Conclusions**
Striving for “flawless accomplishment” is only one of the more obvious forms of perfectionism. It involves two modes of pseudo-atonement: the most common one is “good works” and the other, less obvious one is self-punishment. The same person may use both modes at the same time as they try to wipe out their sin debt. The first mode is one of striving to avoid the lake of fire by becoming absolutely flawless. The second mode—one that people usually do not see in their behavior—strives to avoid the lake by paying the dread penalty through suffering.

The degree to which the form of perfectionism called “flawless accomplishment” can impair a person’s life shows how irrational it is from a worldly perspective. The compulsivity, avoidance behavior and procrastination can seem silly, but there is nothing irrational about it when the need to escape eternal damnation is taken into consideration.

The ills we have just looked at are merely symptoms of a deep conflict in the human heart. Perfectionist defense
mechanisms make people unconsciously try to avoid the lake of fire by striving to attain perfect performance—and also to pay for sin by the self-punishment that can be involved in this.

This comes from a true sense that imperfection separates humans from God and destines them for hell when they leave here. Humans can never win the battle in their own strength, so they tend to become increasingly frantic and debilitated. The fight can never stop until a person internalizes the message of the gospel, that God gives humans the right to claim his own perfection in the form of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. This is the only acceptable payment for human sin...but more on that in Chapter Eight.
Chapter Five

Worldly ills of perfectionism 2: How it impairs a person's social life

In the last twenty years, a consistent finding in the secular research has been that there are three different types of perfectionism in human relationships. In each case, unrealistic standards cause interpersonal problems for perfectionists in the workplace, in marriage, and in the world at large. The three styles operate in different ways and they are accompanied by varying levels of depression and anxiety.

One type of interpersonal perfectionist is blind to his own flaws but demands that other people must be perfect. Another type demands that he, himself, must be perfect in the supposedly critical eyes of other people. A third type is a person who tends to be less concerned about the actions or opinions of those around him, focusing rather on internal standards for performance.

Just because you're paranoid, it does not mean nobody is out to get you

The thing to keep stressing is that the God-given human mind is practical. We humans do not entertain unrealistic or absurd beliefs about ourselves and others for no reason. Our behavior is driven by unseen spiritual realities. In fact, there is even a reality basis for paranoia, given the presence of Satan and his demons. The powerful reason for the distorted
thinking and behavior in perfectionism is the drive to escape the lake of fire, and from knowing one qualifies for it.

**The three styles of interpersonal perfectionism**

Let us look at the three interpersonal styles in action, using fictional people to illustrate them. The three types are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Socially-prescribed perfectionism</td>
<td>“I’m not OK, you demand that I be OK, and you’re out to get me because you know I’m not.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Other-oriented perfectionism</td>
<td>“I’m OK, you’re not OK.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-oriented perfectionism</td>
<td>“I’m not OK but I’m working on myself.”</td>
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1. **Socially-prescribed perfectionism**: you think you must be perfect to please other people but you know you are not. So you fear them and think they are out to “get” you.

2. **Other-oriented perfectionism**: you believe you are perfect but other people are not. You blame them for your mistakes and subject them to constant complaint and criticism.

3. **Self-oriented perfectionism**: you must be perfect to please yourself.

**Socially-prescribed perfectionism**

This is the first of the three types of interpersonal perfectionism. The two fictional people described here
display socially-prescribed perfectionism in somewhat different ways.

**Mary, the cleanliness freak**
Why does Mary anxiously stay up all night cleaning the house and rearranging the furniture before her friend, Susan, arrives the next day? It is as if she is afraid Susan is going to inspect her home with a magnifying glass and inflict some terrible punishment on Mary if she finds the slightest speck of dust.

When Susan arrives, it is apparent she has not the slightest concern about the house. However, Mary is very worried about how her housekeeping efforts appear, and cannot relax during the entire visit, even though Susan could not care less. In fact, Susan's home would hardly win any prize for cleanliness, and she would actually feel a lot more comfortable if Mary's house were less tidy and neat. Mary has visited Susan's home several times, so you would think she would know this. But if she does, it makes no difference. When Mary goes to Susan's home, she focuses only on her own behavior, how she must avoid spilling anything on the rug, or how her grooming must be just right.

**Jerry, the paranoid socially-prescribed perfectionist**
Jerry is sure that everyone at work looks at him negatively, wanting to denigrate. He suffers acute anxiety in the form of panic attacks whenever he is asked to give a presentation. In fact, Jerry avoids expressing an opinion in any group setting. He is afraid that whatever he says will be wrong, and that he will be attacked by all the other people.

In the lunchroom, he sits by himself, because he thinks nobody likes him. Even when someone invites him to join them he mutters an excuse and refuses. He makes friends
only with great difficulty, because he is sure other people will reject him, and even punish him, when they find out what he is really like. This means his social life is almost nonexistent. He tends to go straight home after work, miserable and lonely, yet powerless to do anything to relieve this feeling other than drink a few beers.

**What's going on in socially-prescribed perfectionism?**
The socially-prescribed perfectionist is particularly sensitive to how other people view him. Both Mary and Jerry go to an extreme in overestimating the importance of their flaws to others. They are projecting their own conscience, with its sense of deserving eternal damnation, on other people.

Others are viewed as merciless judges of the Law's demand for perfection, sure to condemn and punish if they see a single flaw in the socially-prescribed perfectionist. People in this category are ruled by a standard they cannot meet, believing they must reach it to satisfy other people, knowing they cannot do it, yet feeling compelled to try. This creates poor interpersonal relations—they resent other people for “making” them try so hard and for being so “un-accepting” of them.

The curious thing is, they tend to be blind to themselves until they encounter a performance or exposure situation where they know or believe that other people’s attention will be on them. It is as if they can only see their faults when they are exposed to the eyes of others, who are seen as unforgiving accusers. The result is that the more severe a case of socially-prescribed perfectionism a person has, the more likely they are to avoid social situations.

Another common perfectionist trait that is striking in Mary is her distortion of the standard relative to the situation. A
highly antiseptic hospital is essential, but it is unnecessary to keep a home that way. This apparently irrational element points to the innate awareness of an absolute standard of perfection that must be met. That standard is displaced on a facet of a person's life that they think they can control. In this case it is cleanliness.

There is a flavor of "all about me" narcissism in both Mary and Jerry. Neither of these people think that others might be more interested in their own affairs or performance than in Mary or Jerry. Both are making the assumption that other people's attention is primarily on them when this is rarely the case. However, unlike typical narcissistic personalities who assume everyone in the world adores them, these two display malevolent narcissism. This is a condition in which a person thinks other people's attention is on them to attack, not to admire. They will see criticism where it does not exist, and be miserable because they believe other people expect too much of them.

Another aspect of the perfectionist's self focus is lack of empathy with others. If Susan says her bedroom is too cold, Mary will rush to install a space heater. There may be some genuine concern in Mary, but her prevailing interest will be to avoid the imagined criticism coming from her friend.

Defense mechanisms of socially prescribed perfectionists: "Flawless accomplishment" and social withdrawal are two major defense mechanisms of people in this category. Jerry does more of the second, whereas Mary relies heavily on the first, trying to pay for her sins with a perfectly clean house.

Mary has displaced her awareness of being a sinner onto her house, and its cleanliness. For sure, guests will see that one little speck or crumb. They will criticize her cleaning job for
not being up to par, and her home for not being sufficiently shiny. She will interpret the slightest frown from another person as a total indictment of her, and become depressed at any sign of criticism. Deep down she knows she cannot make the grade, that even one flaw keeps her from God and destines her for eternal punishment. If she receives an hour of praise and one tiny criticism, she will only hear the one negative and dwell on it, sensing its terrible implication.

In Jerry’s case, an element of paranoia complicates the situation. Not only does he strive to make himself flawless, he also uses avoidance of other people to cope with his fear. He is afraid of them, believing that they are really out to attack him, that they are destructively critical, and their attention is malevolent. This is because he is externalizing his own psychic apparatus, a harsh moral code that lacks any sense of being forgiven. Because he knows he is far from flawless and deserves punishment—eternal punishment if he did but know it, he sees other people as attackers and punishers.

We also see him escaping into alcohol, which is common for people with social phobia, the psychiatric disorder closely related to socially prescribed perfectionism. This tendency to engage in substance abuse is a means of hiding. It helps to repress the emotions attached to the sense of being imperfect, and it provides false confidence.

**Disorders associated with this style:** Socially-prescribed perfectionism is an element in various psychiatric disorders, including avoidant, schizoid, schizotypal and paranoid personality disorders; in the anxiety disorder category it is found particularly in people with social phobia; and in the psychotic category, in paranoid schizophrenics.
Unsurprisingly, the voices heard by schizophrenics are usually attacking and accusatory. Although there is the possibility of a demonic origin for the voices, they are suggestive of the person’s strong sense of the prosecuting aspect of the Law.

All these disorders involve a fear of other people arising from the defense of projection. The damning Law printed on a person’s psyche and the accompanying sin=death/hell equation is projected into the minds of others, turning them into imagined prosecutors who are to be feared and avoided.

**How socially-prescribed perfectionism develops**

How this form of perfectionism arise? How does it get routed into a fear of not appearing perfect in the eyes of others, and of others’ imagined desire to attack them for it? One factor could be the genetic trait of shyness, which is found irrespective of environmental influence. However, shyness does not necessarily develop into socially-prescribed perfectionism as long as a person is surrounded by supportive family, friends, and others. On the other hand, for a shy person who is not given strong family support and even receives some mistreatment, shyness can grow into this pathological interpersonal style.

The society at large can play an added role. If you live in a culture where the concept of “face” dominates or there is social ostracism for anyone who does not fulfill certain standards—it could be a family, a social class, or an ethnicity—you feel compelled to make yourself fit the mold and be acceptable. This will trigger the innate sense of deserving eternal punishment, so you will experience constant anxiety about being unable to match up.
For the socially-prescribed perfectionist, the fear of displaying a weakness is omnipresent, yet it can actually make them lose the facade behind which they hide. When they are going through a hard time and have difficulty coping, they deny it and refuse to seek help. This is self-defeating, because when a person avoids confronting their difficulties, they are more likely to succumb to anxiety and depression.

What is worse, if they become mentally ill and cannot hide the fact, feelings of shame and humiliation can send them into a downward spiral which compounds their depression or anxiety.

The irony is that secular therapists find this type of perfectionist difficult to work with because they will not talk about anything that is likely to make them look bad. What is the solution? Little progress can be made until a person experiences the safety of the “salvation ship.” The socially-prescribed perfectionist can learn to stop focusing on the human audience and, rather, use his projective ability to dwell on the mind of a forgiving God who loves him despite his flaws.

When we humans know God will never throw us overboard, and that all is forgiven through the blood of Christ, we feel safe enough crawl out of our defense shell and admit our flaws. Only then do we grow emotionally.

**Performance anxiety: it is not a form of pride**

Performance anxiety is closely related to socially-prescribed perfectionism, only it is more widespread. One false but common belief is that people who have a fear of making a mistake in the presence of others just have a bad case of pride. It can seem that they so intensely need to impress
others that they are terrified to think they might not accomplish that.

The author can remember ignorantly using this interpretation in the counseling room on several occasions. However, in the light of the existential death grip of the \(sin=death/hell\) equation, it is incorrect. The fear aspect of perfectionism is the reason, not pride.

