

Pursuit of Perfection

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I memorized the Ten Commandments when I was seven years old. It was part of Vacation Bible School that summer. Being naturally competitive, I learned them in order to score points with the adults; good things tended to come my way when I pleased adults.

I grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist church. It taught that keeping the Ten Commandments perfectly was a test for salvation and necessary to survive end times. The commandments were emphasized in “My Little Friend” and “The Primary Treasure”, children’s Bible studies which our church provided and my Mom taught every night before my brother and I went to sleep. They were emphasized at the church schools I attended. Everything in my religious life revolved around them.

Above all, I knew that if I kept the Ten Commandments I would be accepted by my parents, my teachers and by God Himself. I also knew that if I didn’t keep them I would not be saved.

My entire life became an exercise in staying “between the lines.” I studied hard at school in order to stay between the lines of scholarship. I practiced baseball until it was too dark to see in order to stay between the lines of excellence in that sport. I practiced piano in order to stay between the lines of musicianship. The smallest failure in these, or any other arena, caused me intense mental pain.

I still remember the first “C” grade I got on a report card – 4th grade Social Studies. I was crushed. I didn’t understand how my folks could be so complacent about it when I finally got up the courage to admit it to them, although I was glad they didn’t punish me. I vowed never to get another “inferior” grade, and I didn’t all the way through high school.

This performance orientation defined me. I thought I was made of sterner stuff than other people. I tried new things only when I could figure them out in advance. The thought of failing in public was enough to make me break out in a cold sweat.

However, this performance orientation served me very well. All of the authority figures in my life were generous in their praise and with their pocketbooks. The harder I tried, the better I got, and the more praise I received. I was focused. I was intense. I knew what I wanted and how to get it.

This performance orientation also caused a few problems. I had a terrible temper. I had no patience with people, especially myself. I was judgmental. I learned the hard way that it isn't a good thing to be correcting your teachers all the time.

Some would say, "Oh, Richard's just wired that way." True, but having the Ten Commandments as the very core of my life intensified the situation greatly. I didn't know anyone who tried harder than I did to keep them. I didn't know anyone who came as close as I did toward keeping them properly.

I was a religious zealot, jealous for the things of God. I truly enjoyed everything we did at church. I read the Bible stories. When I got older, I read commentaries and Bible dictionaries. I read everything I could get my hands on that had anything to do with religion.

But there were these "side" issues that kept getting in the way. I learned to swear like a sailor. I could be especially colorful of speech during those *mano a mano* moments that occur regularly at basketball and football games. I was always careful, though, never to take God's name in vain (Commandment #3) or let the adults hear me.

I suffered through all the normal hormonal changes that teenage boys go through. It seemed to me that I spent most of my time either thinking about God or lusting. Sometimes I was doing both at the same time. Psalm 51 became my comfort. I figured if David could get through it, I could.

I now charged head-long into a vicious cycle. I'd say, think or do something that the Ten Commandments told me not to do. I'd beg God for forgiveness. I'd get over the immediate grief. I'd pick myself up, dust myself off and look around to make sure no adults knew I had

failed. Then, I'd launch back into my pursuit of perfection, only to fail at some point down the road. "Some point down the road" could be three minutes or three weeks or three months, and I'd be back on my knees begging God for forgiveness.

These thinking and behavioral patterns persisted into adulthood. I became two people. On the outside, I was perfect – always doing the right thing, active in church, teaching Bible studies, becoming a minister. On the inside, I was desperate, living in constant fear that I would be found out for the complete fake I thought myself to be.

My entire being screamed for relief. The cognitive dissonance resulting from trying to rationalize my behavior with my desire for absolute perfection demanded answers I didn't have. Thankfully, God created us in such a way that we absolutely cannot stay in this state for long.

Music became my pressure relief valve. I began to write songs. Most of them were frightfully depressing, and all had a consistent theme – the need for peace.

A bit later, it was demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that our church's prophet pretty much plagiarized everything I thought had been dictated to her from the very mouth of God. Worse, our church had known about this situation from the beginning and had covered it up. This left me with no foundation, because I had developed a habit of proving everything I read in the Bible and in other religious books against this person's writings.

And then my wife started studying the Bible with a friend at work. My wife's role was to see to it that Lynn learned "the truth." Instead, Lynn would say, "Lois, I don't think that's in the Bible." Lois would come home and we'd look it up to prove Lynn wrong. Nine times out of ten we discovered "that" wasn't in the Bible.

These three processes (music, losing my foundation and learning that I didn't know as much about the Bible as I thought) served as the starting point for a fifteen-year journey out of that church and into freedom.

The first time I read 2 Corinthians 3:7ff (“Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone...”) I was stunned. Flashing lights and sirens went off in my head as I realized the very thing I thought was my reason for being – keeping the Ten Commandments – was, instead, the very thing killing me every day. “How much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” More flashing lights and sirens! The thing I wanted more than anything else in life, righteousness, was a gift brought to me in the New Covenant.

Everything fell into place. My entire life’s work of pleasing my elders and pleasing God disappeared in a brief puff of ash. I didn’t need God’s approval; I already had it in Jesus (Romans 15:7). I didn’t need to beg for forgiveness; I already was forgiven in Jesus (Ephesians 1:7). I didn’t need to earn righteousness; I already was righteous in Jesus, made perfect through His sacrifice (Hebrews 10:8-14). I no longer needed to worry about whether I would be saved at the end of time; I already was saved, right now and for all eternity, in Jesus (1 John 5:13).

The Law truly is holy, just and good. God gave it so that we could see how much we need Jesus. When we get to that point, the Law has done its work and is finished with us. Trying to use the Law to do something for which it was not designed is an exercise in futility. I thought it would give my life meaning and purpose. I was terribly wrong for many, many long and frustrating years. The Ten Commandments were pointing me to the One Who could give my life meaning and purpose, and when I finally turned around, when I finally repented, to meet Jesus, my life changed forever.

Law or Grace. I had to choose how I was going to live my life. I chose grace! You need to make that choice, too. Trying to live by Law will destroy you – body, soul and spirit. Accepting God’s grace in Christ will bring you back from the dead.