Perfectionism can come to the fore when you focus on possible flaws in your performance as witnessed by an audience. As stated earlier, it is as if you do not see yourself until you are in front of other people. The rest of the time you are oblivious to your imperfection. Facing an audience, even of familiar friends, you suddenly see only your faults, incompetence, and worthlessness. You are blind to whatever talent and ability you possess; your sense of it flies away.

What is happening is that your anxiety about being seen robs you of your normal defenses and you suddenly start projecting your harsh moral code into the mind of your audience. Unconsciously, you are catapulting your sense that sin separates you from God, that you deserve punishment, that you are destined for the lake of fire. Regardless of the nature of the audience—even your own mother or your best friend—you envisage them as attackers. Any small mistake will make them despise you, or worse.

There is a well known inverted U-shaped relationship between anxiety and performance. A little bit of fear improves performance, but a lot of fear does the opposite. This means that when fear increases beyond a certain point, performance can grind to a halt. Once anxiety makes a person stumble, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to recover.
The black-and-white perfectionist thinking (splitting) makes you believe that all is lost upon the first mistake. The first false step can make you fall headlong, unable to get up. In your mind, the audience turns into merciless judges and executioners. These overwhelming feelings come right up into the center of your consciousness so you cannot focus on the task. You are experiencing the sense that one mistake sends you to hell. So the fear is all about your eternal destiny, and pride has little to do with it.

**Other-oriented perfectionism**
This is the second of the three types of interpersonal perfection, and probably the most common and effective one in terms of functionality.

**Bill**
The idea of a review session with Bill puts horror into the hearts of his employees. Try as they might to do everything just right to please him, he will find that one little thing they missed, that one tiny mistake, and berate them for it. He will even detect mistakes that are not really there; his critical comments just go on and on. Work piles up on his employees’ desks as they are forced to waste their time listening to him. Never do they hear praise and encouragement from him. Bill can literally make his staff sick. They go home with a migraine after hearing they are not doing enough work, paying enough attention, doing it just the way it should be done.

If his child brings home a report card with a B, then why cannot he get a B plus or an A minus. If he brings home an A minus, why is it not an A? If Bill and his wife, Ann, have marital problems, which they often do, it is “Ann’s fault.” If Ann gives Bill a present, it is never the right color or the right thing. If only Ann would change, be more loving, be less
demanding, spend more time with Bill, be more exciting, lose a bit more weight, be more assertive, get more done, listen to Bill more, respect him more, and on and on. Nobody can ever please Bill.

**Comment:** People like Bill are very irksome for others. Whatever he does is right and whatever anyone else does is wrong. When other people do not please him, he feels he has a right to get angry. Instead of projecting his harsh moral code into the minds of others like the socially-prescribed perfectionist, Bill projects his sense of being a sinner onto them. In his mind, other people are always the bad guys; not him. Others are the ones who cause all the trouble.

In terms of the type of spouse, people with this propensity tend to have either a mate who holds their own under criticism and joins them in their attacks on others; or a mate who is guilt-ridden and insecure.

Other-oriented perfectionists score relatively high on measures of family difficulties (although socially-prescribed perfectionists are highest in this respect). This is understandable in light of their tendency to see themselves in the right and their spouse or children in the wrong. Just like Adam, they are blind to their own imperfection, the beam in their own eye. Adam blamed Eve, and, in a roundabout way, God: “the woman whom thou gavest to be with me.” (Genesis 3:12).

**Defenses:** *Hiders*, projection and blaming are defense mechanisms concealing the fact that, deep down, these people sense they are lost sinners. However, for the most part they can drown out that inner voice that tells them this. Research shows this defense to be effective in the sense that other-oriented perfectionists have lower levels of guilt and anxiety
than the other two groups. In other words, this type of perfectionism is effective in protecting people from the \textit{sin=death/hell equation}.

**How does other-oriented perfectionism develop?**
The author knows of no research on this, but personal observation suggests that parents of other-oriented perfectionists taught them as children that they can do no wrong, that they are better than other children, and that other people are corrupt or stupid. Parents do this by ignoring or even affirming bad behavior in the child, and by modeling the hypercritical aspect of this mode of perfectionism, attacking those outside the family. The family may sit at the dinner table and relate to one another accounts of the stupidity or unfairness of bosses, co-workers, teachers and classmates.

However, environmental influence does not explain why one would demand \textit{perfect} performance from others, not just good performance. We have to go back to the deeper reason, that somewhere inside, a person knows that one tiny flaw is all it takes to keep them separated from God forever.

**Self-oriented perfectionism**
This is the third type of interpersonal perfectionism, a style that focuses more on the self than on other people.

**Peter**
Peter spends all his spare time at the gym. He has chosen a series of goals for himself that he works at almost non-stop. As soon as he reaches one goal, he goes after another in a manner that seems punishing. Even after he broke an ankle, he continued his work-outs in excruciating pain. He is never satisfied with his performance. Each new goal seems the be-all-and-end-all, until he attains it. Afterwards he feels lost,
empty, guilty and unworthy. These feelings do not get brushed aside until he begins to climb a new peak.

**Comment:** Self-oriented perfectionists strive to reach unrealistic levels of success in academia, work, sports, or more idiosyncratic personal goals. They tend to be autonomous and, like all perfectionists, they are inclined to become depressed and anxious when their faults and failures become apparent to them. Their attention is on themselves rather than on other people either as punishers (socially-prescribed perfectionists) or punishees (other-oriented perfectionists). Instead, they aim for perfect performance according to broadly recognized standards.

**Defenses:** Self-orienteds use *hiders* plus all forms of *pseudoatonement*, particularly “flawless performance.” Self-cleansing and self-punishment also feature prominently in their repertoire. These people tend to be obsessive or compulsive—sometimes to a clinical level—about their performance. Requiring increasingly high levels of performance from themselves, self-orienteds may ruminate over their flaws constantly. They tend to displace sin on only one or a few areas that they believe they can control, and which become the focus of their efforts. This can range anywhere from long-distance running to the elimination of body fat.

Self-oriented perfectionism is associated with the self-controlling disorder, *anorexia nervosa*. The anorexic is actually attempting to get rid of sin by eliminating all fat on the body. That is why they may even fast to the death, a practice which is formalized in certain religions such as Jainism. Death occurs because fasting as a means to try to pay for sin cannot stop; it never reaches its target.
Another tendency of self-orienteds is to be “control freaks,” unable to let anyone else around them take the reins, feeling they must hold on at all cost. Children they raise can grow up lacking many forms of competence because they were not allowed to try or do many things for themselves. If they are off work sick for a few days, the workplace falls apart because nobody there knows what to do or feels responsible for it. The self-oriented perfectionist keeps tight tabs on things and does not like to delegate.

**How does self-oriented perfectionism develop?**
Parents are likely to have been cold, authoritarian, and performance-demanding. These perfectionists learned as children to strive for achievement and depend on their own emotional resources. They tend to take these characteristics to extremes as adults in their quest for perfection.

**How effective are these three styles in maintaining sanity? What does the secular research suggest?**
For perfectionists, feeling superficially sane means the *sin=death/hell equation* must stay under the rug or be kept at bay. Some forms of interpersonal perfectionism achieve this better than others. A general finding of the research is that the more aware a person is of their imperfection, the more anxious and depressed they are. This means that socially-prescribed perfectionism is associated with the highest levels of psycho-pathology.

**Best defense?**
Secular research shows that other-oriented perfectionists are in better shape than the other two types in terms of mental health. They hide from the sense of being a sinner, then project it away from themselves onto other people, using a blaming form of projection. This enables them to make others (including God) responsible for problems they
encounter in life and demand perfection from them instead of looking at themselves. It seems that this defense mode is relatively effective in that other-orienteds have less depression, less anxiety and less overall mental illness than the other two groups.29

So in spite of the family problems associated with other-oriented perfectionism, it keeps a person feeling relatively sane. Although projection and blaming make for social impairment, these defenses appear to be an effective way to fend off existential guilt.

It is curious that in the psychoanalytic world, projection is considered a primitive form of defense, when in reality it seems to be a sophisticated two step maneuver: detach from a sinful or threatening thought and pin it on someone else. The reason for its “primitive” status may be that projection is very common and can be found early in life, particularly the blaming type that refuses to take responsibility for wrongdoing. There is the familiar cry of young children: “He started it, it’s his fault.” “No, it’s her.”

**Mid-way**
Self-oriented perfectionism lies between the other two groups in its ability to suppress emotional reactions to the sin=death/hell equation. People in this group suffer less from major depression than socially-prescribed perfectionists, but more than other-oriented perfectionists, possibly because they are less likely to project their flaws on others.30 Self-orienteds are better off emotionally than the socially-prescribeds because their imagination does not create attack as the only possible response from others. They focus more on actual task-oriented successes and failures. Thus they are less at the mercy of the opinions of other people and rely more on the illusion of controlling their own destiny.
Worst defense?
Socially-prescribed perfectionism is associated with more depression and anxiety, more psychopathology in general than the other two types, is a predictor of depression, and is most likely to be associated with family problems. Our interpretation is that this form of perfectionism is less effective in suppressing existential guilt, or the sense of deserving eternal punishment, and therefore it is associated with more mental illness.

Why are the other two interpersonal styles better at keeping the sin=death/hell equation under wraps? Well, other-oriented perfectionists project their flaws on other people; self-oriented perfectionists use work and performance as hiding and pseudo-atonement, but socially-oriented perfectionists try to avoid other people. This is not a very practical tactic—no man is an island. Their other tactic is not so good either: their striving for the illusion of “perfect performance” is impeded by anxiety and they misread the feedback from the “critical” audience. In other words, they have little control of the experience of shame and failure that triggers the sense of deserving damnation.

Conclusions
From a Bible-based perspective, the three interpersonal perfectionist styles cause a variety of ills in personal relations that fan out into work and other areas of life. They also vary in how well each defends against the sin=death/hell equation. The less effective a defense style is at keeping the conflict under wraps, the more psychopathology there is.

Using the relative absence of depression and anxiety as a criterion, it is the finger-pointing, other-oriented perfectionist who seems to do best. Apparently, blaming other people is a relatively effective way to keep existential guilt at bay, and it...
has the added bonus of keeping pride intact. Blaming is a very popular defense that all of us probably use a good deal more than we realize or are willing to admit, regardless of our salvation status. We do it because it works, and often we get no pushback from people we project on, because existential guilt in them makes them buy the idea that everything that goes wrong in our lives is really their fault.

We speculated on how these different styles might develop. Although cultural and genetic influences probably play a part, they only change the style or content of perfectionism. They do not cause perfectionism.

On the eternal level, the outcome of these interpersonal styles could actually be the reverse of the worldly ones. Other-oriented perfectionists are so well defended that they are least likely to feel their need for Christ. On the other hand, guilty-feeling socially-prescribed perfectionists, who might be less well-adjusted in psychiatric terms, could be closer to salvation. That is because the less psychological defense you have, the more open you might be to the true defense, the shed blood of Jesus Christ that pays the penalty for human sin.
Chapter Six

Worldly ills of perfectionism 3: Psychiatric illnesses

Perfectionism helps a person avoid facing the horrible truth about their eternal destiny, but its price is heavy. In the last two chapters we saw the havoc it creates in human achievement and interpersonal relations. Now we will look at what it can do to our mental health.

Perfectionism can cut both ways: make you ill by its presence; and make you ill when it breaks down or is absent.

Perfectionism is a double-edged sword. Like an opiate drug, it dulls pain and can reduce superficial anxiety and depression, but it also has bad side effects on mental health. On the other hand, people can become mentally ill when perfectionist defense armor suddenly falls off—the equivalent of painful drug withdrawal—or when the armor is half-baked or never put on in the first place. Mental disorders are found in people who suddenly become naked of perfectionism, or who have only a patchy form of it.

In other words, perfectionism can be bad for you when it is working (or overworking), bad when it falls apart, and bad when it is full of holes. So we are going to look at different types of mental illness associated with these three facets of perfectionism: side-effects, withdrawal/absence and the present/absent patchy form.
Side effects: mental disorders that accompany perfectionism

In some disorders perfectionist defenses work hand in hand with brain malfunctions to produce behavior that can quiet down existential guilt—the intended effect—but yield obsessive thoughts and compulsivity that impede a person’s functioning. If anything, perfectionism is on overdrive in these disorders; it seems to have run *amok*. Irrational-seeming behavior patterns take over in a stereotypical and repetitive fashion, often assisted by genetic defects in brain structure and chemistry. There is method to the madness in these patterns, though. We see in them various forms of *pseudo-atonement*, attempts to erase sin or pay the penalty for it.

**Genes?** Genes probably play a part, because when one member of a family system has a disorder characterized by obsessive thinking and/or compulsive behavior, other family members often display similar illnesses. There are many relatives in this group, including Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), anorexia nervosa, bulimia, Body Dysmorphic Disorder and trichillomania. The common thread of the obsessive and compulsive elements in these illnesses is perfectionism, but the bio-genetic nature of the disorders in no way explains the perfectionist content.

**Anorexia nervosa**
Anorexia nervosa is a serious disorder revealing perfectionism in action. As an anorexic, you have a powerful obsession with food and calorie restriction that takes up much of your thought and conversation. Prevailing cultural standards play a role in initiating the
illness. You want to be as thin as models and actors, but once you start dieting, perfectionism takes over, and food restriction goes too far. Food becomes the enemy that stands in the way of your becoming perfect. You exaggerate not only the importance of food but also the amount and impact of what you consume. When you eat a small pea, in your mind it is a gigantic potato. After you consume even a small meal, you have feelings of anxiety and guilt. Your distorted idea of the perfect body is one that has no fat/sin.

**Defenses:** Anorexic defense structure involves repression of the sin=death/hell equation plus several forms of pseudo-atonement: 1. the rigid discipline of restricting food—a form of “flawless performance;” 2. the suffering aspect of restricting—a form of self-punishment; and 3. self-cleansing—the illusion of becoming sinless by eliminating fat.

As an anorexic, you displace sin onto eating, food and body fat, consuming as little as you can because eating feels illicit. Somewhere below the surface of consciousness, you believe that your life—actually your eternal destiny—depends on your being thin. Deeper members of your internal committee are not convinced about this but until you grasp the true remedy—the gospel—no other option seems to exist. You must repress those threatening, deep, truth-telling parts of you until you find grace.

When the restriction of food enables you to lose fat, you have the illusion that this cleanses you of imperfection. If you gain a few ounces in weight, you panic without knowing why. Your hidden false belief is that if you can eliminate food and fat perfectly, you can escape the lake of fire. This means that while you are alive you cannot be satisfied, because there will always be fat on your body.
Even when you are almost skin and bones, you will find fat somewhere and want to starve yourself until it is gone. If left untreated, you can fast to death, because insufficient calorie intake causes not only fat loss but also a reduction in muscle tissue. Eventually the walls of the heart become too thin to pump.

Researchers have found a positive relationship between anorexia nervosa and both self-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionism, especially the first of these. The findings make sense in that self-oriented perfectionism is a form of narcissism (self-preoccupation) directed, in this case, at perfecting the body. Socially-prescribed perfectionism, on the other hand, involves concern for one’s appearance in the eyes of others. Its anorexic form is the belief one is only acceptable to others—deep down, to God—if one is unrealistically thin (sinless).

Incidentally, fasting is a common form of religious asceticism. The ascetic believes that suppression of fleshly appetites will bring one closer to God. That is because fasting involves two unconscious forms of pseudoatonement. One is, striving to pay for sin by self-cleansing; the other is self-punishment.

**Neuro-chemistry:** Anorexia is kept in place not only by perfectionism, but also by the desirable effects it has on neuro-chemistry. People with obsessive tendencies have excessive anxiety-causing serotonin in parts of the brain that govern the repetitive thought patterns and behavior. Cutting calories reduces the serotonin and the anxiety level so there are fewer obsessions and compulsive symptoms. “Restricting” also tends to suppress appetite and squelch painful emotions, especially guilt and anxiety.
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) are two similar, genetically-based, odd mental disorders strongly associated with perfectionism. They reveal the energy and craziness of perfectionism so well that they are worth a close look. The first of these is serious and debilitating when it flares up. The second is a pervasive, long-term personality style.

OCD is characterized by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. The strange, stereotypical and mechanistic behavior patterns—self-cleansing rituals and checking—can literally go on for hours during which perfectionist content is acted out in a compulsive manner. Evidence suggests that the repetitions are caused by brain abnormalities, particularly excessive activity in the cortico-striatal area. People with OCD are usually aware that they have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behavior patterns but they are unable to stop themselves voluntarily.

This differs from what we see in schizophrenia, a psychotic disorder sometimes involving obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Unlike OCD sufferers, schizophrenics lack insight that there is anything irrational about their perfectionism. One paranoid schizophrenic man constantly soaked the floors, walls and furniture of his house with laundry bleach. He seemed oblivious to the overpowering stench and the disintegration of the floors and upholstery. Without knowing it, he was attempting to purge himself of sin by projecting it on his house and trying to bleach it into non-existence.

Like schizophrenics, OCD sufferers also do not perceive the underlying existential issue but they do see the irrationality of their behavior even if they cannot control it. They are often conscious that they are flawed, and may be
quite verbal about their guilt feelings and anxiety. The more stressed they feel, the more they find themselves compelled to use perfectionist rituals despite knowing this is crazy. They are blind to their purpose: to try to gain atonement with God.

**Cleanliness:** A preoccupation with cleanliness and organization is a trait commonly found in people who have OCD (and OCPD). It can start early in life; Sigmund Freud noted this defense even in young children. OCD sufferers tend to become excessively organized and concerned with cleanliness. They “must” remove every little speck of dirt and every tiny stain, i.e., sin. Items on shelves must be organized and lined up straight. This is a self-cleansing form of pseudo-atonement, trying to wipe away imperfection—dirt and disorder—for the same underlying reason an anorexic sheds fat. However, a person never reaches closure because the sense of impending doom lurking below the surface of consciousness does not go away through this mechanism.

**Checking behavior:** Another form of OCD perfectionism is repetitive checking behavior: examining locks, switches, faucets, etc., making sure nothing is left on or open.

Why this checking behavior? The sense that a person commits unconscious mistakes (i.e., the broad meaning of sin discussed in Chapter One) that could have a serious consequence—eternal damnation—is displaced on the physical environment. Excessive concern about making an error arises from existential guilt, the sense that a single sin keeps a person on track for the lake of fire. The person seeks to find the mistake and atone for it—and for sin in general—by the defense of “undoing,” turning off the switch that was left on, etc. However, the effort does not
stop there. The lingering, underlying sense of being stained makes a person endlessly check, and check the physical environment.

**Fear of harming:** People with OCD often have a fear of harming somebody, and may even hear an obsessive internal message telling them to *do* it. *Hiders* and second step defenses like projection are brought in to enable them to disown this inner voice and attach it to some outside agent. As we saw in Chapter Three, Elizabeth claimed this voice was a demon but more likely it was a projection of part of herself.

This is not to say that demonic possession does not occur; it does, and it should always be considered a possible source of this particular symptom. How can you tell the difference between defense mechanism and possession? Not so easy. In the case of Elizabeth, the symptom lost its strength when she thanked God for saving her, which would not have happened in a possession state.

Medication can reduce the symptoms because it acts on the brain chemistry underlying the obsessive thoughts, but it does not get rid of the disorder. A secular treatment called Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is way to gain partial control of individual obsessions and compulsions. However, the author has found that internalization of the gospel is the only remedy that really makes a difference. There is nothing like knowing your sins are paid for, that God forgives you to the uttermost. This is the only thing that—gradually—eliminates the existential anxiety that fuels the perfectionist obsessions and compulsions.

**Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD)**
People with OCPD do not have the obsessions and compulsions found in OCD sufferers. This disorder is not
classified as a form of anxiety by the psychiatric profession, but as a personality disorder—character pathology lasting at least two years—it shares several behavior patterns with OCD. In general, personality disordered individuals have problems dealing with other people and tend to avoid seeking professional help, so OCPD is probably a lot more common than the official statistic of one percent in the general population.39

OCPD personalities display their perfectionism in excessive devotion to work and productivity, to the exclusion of leisure and friendships. This preoccupation cannot be accounted for by economic necessity or any other worldly practical matter, but it is quite understandable from the perspective of the sin=death/hell equation.

**Pseudo-atonement defenses:** The over-conscientious, inflexible and overly scrupulous patterns of OCPD are “perfect performance” and self-cleansing types of *pseudo-atonement*. People in this category are fruitlessly attempting to atone for their sins through a combination of superior achievement, moral behavior and physical cleansing.

**Second step defenses:** The following are second step defenses that help OCPD sufferers hide from their inability to attain perfection, and from the threatening big picture:

1. Myopia: These people avoid “seeing the wood for the trees,” and focus only on the immediate details. This is a cognitive style common in perfectionism, enabling a person to be blind to the larger truth concerning their eternal destiny.

2. Indecisiveness and procrastination: A characteristic of OCPD sufferers is that they have difficulty bringing a task
to completion, as we saw in the example of Jim in Chapter Four. They cling to the idea that their work must be perfect, and since they are terrified by the knowledge that it never can be, their unconscious solution is to avoid finishing. For the same reason, they avoid making decisions.

So indecision and procrastination are perfectionist defense mechanisms that help a person think they can avoid making a mistake, i.e., a sin.

**Body Dysmorphic Disorder**
This is a mental disorder involving obsessive thought patterns rather than compulsive behavior. A person focuses intense hatred on a part of the body that may have nothing wrong with it, from an objective standpoint. The loathing is, however, explained by perfectionist displacement of sin on the body part. The hated nose is a proxy for the hated, damning sin nature.

**Trichotillomania (hair plucking)**
Hair plucking is a disorder involving compulsive behavior rather than the conscious, obsessive concerns of Body Dysmorphic Disorder. Hair represents sin, so plucking is self-cleansing: an attempt to remove sin and the sentence attached to it. Another “benefit” of this behavior may be self punishment—hurting and disfigurement, just as head-banging may unconsciously function as a penance in disorders within the autism spectrum.

**Addictions and Impulse Control Disorders**
Certain addictions and impulse control disorders involve an unusual form of perfectionism: denial of the Law rather than rejection of being a sinner. In these disorders there is often a defiant admission of personal flawedness, even to
the point of challenging God: *Go ahead, strike me down if you like. I can do what I like. I don’t face any punishment.*

This category involves compulsive and, often, illicit behavior. The disorders include: alcoholism; other substance abuse; pathological gambling; internet pornography; shopping sprees; risky sex; smoking; and illicit or dangerous novelty-seeking.

**Defenses:** The first step is to repress the moral code, to deny its very existence. The second step is to act out with behavior that is a defiant cover-up for underlying existential guilt. As an added punch, the painful consequences of the behavior in the form of illness and job loss can be a form of self-punishment, a type of *pseudo-atonement.*

Also, risky or illicit activities and substance abuse initially offer physiological escapes of various kinds. They have a tendency to elevate neurotransmitter activity in the brain, producing substance-dependent stimulation or calm, providing the illusion that all is well. However, once physical/emotional addiction and tolerance has occurred, these effects are reduced, and a person seeks new or increased levels of excitement or pacification.

**Withdrawal: disorders involving a breakdown of perfectionism**

Just as mental illness can happen when perfectionism is ramped up to an irrational fever pitch, it also occurs when perfectionist defenses break down. When, for whatever reason, defenses stop doing the job of keeping the *sin=death/hell equation* under the rug, suppressed material can flood up to the surface. Emotions flowing from the
innate conflict have lost their smokescreen and mental illness can result from the surfacing of the truth. It takes the form of depression; anxiety, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; anger-related disorders; and even psychosis. Physical illnesses can accompany this due to the effect stress has on the immune system. The depression, anxiety, anger and despair burst into consciousness as natural responses to existential guilt, the sense of deserving eternal damnation.

Failure is a major cause of perfectionist defense breakdown. One of the most stressful things for perfectionists is to fail, even once. One small letdown can conflict with their desperate need to see themselves as flawless. It forces them to face what they most fear, that they are destined for the lake of fire.

**Depression**
Living in this world presents losses and failures, but humans can usually cope with them. However, for a perfectionist, not only the loss of a job or a relationship, but even the failure to reach some minor goal can prompt a downward spin into clinical depression. We saw this happen to Alex in Chapter Four.

Failure can expose a person to the sin=death/hell equation. Any letdown can put the person in touch with that inner sense of lurking darkness, leading to a profound emotional response which easily leads into clinical depression.

**Question:** Every a time a person experiences depression and/or anxiety, is it caused by the sin=death/hell equation? Perhaps not in the initial stages, but when a mental disorder arising from some worldly issue becomes lasting and severe, the deeper issue has probably been triggered. The worldly issue may get resolved, but the disorder can
continue, and after the first episode, it is likely to recur in the future. This is because the sin=death/hell conflict does not reach a state of resolution until a person grasps salvation in the blood of Christ.

Also, what is called “endogeneous” depression has no evident worldly trigger. It just appears out of nowhere, like an earthquake, activated by existential guilt without an apparent precipitating upset in this world.

**Anxiety disorders**
Some people suffer from both depression and anxiety, others have just one or the other. Genes and life experiences make for this difference. Women tend to suffer from both more often than men. This is consistent with God’s curse of greater sadness for women through Eve: “I shall greatly multiply thy sorrow...” (Genesis 3:16).

**Panic attacks and phobias**
Anxiety comes in many forms, including panic attacks. However, the extreme terror of a panic attack is an irrational response to most upsets in this world, particularly the relatively minor ones that typically stimulate them. On the other hand, panic is a very realistic response to the reality of the lake of fire, and it can be triggered by any real world experience that a person associates with that eternal reality: darkness; powerlessness; or isolation..

Phobias involve irrational fear of events that often present little or no real danger but certainly make sense as a response to the sin=death/hell equation. Fear-arousing events in this world trigger profound emotional reactions to the deeper issue. These reactions become attached to relatively unthreatening worldly events and tend to persist.
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the secular treatment of choice for these disorders. It is used in a blow-by-blow fashion to disconnect each real world event, through desensitization, from a powerful anxiety-causing emotional response that is inappropriate to it. Up to a point this works, but it is like giving a series of tune-ups to a car that needs a new engine.

**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**
The debilitating and long-lasting effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder have come into focus in the last few years. Even though there is a real world trigger for this disorder, its symptoms are best understood as arising from the dread sin=death/hell equation.

This is how the disorder comes about: 1. a perceived life-threatening event occurs, 2. the event triggers the sin=death/hell equation, and 3. this sets in motion an endless loop of powerful anxiety-based reactions. To a limited extent, the hider defenses squash the anxiety, leading to flattening of affect, numbing and emotional withdrawal. However, a person who appears catatonic and empty most of the day can be forced to experience existential guilt and anxiety as it surfaces in the form of nightmares and sudden flashbacks during the waking hours.

Once this pattern is established, it can continue in full force for many years. The hyper-arousal, flashbacks and other PTSD symptoms tend not to go away without much help. The most effective secular treatments involve desensitization, helping a person develop a sense of safety in a hitherto threatening environment by exposing them to it while gradually building a positive response.
Social Phobia Disorder
Social Phobia is the most common anxiety disorder, affecting approximately thirteen percent of the population. In the previous chapter we looked at the inner perfectionist dynamic of this malady in the discussion of socially-prescribed perfectionism.

It is closely related to Avoidant Personality Disorder, the major difference being that avoidants are socially inhibited, feel inadequate, and are hypersensitive to negative evaluation. Social Phobics experience more outright fear around other people, especially in performance situations, and may have panic attacks when appearing in public. However, both Avoidants and Social Phobics have the same underlying dynamic: projection of their sense of deserving eternal punishment into the minds of others, mentally making them their attackers who send them to the lake of fire.

Perfectionism, anxiety and self-control
A sense of control is important to perfectionists. Consequently, some researchers have looked at the relationship between perfectionism and personal control.

One study asked: if perfectionists sense they have less control of a situation, do they experience more anxiety? The answer was “yes” in a study of professional performers. Self-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionists who had lower levels of personal control were more anxious about performance, had more physical anxiety, and had less goal satisfaction.

Another study found that as long as socially-prescribed and self-oriented perfectionists can avoid “hassles,” that is, situations where they experience failure, they stay relatively sane. But when they cannot avoid hassles and
are forced to see themselves making mistakes, they get depressed and anxious.\textsuperscript{44}

In other words, the less control you think you have, the more your perfectionism will cause mental illness. This is important when we look at the fact that deep down no humans truly believe they control the thing that is most important to them: their eternal destiny. They unconsciously sense they lack the ability to make themselves sinless. To stay relatively sane, they may be able to superficially delude themselves that their existence is in their own hands. However, at a gut level there is no peace or sanity for anyone not under coverage of the shed blood of Christ.

\textbf{If everybody is unworthy, and knows it deep down, how come all humans do not suffer depression or anxiety?}

This is a complex matter. Everyone carries existential guilt but genes and environment influence how people cope with it. For some, it remains below the surface of consciousness, kept submerged by a host of perfectionist defense mechanisms. For others, it comes up to the surface readily. One factor is genetic biochemistry; researchers have found genetic markers for depressive disorders.\textsuperscript{45} If a person has these markers, it does not necessarily mean they will suffer from depression, but it means they have a predisposition towards it when under stress. If their lives thrust enough losses and difficulty on them, and they have insufficient buffers to help them deal with it, they will react with depression.

The buffers are the different perfectionist defenses. Some forms of perfectionism are better than others at maintaining sanity. For example, research mentioned in Chapter Five shows that a person's style of interpersonal perfectionism
influences how much anxiety and depression they experience.

We have to remember that outside of the blood of Christ, nothing can work very well or for long. Those who rely on perfectionism as their defense are always at risk for some degree of depression and anxiety, although it may not reach a clinical level.

**Disorders featuring patchy perfectionism**
The third category of mental disorders in this chapter incorporate both the presence and absence of perfectionism. In other words, we see a patchy quality: sometimes too much of the most dysfunctional forms of perfectionism; at other times perfectionist defenses are lacking. This tends to go along with pronounced character and behavior pathology.

**Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)**
BPD is a condition in which out-of-control emotions are close to the surface because perfectionist defenses are inconsistent, absent in some areas, and present—pathologically so—in others. On the one hand, BPD sufferers have painful, undefended reactions to the sin=death/hell equation. On the other hand, they display self-destructive forms of pseudo-atonement.

As a borderline, your armor is full of big holes. You are certainly not in denial about the torment and futility of life in this world; quite the reverse. In response to the sense of deserving eternal punishment, you experience an all-encompassing form of self-loathing that can paralyze your ability to act in the world. You feel you are between a rock and a hard place without knowing why. Somebody out there is to blame, and you simmer with a free floating,
diffuse kind of anger. Going along with this is a preoccupation with life’s emptiness and meaninglessness. Until you are saved, and sufficiently sure of it, you phase in and out of boredom, anger and numbness.

One powerful feature of this disorder is a relatively conscious fear of abandonment. In reality, this is the experience of actually being separated from God, awaiting the lake of fire. Borderlines project this fear into the human realm, often displaying an obsessive attachment to another person. Since they sense that they deserve to be discarded—in fact they have an underlying sense of being eternally damned—they have a cynical belief that they must manipulate other people to get the attention they want from them, often with suicidal gestures.

As a borderline, it is very hard to believe anyone would do anything for you out of love. This is not just due to the poor parenting you have probably experienced. At a deeper level it is triggered by lack of a sense of being loved and forgiven by God.

It is interesting that borderline suicidality seems to have a goal of prompting someone to make a rescue attempt. This may be due to an innate sense of the true rescuer, Jesus Christ. However, sometimes the suicide threats are serious, and probably not manipulative; about eight percent of the time borderlines take their own lives.46

**Borderline suffering as pseudo-atonement:** This disorder involves a destructive form of *pseudo-atonement*: physical self-punishment. It is typically in the form of self injury or self mutilation, including cutting, making small incisions that draw blood on the arms or legs.
Though we humans are rarely conscious of it, knowledge of the essential blood payment lies deep in all of us. Lacking knowledge of the Law, it is easy to fall into the trap of making a sacrifice of human blood, perhaps as an unconscious form of rebellion that is abhorrent to God.

**Chemical hiders used by borderlines:** Many borderlines experience intense emotional pain, partly because they have a deficient natural opiate system. They are unable to carry out self-soothing, perhaps a result of parenting deficits, but also possibly due to innate deficiencies. This is where cutting comes in again. It is not only a blood sacrifice, and therefore a direct unconscious attempt to atone; it also triggers the body’s natural opiate response towards the production of pain-killing endorphins. So a secondary gain for self-injury is that it tends to jump-start the opiate system.

The deficiency in natural opiates also helps to explain the high level of substance abuse found in borderlines. Also, addiction offers *hiding* as a defense, as well as being a means of self-punishment in its harmful effects.

**Why do borderlines unconsciously choose suffering as a way to seek atonement?** Why do borderlines have these self-harming tendencies rather than constructive forms of *pseudo-atonement*? It has much to do with their history. Borderlines have often been raised in a situation of generational child abuse. This may stem from a learning effect, where each new generation imitates the previous one, or it may come from the inheritance of genetic weaknesses.

Whatever the reason, borderlines do not acquire the positive, constructive forms of *pseudo-atonement* that normally keep a person afloat in this world. Moreover,
they become accustomed to the unconscious guilt-relieving effects of being punished. In fact, they often become magnets for mistreatment by seeking out partners who will abuse them.

Although punishment-seeking can seem paradoxical as a defense mechanism to reduce guilt and anxiety, it is an unconscious attempt to pay for one's sins, i.e., a form of *pseudo-atonement*—*hit me, said the masochist; no, said the sadist*. If, as a child, you experience a habitual reduction in existential guilt after being punished, you continue to seek this as an unconscious secondary reinforcer that provides guilt relief in adulthood.

**Bulimia**

Bulimia is another “patchy perfectionism” disorder. Like anorexia, it is linked to self-oriented perfectionism, and it also involves dietary restraint, but the bulimic lacks the rigid control of the anorexic. As a bulimic, you lose restraint every so often and go on a compulsive food binge.

**Binging:** On an emotional/spiritual level, binging derives from the fact that perfectionism offers no forgiveness. Once a person has entered the error, or sin, of dropping off the food restriction wagon, all seems to be lost. There appears to be no way back, so the person throws all caution to the wind and goes “hog wild.” There is an empty place inside that food cannot fill because it is spiritual. That is why a binge often does not stop until the larder is empty; the hunger cannot be satisfied in this way.

In bulimia, there must be perfect control or there is no control. On the surface, this black or white thinking, or splitting, seems unreasonable and irrational, but it comes from the innate *sin=death/hell equation*. Subconsciously, a person is aware that one sin separates them from God and
destines them for eternal darkness. Once that line is crossed, there is a sense of finality and hopelessness, leading them to throw all caution to the wind.

Aside from the emotional/spiritual aspect of a binge, it can also become addictive because it offers physical comfort. There is a mood-improving elevation of serotonin after ingestion of the fatty and sugary foods typically consumed during binging (different from the anxiety-causing effects of serotonin mentioned in connection with anorexia).

**Purging:** Some, but not all, bulimics purge after binging. Guilt feelings erupt when the bulimic falls off the wagon, but purging is a way to get back on it again as the food is thrust out of the body. Even though it is physically distressing, the relief gained from purging can make it as addictive as binging.

This is not so strange when we consider the reasons. One is that for the bulimic, food, eating and fat are sins. Expelling food *per se*, plus stopping it adding fat to the body—both these things give the illusion of getting rid of sin. Also, the very act of purging gives the illusion of undoing the sin of binging, a self-cleansing a form of *pseudo-atonement*. Purging is a kind of anti-eating that erases guilt from the record and returns one to an imaginary state of sinlessness. Furthermore, purging is physically unpleasant and harmful enough to also be self-punishing. So on several fronts, purging helps bulimics fool themselves that they are controlling their eternal destiny.

**Conclusions**

As long as people can keep the *sin=death/hell equation* below the surface of consciousness through some workable
mode of perfectionism, they may be maladjusted but not mentally ill. This chapter shows what happens when perfectionism is not working well enough to maintain relative sanity.

On the one hand, perfectionism’s “side effects” are seen in some serious mental disorders involving obsessions and compulsions that attempt to atone for sin. On the other hand, people become ill if stress weakens their perfectionist defenses and they have to face reality. When perfectionism is absent or temporarily breaks down, underlying anxiety and depression come to the surface. Any failure can rupture defense against the sin=death/hell conflict and make a person crash into a painful mental state which deepens if they cannot escape back into perfectionism soon enough.

Overall, when perfectionists repress their sense of being imperfect and do not engage in destructive or compulsive forms of pseudo-atonement, they can be somewhat sane. However, mental illness happens when perfectionist defenses 1. are obsessive or compulsive; 2. consist of the self-punishing type of pseudo-atonement; 3. break down, particularly when a person has a genetic predisposition towards depression or anxiety; or 4. are absent.

Secular treatments have limited usefulness, like tune-ups on a car that needs a new engine. However, the author finds that when people embrace salvation through Christ, they lose the need for perfectionism and recover from mental illness. Even paranoid schizophrenics can become almost asymptomatic and gain a core of sanity.
Part Three

The eternal perspective

Now for the good part: the certain cure for perfectionism
Chapter Seven

Perfectionism and damnation: the eternal ill that really matters

The eternal ill of perfectionism is huge, yet most people are blind to it. Its enduring aspect is that humans, who enter this world separated from God and destined for the lake of fire, stay on that pathway. They may struggle and strive all their lives to become perfect, but if their own efforts are what they are relying on instead of God, when they die they will go to the lake of fire.

If this situation seems unfair, if it seems wrong because sin is the cloth of which humans are woven and humans are in this situation through no fault of their own as individuals, we have to remember that everyone has a chance to walk out of it—for free. The only qualification for avoiding the lake of fire is that you claim the God-given rescue: the shed blood of Jesus. You do not have to earn it, no human can. It is yours because God loves you.
Chapter Eight

Grace: the certain cure of all the ills of perfectionism:

Perfectionism is the mistaken drive to avoid the lake of fire through human effort. We have looked at the many ways people try to do this, and the reasons why it is impossible. Now it is time to look at what the God of the Bible—alone—has done for us.

The only viable way for humans to attain perfection is to receive it, as a gift, from God. It so happens that He not only allows us to do that, He commands us to do it. Throughout Leviticus, humans are ordered by God to offer blood sacrifices and be forgiven for sins. Christ is now the acceptable sacrifice given by God just because He loves us.

False pathways
Humans have a drive to escape the looming disaster of hell. Perfectionism is the wrong path to take, but if a person has not grasped the saving truth in the Bible, it is understandable for them to go that route. They do it out of desperation, even though an inner voice tells them it will not lead them where they need to go. Outside of the grace of God, there are only false pathways. Each one is a short-term pacifier, giving the illusion there is nothing to worry about. The most perfectionism does is keep some of the fear, anger and depression at bay.
The God-given way out
The saving truth of the Bible lies in its promise of substitutionary blood atonement: God accepts, and ultimately provides a substitute for the human sinner. There is an everlasting covenant spelled out in the Law God gave Moses and fulfilled in the death of Christ. Complete understanding of it comes from the first five books of the Bible, otherwise known as the Pentateuch, or Torah.

The nutshell version goes like this: Since humans cannot make themselves flawless, God provided a means in the Mosaic Law which, if followed to its conclusion in Christ, permits all humans to be treated by Him as if they were flawless. It is of enormous importance that God makes this commitment in writing. He gives us the right to go to Him and say: You promised.

The writer of the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews is agreeing with the Law (Torah) when he says: “Without shedding of blood is no remission.” (Heb 9:22). This is based on God's statement to Moses: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” (Leviticus 17:11).

As long as humans follow the blood atonement covenant, they are covered by God's own perfection in the form of the shed blood of Jesus. Christ's death on Calvary is the final form of the God-given covenant detailed in the Law. When humans claim the undeserved, unearned payment Jesus made on their behalf, they are no longer separated from their heavenly Father. Now, they are completely forgiven for all sin (past, present, and future). The lake of fire no longer awaits them.
Grace: before Christ died on the cross
Since the Fall, the Creation has been polluted. Humans have entered this world separated from God, spiritually dead, with physical death and the lake of fire ahead. The entire Creation lies in a state of corruption, doomed to be destroyed. Death, physical and spiritual, is the consequence of imperfection and there is no way we humans can pay and live.

However, God has established that the death of a substitute for humans pays the penalty for all of our sins. Right at the Fall, God had to intervene with grace. Had it not been so, the human race would not exist because Adam and Eve should have been killed on the spot. In His mercy, God made them coats of skin for cover, the first blood sacrifice.

According to the Law, the substitute must be a “clean” individual—originally an animal—killed in the prime of life, as Christ was killed. When the priest sprinkled the shed blood of the animal on you, the sinner, you were forgiven by God. You had to provide the best sheep from your own flock, a sacrifice made by you. But it was something you could do, and no great hardship. There was even a sliding scale, so that if you could not offer a sheep, you could bring a pigeon, or even a handful of flour. You were not asked to do the impossible: make yourself perfect. This is the central aspect of the book of Leviticus, which outlines blood sacrifices to cover every type of sin.

So grace has been present from the beginning. Our participation in the blood sacrifice does not prevent physical death in this world, but it saves us for eternal life in the world to come.

Grace: after Christ died on the cross
When Jesus died on the cross at his Father's request, He
replaced the system of animal sacrifices. Now the offering is God himself in the human form of Jesus; our kinsman redeemer (see the book of Ruth) whose shed blood purchased us out of Satan’s hands. Humans are commanded to cover themselves with His perfection and be saved. God forgives us if we approach Him coated in the blood of Christ. Nothing else is required for us to be saved.

Christ explains this at the Last Supper, calling this the New Covenant or New Testament in His blood. God was providing the very best sheep from His own flock to die in place of all humans who claim that atoning death to make their payment. Getting saved from hell became even easier than under the Old Covenant, because God made the sacrifice instead of requiring humans to do it. He literally purchased us out of Satan’s hands with the blood of sinless Jesus. The word “redeem,” to buy back, refers to this payment. God bought back what had been his in the Garden of Eden.

God is willing to see us through the rose-colored glasses of Jesus Christ. This means He is willing to look away from our sinfulness. It does not mean we stop being sinners or that we have a “sin permit.” God wants us to obey Him for our own good. Our status is: forgiven sinners.

Coated? The pictures God gives us in the Law shows Jesus covers us like clothing of clean white linen. Only under that covering are we accepted. As long as we are wearing the mantle of Christ, we can approach God and be with Him forever as if we were as perfectly sinless as Jesus. We are safe from the fires of hell in His everlasting arms.

In case pride gets the better of us, and we start deluding ourselves this is our own righteousness, it is essential to remember we are utterly dependent on the perfect
righteousness of Christ. We are under that cover, but far from perfect ourselves. This is “as if” righteousness. Salvation, a unilateral action on the part of God, is a total gift to humans, completely unearned and undeserved. It is the ultimate act of God's grace, unmerited favor.

A transformation begins in your heart once you understand this. You cannot help but love Him in return for loving you. You will love your neighbor, too. Even your enemies will be included in this, eventually. Why should you escape the fire and not everyone else? All humans are unworthy. So what if some are more corrupt than others? Did any of us deserve to be saved? No way.

The gospel cures perfectionism
The only cure for perfectionism is the gospel, the good news that Christ took our punishment on Himself. Its message has to penetrate the surface of our hearts, or, if you like, the human psyche, and sink into the deep place where the sin=death/hell equation lies.

The gospel brings resolution to the conflict born in us: we want life but face hell because we’re not perfect. Perfectionist traits begin to dissolve as we humans come to believe we are forgiven for all sins, transgressions, blemishes, flaws, or whatever else our imperfections are called.

God appeals to our sin nature
A certain fact is widely ignored both inside and outside of Christendom: we are lured into salvation by our terrible need to escape hell. To bring us to Christ, God appeals to our corrupt, “psychopath” human

God appeals to our selfish need to escape hell in order to save us, not to any high or moral purpose of ours
nature. He does not expect us to be drawn in by the idea of holiness or servant-hood, or by the promise of becoming good or better people. Those ideas are red herrings Satan uses to turn us off the God of the Bible. They do become important to us, but only when we are safe in God’s arms, no longer under the gun. We have to know that human works and goodness are not instrumental in our being or staying saved. Christ’s blood alone achieves that.

God knows that before we reach safety, we are self-preoccupied, desperate for a way to escape eternal damnation. That is why He makes salvation a total no-strings-attached, no pre-qualifier gift. All you have to be is what you are: a sinner.

The gospel: Inborn message?
Perfectionism is not the way to go, but its very existence and persistence suggest that humans sense there is a way to avoid the lake of fire. If there is an inborn sin=death/hell message, it would make sense for there to be a God-given hint of an “out.” Let us look at evidence for this.

Rescuer myths
One indication is the world-wide popularity of rescuer myths, particularly the theme of a prince who rescues a damsel from the jaws of a dragon. This closely resembles the theme of Christ, whose death on the cross rescues believers, called “the woman” in the Bible (Rev 12:6,17). Satan is depicted as a dragon in the book of Revelation (Rev 12:3, 4, 7, 9, and13). Genesis 3:15 is the first place we find a prophecy about Christ’s triumph over Satan. As the seed of the woman, He will destroy the head (or plan) of the seed of the serpent, or Satan.
Rescuer fantasies are common in the psychiatric population. This is not necessarily because the ideas of these people are distorted; in fact, they may be closer to the unconscious than “normal” people. Such fantasies are common in individuals suffering Borderline Personality Disorder, affecting one to two percent of the population.49

**Innate sense of the importance of a blood sacrifice**

Blood clearly gets very special treatment by God in the Law (Lev 7:26-27). The fact that it must not be eaten, and that humans must avoid contact with it may explain why blood phobia is common in the psychiatric population.50

Then there are those who say they find relief in “cutting,” making small incisions on their limbs that produce drops of blood. It is reasonable to assume that the bloodshed gives a person an unconscious sense of atonement with God. However, this particular practice is not acceptable to Him, because the impure blood of a sinful human does not satisfy the requirement of the Law that the sacrifice must be unblemished. Human blood cannot pay the penalty for sin. Also, human sacrifice involving murder is a serious sin. Exodus 20:13 says: “Thou shalt not kill,” referring to cold-blooded murder.

Humans appear to have an innate sense of the importance of blood and may be innately aware that blood pays the penalty for sin. All over the world, even in Bible-naive societies and from the earliest times, humans have offered blood sacrifices designed to appease gods. Where do we get this idea of the role of blood if God does not provide a hint to help us recognize the truth when we hear it?

These facts suggest that God places seeds of information about the gospel in the human psyche. However, the seeds
will not grow in the right way unless a person uses the Bible for guidance, led by the Holy Spirit.

**Why vestiges of perfectionism remain after a person is saved?**

Why do we humans still find ourselves struggling to pay for our sin even after grasping the coverage of Christ’s blood? Well, because parts of us do not know the wonderful, freeing truth.

**Habits**

For one thing, old habits die hard. Personality traits form during the first few years of life, but most people do not internalize the gospel until after they have solidified into a perfectionist mold. You seize up like a perfectionist Tin Man and the tendency sticks even when it is obsolete. However, it is curable. The Holy Spirit will work on you with His oil can if you do not resist Him.

**Fear**

After you are saved, you begin to lose your fear about your eternal destiny, but it does not happen overnight. Being saved is like being pregnant. You either *are* or you are *not*. Knowing you are saved is not so black and white. To be sure, when you grasp the shed blood of Jesus Christ as payment for sin and know you are off the hook, you no longer need to be afraid. However, Satan will use your residual fear and do his best to keep you in the perfectionism trap.

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You notice some sin in you, and one member of your internal committee says: *It’s OK, Jesus paid the penalty for that. You are off the hook.* Yet out of doubt and fear, another part of you can get in a frenzy: *That’s got to go. I’ve got to wipe that away or I’m done for.*
You still have one foot in the deadly trap even though a part of you has said yes to Christ. Not sure you are saved by grace alone, you still try to rescue yourself. Claiming the blood of Christ begins—only begins—a new course. The process of fully knowing you are saved, of convincing all those doubting committee members, continues until you leave this world. It is doubtful that anybody fully "gets" the transforming message of salvation all their way down to their toenails before they leave here.

**Imperfect faith**
Fortunately, perfect faith is not essential to salvation. We have to remember the mustard seed parable. Even tiny faith can move a mountain. So if you are unable to move mountains with your faith, you have an idea of how minuscule it must be: even smaller than a mustard seed. Yet it is enough to keep you out of hell (Matthew 17:20).

**The inner skeptic**
One moment the gospel strikes you with tremendous relief, as if you hit the lottery and now all your money worries are over. In fact, it is an infinitely bigger deal than that, but we humans tend to see blessings only in worldly terms. This is about eternity, no less. Next moment, your inner skeptic says: *the gospel makes salvation too easy, it can’t really be true.* Once you learn to recognize your skeptic, you can use Scripture when you talk back to him.

**False doctrine and not doing our homework**
There is a lot of false doctrine out there in the church. To fight its effects and its presence, we need to internalize Scripture, i.e., the Law and the prophets. There is no substitute for independent Bible reading, using dictionaries, concordances, maps and any other tools that will help. Scripture builds and deepens faith like nothing else can. God
gives us the picture of chewing the cud in the “clean” animals (Leviticus 11:3). We all need to become ruminants, to meditate on the Law, the prophets, the history of God’s people, and the facts regarding Jesus. But most of us do not give ourselves enough of it.

It is our loss if we ignore the Law of Moses and the Old Testament prophets. Jesus said: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, even though one came back from the dead.”(Luke 16:31).

Pride
What is more, pride continues to raise its ugly head. Satan will use it in his attempt to pull you back into trying to save yourself, or into thinking that Jesus only paid for your sins up to the point of your salvation, and now it is up to you. The pride in human nature keeps you trying to believe in the myth of indwelling perfection. It makes you blind to your faults, and it does not go away when you are saved. Few are broken and humble enough to willingly give up the illusion of innocence.

However, pride does loosen its clutch under the influence of the Spirit. The more you see pride as a handicap, and the more you realize how offensive it is to God, the more willing you are to tell it to be quiet. Jesus tells the parable of the publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14) to illustrate the way you are freed from guilt when you pour yourself out in confession to God. Pomposity gets in the way of this freedom and blocks the forgiveness and peace of mind you can have.

God will break down pride: the example of Job
God can bring in the wrecking crew to break down pride. It will hurt temporarily but, remember, God has the very best
intentions. Look what he does to Job. Job is what many would consider a godly man. There are plenty of people like him in the church who behave well but are not broken, i.e., they do not see themselves as sinners.

Job’s problem is that he is pure in his own eyes. He makes sacrifices for his children in case they sin, but none for himself. Why? Job is blind to his own flaws. So God breaks him down in a terrible way, using Satan as tester. Satan wants Job to curse God, so he hits him with loss of his kids, his wealth, and his health.

The best part of the story is that, in spite of all the trouble in Job’s life, he does not commit the sin of cursing God, thereby rejecting salvation. Satan wants to make all humans commit this sin so he can drag them to the lake of fire with him, but Job does not do it. However he does question God and complain about his misfortune. Finally Job sees how wrong this is, recognizes he is a sinner, confesses to his Father and repents, saying: “I am vile.” (Job 40:4). God, in turn, forgives Job, and doubly restores everything he lost.

A lovely thing about the book is that more than a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, Job shows that he knows he is saved by Christ’s shed blood. He makes an inspiring prophetic statement: “I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.” (Job 19:25).

**Is the sin=death/hell situation unfair?**

If there seems to be something overly harsh or unfair about the sin=death/hell situation, we must remember that God is absolutely pure, completely uncontaminated, and inviolably
holy. There is a technical aspect to the situation. Nothing impure can get near Him, including humans.

It is not that He wants to reject or destroy us, it is not that he hates our guts and wants to torture us. No. He loves us. Eternity is what matters to Him. As a loving parent He does not want us to spend eternity in darkness. Says His servant Peter: “The Lord...is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9). Peter is basing this on the fact that God commands us in the Law to be saved.

Everyone has always had a way to be saved
The Law is said to be not merely for the Israelite, but also for the “stranger that sojourneth among you” (Exodus 12:49; Lev 16:29;17:12; Num 15:15). We previously looked at the fact that before there was a written Law, our forefathers in the Garden were saved by a God-given blood sacrifice. Humans have been able to escape hell from the very beginning.

Human rebellion led to the sin=death/hell situation
It was humans who allowed themselves to get into this bad situation in the first place back in the Garden of Eden. There was no sin before the Fall, but although the terrible quandary was set in motion by our forefathers, they are hardly to be blamed. None of us could have withstood the wiles of Satan any better than they did; they were tricked into rebellion.

Justice
As to the unfairness of the situation, justice would be done if all humans went to the lake of fire. Horrible as it seems, this would be consistent with the Law. But God did not let that happen. He stayed within the Law to give us an ingenious remedy, an undeserved escape hatch, an easy way to connect with Him and avoid the deserved punishment. This rescue is
unearned by us, and it involves the death of Jesus Christ, who is our proxy. How fair is that on the One who died for us?

Conclusions

Whether it manifests in a religious or secular mode, the origin of human perfectionism is flight from what Jesus calls “outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30), i.e., hell. Humans sense that imperfection destines them for this horrible place when they leave this world.

We know, deep down, that human perfection is unattainable, because the standard of total flawlessness is absolute, totally beyond our reach. But until we take in the truth about the only viable way to connect with God forever, perfectionism can seem like “the only game in town,” better than nothing. The good news is that it has not been beyond the reach of God to remedy this situation on our behalf. He did it at considerable cost to Himself.

In the last chapter we made the point that the perfectionism tendency is not something that disappears immediately once a person hears the truth and claims the shed blood of Christ. Its patterns of thinking and behavior are often deeply ingrained in the human personality. However, the more deeply we humans absorb the fact that Christ took our punishment, that He did it as a gift to us, and that we are free to claim that gift in spite of our thorough corruption, the more perfectionism loses its hold on us. As that process continues, the old ways of thinking and acting gradually dissipate.

Little by little, you notice your perfectionist behavior. The Holy Spirit opens your eyes to it. You see its absurdity. You wonder how you ever got caught in it. It is startling to recognize how it conflicts with grace. So you start to challenge it in your mind.
And yet, next thing you know, you can find yourself right back in one of your old patterns, unable to complete a task that will not be one hundred percent flawless, or unable to speak at a meeting because you might make a mistake in front of those “critical” listeners who for sure are out to get you. You might even beat yourself up for still being a perfectionist: you want to be a perfect non-perfectionist.

Getting out of the deadly trap will not happen overnight. The practical advice in the next chapter can help you look at yourself. The secular suggestions are useful, but remember: they are only practicable when you know you are safe under the cover of Christ’s perfection.
Chapter Nine

Why the secular affirmations are useless before you are saved

Secular theorists recognize that perfectionism is bad for you, so they have devised some anti-perfectionist affirmations to cure it. In this chapter we see why these ideas bounce off like water from a duck’s back until a person has internalized the gospel. However, they are useful after a person is saved.

Secular remedies that cannot work without the assurance of salvation

What follows is the type of advice and affirmations that secular theorists use to combat harmful perfectionist thinking and behavior. Following each affirmation we give the reason why this cannot happen before a person has internalized—that is, taken in and applied—the gospel. Until the deeper issue is resolved, worldly recipes have only a limited effect.

1. Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of trying to be perfect, so you will realize that perfectionism is irrational and you will stop doing it.

*This advice does not go to the root of the problem. Unless you know what the Bible teaches, you are blind to the real reason for striving to make yourself perfect. Nothing can change in you until you claim coverage of the imputed perfection of Christ. You cannot be thoroughly convinced about the disadvantages of perfectionism until that point. Only then can you feel safe enough to look at yourself and*
your life. That sense of safety comes from the guarantee that God accepts you with all your past, present and future faults, regardless of how big they are; that no sin does not fall under the coverage of the payment Christ made on your behalf; and that all is forgiven.

2. Increase your awareness of the self-critical nature of your all-or-nothing thoughts, and how they extend to other people in your life.

The problem is, until you are safe in God’s arms forever, you dare not see yourself as you really are. Even if you could gain such insight without being saved, this would not be enough to change you. Those all-or-nothing thoughts seem totally irrational only when you do not realize they come from the sin=death/hell equation. That idea that “either I score 100 percent or forget it” seems completely unreasonable unless it is saying hell lies ahead if you do not attain the perfection of God. The Law says you can only escape hell if you score 100 percent all the time. You would have to be totally sinless all your life; an impossibility for humans. Anything less, even if it is 99 and 99/100ths percent perfect, keeps you on track for hell.

The impossibility of humans attaining perfection is why God had to go to such lengths to save us, putting Jesus in a tent of human flesh and having him pay the penalty for all our sin. Jesus, himself, never sinned, which is why his death can atone for us. He suffered spiritual death and hell in our place. God, in his goodness, gives us this payment, freely allows us to claim it, and promises to impute His own perfection to us, just because He loves us. We deserve the lake of fire but God gives us heaven. So it is consistent with the Law to have this black and white thinking, either 100 percent or hell.
3. Be realistic about what you can do.

*Well, you can try to be realistic. The problem is that if you are truly realistic, you know you have no hope of saving yourself. You cannot afford realism before you are saved, because it would lead to depression, hopelessness, and rage.*

4. Set strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on; attend to another activity.

*All very well once you know your sins are paid for. Until then, you find yourself behaving in what seems like an irrational manner, unable to let go of a task after you start it, or unable to even start it.*

5. Learn how to deal with criticism.

*If you dare not admit you are not perfect, you will not be able to deal constructively with criticism. Either you will refuse to hear it, or you will experience feelings of failure, anxiety and anger. That is how you will deal with complaints about you or your performance until you have the assurance of salvation as a gift. Once you internalize the fact that God forgives every sin, despite the fact that the sin nature continues its activity until the day you leave this world, you will be able to accept criticism and learn from it. The fear coming from the sin=death/hell equation will dissipate and the Holy Spirit will work to quiet the pride and arrogance in your heart.*


*Humans have an internal standard, an innate ideal. Going along with it is the knowledge that the penalty for not hitting it 100 percent of the time is eternal damnation. When someone recommends you lower the standard, you*
might like the idea, but it is impossible to change the Law written on your heart. However, when you are saved, and your inner self knows God accepts you in spite of all your flaws, you are no longer dominated by perfectionism. Then you can be reasonable about standards, raising them and lowering them according to the situation.

Irrational beliefs you can renounce only after you are saved

Now, instead of looking at secular affirmations, we will look at perfectionist beliefs that secular therapists tell you to renounce. People are told to drop or replace these ideas because they are foolish and harmful. However, from the perspective of the Bible, they are anything but irrational. All these ideas point to truth when the $\sin=\text{death/hell equation}$ is factored in. The existence of such beliefs is an indication of the real underlying issue: the tiniest departure from absolute perfection separates us from God, and destines us for eternal damnation.

What follow are some supposedly irrational beliefs that underlie perfectionism:

Everything in life must be done to your level of perfection, which is often higher than anyone else's. Yes, the penalty for any tiny sin is eternal damnation.

It is unacceptable to make a mistake. True. It only takes one mistake to be on track for hell. However, impure humans are damned from conception.

You must always reach the ideal no matter what. True. Nothing less than perfection is acceptable to God.
You are a loser if you cannot be perfect. *Yes, a loser of eternal life in heaven.*

There is no sense in trying to do something unless I can do it perfectly. *Yes, if you are trying to attain salvation through your own efforts, an impossible undertaking.*

If I fail, I should give up. *Yes, if you are trying to attain salvation through your own efforts.*

I am a failure unless I reach the ideal. *True, in terms of eternal life. Unless I'm perfect, I'm cooked.*

The fact is, people are right when they express these ideas because this is what the *sin=death/hell equation* tells them. These statements can only be rejected when a person has grasped that Jesus Christ made the essential payment for sin in their place, enabling them to cover themselves with His perfection.

**Conclusions**

The secular treatments cannot cure perfectionism; all they do is inculcate false beliefs without addressing the underlying issue. The lies can work temporarily, but they cannot quell the unconscious turmoil. They are doing the work of Satan by lulling a person into complacency. Satan wants us *not* to perceive the essentialness and the free availability of the shed blood of Christ. He wants humans to remain blind to the God-given right to cover ourselves with Christ's own perfection. He knows that if we believe it possible to fix the situation ourselves, we will not see the need for the death of Christ to pay for our sin.

Deep down everyone knows they are in bondage to the Law, which specifies spiritual death for any tiny departure from
perfection. The ideas that secular theorists have developed to cure perfectionism can only be effective when a person is already freed from the deadly penalty specified by the Law. Practical worldly wisdom can only be useful when the $\text{sin}=\text{death/hell equation}$ has been resolved completely in the only way possible. Nothing can change until a person has assimilated the fact that Jesus has paid the penalty for human sin.

We have to see that the payment is a gift from God to anyone who wants to take it. By claiming it a person is no longer on the hook for being less than one hundred percent perfect in thought, word and deed. Safe in the arms of God, we humans are free to shed those irrational perfectionist beliefs that fill us with depression and anxiety.
Chapter 10

The joy of being a healthy striver

Secular theorists agree that humans are made with a desire to be creative, competent and effective.\textsuperscript{51} Since we are made in the image of a Creator God, this is hardly surprising. But without the assurance of salvation by grace, there is no joy in our creativity. There is only neurotic perfectionism. When we do have that assurance, everything changes, as we see in the fictional case of Simon.

**Simon, the healthy striver:** Simon's project was one he had asked for. He was elated that his boss gave it to him. The task was a challenging one, but he knew that God would help him. He was to build a long-lasting battery that would make electric cars far more user-friendly.

Although he had extensive training and experience, he felt honored to be given this assignment. He worked hard and long at his first design, temporarily feeling stymied and frustrated at times, but always with an overall sense of satisfaction and hopefulness.

It took him many months to finish it. On the way he made some fascinating scientific discoveries that he freely shared with the community. He was a highly motivated engineer who wanted to please God. He always took one day of complete rest each week, exercised, ate well, slept well, and took good care of himself. When he spoke to others
about his work, he displayed a lot of humility, always giving God the credit for any successes he experienced.

The first model of the battery looked promising and worked well for a week before it developed a serious leak. Simon was disappointed in it but not disheartened. Immediately, he went back to work. He was not ashamed, nor anxious nor depressed; this was merely the “error” part of “trial and error” that he accepted as part of the learning process.

He had been praying all along, and now God used a dream to show him a way to solve the problem. A new design took shape, and there were no more leaks. The battery was tried out again, but this time it overheated. His boss made some constructive criticisms Simon was thankful for, and he returned to the drawing board. Further modification of the design looked promising, but although the device did not overheat now, it was more heavy and cumbersome. Simon sought the advice of his boss and some designers in other labs working on the same issues. This led him to decide to produce the heavier battery, knowing that as he kept experimenting, trying to improve it, God would help him.

**Healthy striving under perfectionism?**

Now, if perfectionist defense mechanisms do a good job, a person can engage in something like healthy striving, but only in a limited way and for a short time. This temporary phenomenon is probably what is described in the secular research as “healthy perfectionism.” If it is not gospel-based, sooner or later the fear will return to haunt. The only way to sustain true healthy striving is to be free of existential guilt. Secular research shows that relatively “healthy” perfectionists do experience less shame and guilt. It is doubtful that this is because they are truly
saved from the lake of fire by grace. More likely they have more functional (or “better”) perfectionist defenses.

**True healthy striving under grace**
What is clear is that under grace, the death grip of perfectionism disappears. You will experience a desire to make a contribution to your fellow men and to please God. Perhaps this idea is not new to you, but the only reason why we love Him is that He first loved us.

**Worldly differences between perfectionists and healthy strivers**
Let us look at some of the most striking differences between perfectionists and healthy strivers:

*Healthy strivers set high standards that are reachable.* Perfectionists reach towards humanly unrealistic standards.

*Healthy strivers assess what is appropriate for a situation and aim to reach that level of performance.* Perfectionists try to attain standards that are too high for the situation.

*Healthy strivers can reach a state of satisfaction and relax in it.* Perfectionists are never satisfied, because they continually see new heights they must reach.

*Healthy strivers bounce back from failure.* Perfectionists get depressed when they fail, because their self-assessment is tied into every single performance.

*Healthy strivers experience fear of failure and the disapproval of other people but are not impeded by this.* Perfectionists are impeded by fear of failure and the disapproval of other people.
Healthy strivers are open to criticism and use it constructively. Perfectionists become very defensive when criticized. They see things in black and white, either perfect performance or utter failure. Often they perceive helpful, constructive criticism to be a form of attack. Even praise may seem an assault to them: “I think this painting you are doing is wonderful.” “You mean, you don’t like the one I did yesterday?”

Spiritual differences between perfectionists and healthy strivers

Healthy strivers know God accepts them in a state of imperfection. Perfectionists do not know this.

Healthy strivers know Jesus paid for their sins. Perfectionists do not know this.

Healthy strivers know that God sent Jesus to die for humans just because He loves us. Perfectionists do not know this.

Healthy strivers know that God imputes the perfection of Christ to them, and that human efforts to attain imperfection are useless. Perfectionists do not know this.

Healthy strivers know they will not go to hell when they die. Perfectionists cannot know this unless they receive Christ.

Healthy strivers have peace of mind. Perfectionists do not.
When you internalize the gospel, you will be able to:

1. Get away from the concept of low self-esteem and accept yourself as a flawed but forgiven sinner.
2. Not be run by existential guilt, and the depression and anxiety associated with it.
3. Be willing to see your flaws, confess them to God, experience God's forgiveness for mistakes or failings, and apply it to yourself and others.
4. Relax and know your performance does not have to be perfect, it is not all-or-nothing.
5. Climb back on the wagon after you have erred.
6. Accept that "ideal" is only a goal, never to be achieved.
7. Slow down and become patient.
8. Develop reasonable goals.
9. Stop demanding perfection of yourself.
10. Eliminate unrealistic expectations.
11. Develop an "observing self" that assesses your progress honestly, without fear or shame.
12. Become more assertive and uninhibited as your faith in the forgiveness and support of God grows.
13. Let go of perfectionism.

15. Become a truly healthy striver.

16. Look forward to eternity.
17. Have a close relationship with God under coverage of the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

18. Feel free to pray.

19. Feel confident about decisions.

20. Stop procrastinating.


22. Be forgiving towards others and not be afraid of them.

23. Stop demanding that others be perfect

24. Stop being afraid of death.

Conclusions
Becoming a healthy striver is only one of all the good things that happen after the gospel gets into your psyche. Peace grows within you because you know you are forgiven to the uttermost; that the blood of Christ has been shed for you; that God has committed himself in writing to accept you as if you were as perfect as Christ when you claim the coverage of that shed blood; and that you will not burn in the fire.

The truth truly sets you free. The gospel is the only cure for existential guilt, and when you are freed from this guilt
and the anxiety that goes with it, you will do your utmost to excel both because you enjoy it and because it pleases the One you love. Under this circumstance, you will find true pleasure in your striving.

In whatever ways you find to be creative, inventive, and energetic, your first concern will be to tell the gospel so others are pulled out of the fire. Why should you escape and not everybody else who seeks a way out? This is the appropriate use, if not the prime reason, for the rescue instinct that seems to be part of the genetic programming of humans, and even of some animals.

The assurance of having escaped hell, and of having a sure place for all eternity in heaven—these truths will enable you to be bold in the act of telling. What have you got to lose? At worst, you might experience some temporary suffering or even the earlier ending of your life in this world. But that would be coupled with the satisfaction that you stuck with the only meaningful task it is possible for humans to do in this world, the only task that has true lasting value. You continued carrying the light with a sense of belonging to God.

This is the opposite of the effect of perfectionism, which deadens and supplants that instinctual desire to save others from the lake of fire.
Chapter Eleven

The whole story in a nutshell

This book may have changed the way you think about perfectionism. The truth about its origin might be surprising to secular theorists, theologians of all varieties, and even many in the Christian church, yet it comes from the Bible. Perfectionism’s root is hard-wired into the human psyche: the terrifying sin=death/hell equation: I’m a sinner, therefore I am doomed to go to hell. This equation creates enormous conflict deep in the unconscious mind of the human race. There is a desperate drive to avoid hell while knowing at the same time there is no human way to do it.

Perfectionism is at the bottom of all false religions
All religions start from the true premise that imperfection separates humans from deity and destines them for hell (or at least, something very bad beyond this lifetime). But from there all but one go in the wrong direction. They offer unrealistic perfectionist recipes for the human attainment of total purity. Nobody can be saved through them.

Only one offers a genuine solution: the Bible, which is not really a religion. It is the truth. God has stepped in and provided humans an unearned rescue, a ticket to heaven in the shed blood of Christ, perfectly consistent with the Law. God commands humans to cover their flaws with His perfection. When they do this He will receive them; they will be separated from Him no longer.
Mercy
From left to right wings, from Humanism to all the merciless legalists, all doctrines outside of the Bible are perfectionist. Now, there is nothing wrong with legalism, *per se*. Quite the opposite. Laws not only prosecute, they can also defend us, and that is what the Law does. *Merciful* legalism—law that defends and offers forgiveness—is essential, and this is only true of the Law God gave Moses. It specifies mercy through the substitutionary blood atonement covenant fulfilled by Christ. The Law is the source of grace, or salvation as a gift.

People often wrongly put the Bible in the same category as the merciless religions that are based on perfectionism. Very few realize that the Law God gave Moses is the *only* source of grace. It embodies the atoning death of Christ to the minutest detail. All other doctrines have a law that only prosecutes and damns, never defends, keeping humans on the road to hell.

Perfectionism's strange variety
Perfectionism does two main things. One is to provide armor that keeps a person unconscious of qualifying for hell by deceiving themselves they are not sinners. Then they can carry on as if nothing is the matter. The other task of perfectionism is what we call *pseudo-atonement*, giving the illusion that a person is earning their way out of hell.

There are several types of perfectionism, including some that have gone unrecognized up to now. Many do not fit the common stereotype of trying to attain a flawless performance. Some people opt for massive repression of the underlying issue, especially the awareness of being flawed, so they are superficially naive and lacking in self-awareness. Others opt for painful self-punishment as a way to gain an unconscious sense of atonement with God. Others yet focus upon strange
subject matter, as in the case of a person whose idea of perfection is the elimination of all body fat.

**Perfectionists use a variety of defenses**

There are two main types of perfectionist defense: 1. *hiders*, pushing your sense of being a doomed sinner below the level of consciousness, and 2. action-oriented *pseudo-atonement*. *Hiders* make you blind to: a) your imperfection, i.e., sin; b) the Law that says the consequence of imperfection is eternal separation from God in the lake of fire; and c) the existence of the lake of fire. *Pseudo-atonement* gives you the illusion—or even the delusion—you are making yourself perfect or atoning with God for sin by your actions—good deeds, self-cleansing and self-punishment.

**Perfectionism and achievement**

For people who attempt to attain the illusion of being perfect through their work and attainments, perfectionism has a way of making them do the very opposite. It creates such intense anxiety in these individuals that they cannot have peace of mind and they can become paralyzed.

**Perfectionism and people**

When there is a “people” focus to perfectionism, it is either on others or it is an inward concentration on the self. It appears that the *other-oriented perfectionist*, who projects his own imperfection on the people around him, making them the targets of his constant criticism, comes off better than the other interpersonal perfectionists. He has less depression and anxiety than the other types because he is more blind to his own flaws. But how blissful is his ignorance? The down side is that he is probably much farther away from receptivity to the gospel than others.
Perfectionism and sanity
When perfectionism is working well, a person can appear relatively sane, yet there are “side effects” in human relations and achievement. Some of those side effects are severe enough to make people mentally ill. Perfectionism is like an opiate that deadens pain but takes a heavy physical and emotional toll. The human ego has a potent reason to tolerate these side effects over consciously facing the truth. Who can face eternal damnation unless they have a payment for sin?

For an unsaved person, when perfectionism weakens or breaks down, the result is anger, anxiety or depression. These emotions are an understandable reaction to the sin=death/hell equation. Sometimes one setback, one mild failure, is all it takes to burst the perfectionism bubble. The details of the inner conflict may stay unconscious, but the feelings about it come up to the surface. A person experiences a sense of being damned, often without understanding why, along with worthlessness, fear, and doom. The response is out of proportion to what seems to be the precipitating event, but it makes perfect sense as a reaction to the deeper issue that has been triggered.

Secular treatments for perfectionism
There are some secular treatments in the form of affirmations for the typical achievement-oriented perfectionists. However, only if a person has internalized the gospel are these affirmations useful. You cannot quiet the ripples on top of the water for long when there is a dangerous undertow.

Only the gospel cures perfectionism
The gospel is the very opposite of perfectionism and its only antidote. Humans have to internalize the message that they are free to cover themselves with the perfection of Christ, and
that God has committed Himself to receive them without qualifications if they approach Him this way.

**Talking to Christians now**

If you hear anything that sounds like perfectionism when you go to church, how can you be sure this is what it is? The best thing to do is ask your pastor how a person is saved, and what salvation is. You should hear in response that salvation means being rescued from eternal damnation, and that salvation does not change your status as a sinner. You should also hear that you are saved *only* by claiming the death of Christ as *payment* for your sin, not by any change in yourself.

The Law is very clear about that: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” (Leviticus 17:11). The God-given shed blood of Jesus on the altar of Calvary is the necessary and sufficient payment of the penalty for human sin.

**The only sin you have to repent**

To escape hell, repentance is essential, but not the kind that is usually taught in the church, and even by respected televangelists. Despite what they say so vehemently, you do *not* have to repent of *all* your sins to get saved. This would be a “work” on your part and it is not what the Bible says. The only sin you have to repent is the worst one: the sin of rejecting or ignoring Christ as your sin bearer. By definition, if you do this your sin debt is unpaid and you will go to the lake of fire.

Until you are safe in God's arms, you cannot bear to look at yourself honestly enough to see all the other sins you are going to want to turn away from. Until then, you have no idea of how thoroughly corrupt you are. The Holy Spirit will
point that out to you for the rest of your time here. You will grow. But you will never be perfect, and God does not expect or require it. Our nature is thoroughly corrupt, and we must see this in order to truly appreciate the gift of salvation.

Talking to everyone
The often bizarre and apparently irrational perfectionist behavior is really not unreasonable in the face of what humans know deep inside them: that they are damned for even the slightest failing or blemish. Christ is our only hope. All we have to do is appropriate the death of Christ as payment for our sins and be free forever. What a deal!
Endnotes

1. We use the word “hell” in reference to the Hebrew word gehenna, the lake of fire. This name is derived from the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a place always burning with refuse. The word “hell” is used interchangeably with “the lake of fire” in this book.

2. Does hell last forever? The lake of fire and Bible verses on eternal punishment versus extinguishment:
   Certain prophecies suggest extinguishment in the lake of fire. Malachi 4:1; Isaiah 47:14, Jeremiah 13:24 and Joel 2:5 all use the metaphor of stubble burning in the field after a harvest, suggesting eventual extinguishment.

   However, none of the prophecies indicate the fire itself will ever burn out. On the contrary, Isaiah is one of several prophets who talk of burning that continues (Isaiah 34:10).

   Will all individuals thrown in the fire burn endlessly? The Bible is not clear on this. Talking of the saved in the new kingdom, Isaiah says: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.”(Isaiah 66:24). In Matthew 9:47-48 Jesus talks about those “cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched,” using the same language as Isaiah.

   The expression “their worm dieth not” sounds ominous, but it may not mean that all humans will burn endlessly. Endless burning is clearly awaiting some of God’s creatures. This is the fate of Satan and his cohorts. Revelation 20:10 says: “And the devil that deceived them
was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

It does appear that, besides Satan’s crew, others will spend at least a significant amount of time in the fire, and perhaps eternity. The picture we get from Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus (John 12) depicts the rich man in a conscious state of burning, while Lazarus is in what is called “Abraham’s bosom.” However, this situation is unclear; if this is the lake of fire (it is not called by that name), and it follows the final day of judgment, why are the family members of the rich man still living on the earth? (Luke 16:20-25).

Jesus talks about the sorting process on judgment day when all the unsaved “goats” “on the left hand” will go “into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25: 40), later stating: “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous into life eternal.” (Matthew 25:46). Clearly there is everlasting punishment for the unsaved. However, it might not entail everlasting burning for all, but everlasting separation from God.

Could it be that the length of time a person burns in the fire is a reflection of the amount of sin committed in their life? God may be giving us a clue about degrees of eternal punishment in the Law he gave to Moses. This is what some theologians have called the Talionistic code, in which the punishment fits the crime, i.e., an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, etc. (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21). If God applied this code to the lake of fire, it could mean that the more sin there is in an unsaved person’s life, the longer they spend burning. Or the more sin, the worse the experience in hell, per Dante's
fantasy of many levels. Why should a cruel despot who murdered millions suffer the same punishment as a regular unbeliever?

So the author asks: Is the lake of fire temporary for the majority of humans, with a set time of suffering and then extinguishment? (This is what the author hopes, at least.) Is there endless suffering for all with, perhaps, varying degrees of hardship? Or is there endless burning for all the unsaved? The situation is not clear. God wants us saved, and it is the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom. Extinguishment has less deterrent value than the prospect of eternal punishment. Better to prepare for the worst contingency, particularly when the remedy is free.

3. Most, but not all, religions specify hell/hells. Some propose suffering continual reincarnation in this world as a form of eternal punishment.


5. The capitalized word “Law” refers to the 633 commandments God gave to Moses, written in the Pentateuch or Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Law includes grace in its provisions for being totally forgiven by God via a blood sacrifice.

6. All quotations are from the King James Bible


8. See note #2.

10. Ibid, 657.


21. Luther, Martin (1483-1586), when reading the book of Romans learned about salvation by grace alone. Internet arcticle: www.religionfacts.com/Christianity/people/luther.htm.


31. Ibid.

Endnotes


40. Ibid, 466.

41. Ibid, 341. 10-25% lifetime risk of depression for women, 5-12% for men. Panic disorder without
agoraphobia is twice as prevalent for women; panic disorder with agoraphobia is three times more often for women.

42. Ibid., 414.


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**Notes:**
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- **J:** Justice
- **K:** Karma
- **L:** Lake of fire
- **N:** Narcissism
- **O:** Obsessions
- **P:** Parable
- **R:** Religion
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