

Embracing the Broken

LETTING GO OF PERFECTION &
LIVING BY THE POWER OF CHRIST'S GRACE



TIFFANY WEBSTER

Author of "Perfect Lie" and Founder of Evergreen

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PART ONE

*The Chains
of Perfection*

ONE

Perfectionism Is Born

I sat there staring at my race car on the wall. Everyone's cars had moved but mine, and I hated it. I was in third grade, and we were learning times tables. My teacher had created a large-scale racetrack that spanned the walls of our classroom, and every student was given a race car that represented how fast they could complete a sheet of multiplication problems without missing one. It had been a month, and there sat my car alone at the beginning. It hadn't moved an inch. OK, fine, it wasn't alone. It was there with two other cars, but I had dismissed both of them because they belonged to two kids in the class who had an innate anger toward school and who couldn't care less if their cars moved, let alone if they even tried to do their work to begin with.

I'm sure I had felt this awful emotion before—but this is the first clear, vivid memory that I have of this feeling. It's the first of what would become many times where I felt "it," the shame, panic, and heartache of not measuring up and not being "enough." And it hurt.

The teacher passed out our daily times table sheet again. "Ready, set, go!" I hurried through it, trying so hard not to miss one. "TIME." We dropped our pencils and my teacher began calling off the answers. I started to get anxious. *So far so good. Only a few left. . . .* I was holding my breath.

" $4 \times 5 = 20$ "

" $2 \times 3 = 6$ "

" $6 \times 3 = 18$ "

" $7 \times 8 = 56$ "

My heart dropped. I immediately got a big lump in my throat. I didn't want to cry. *Please don't cry.* The teacher's voice faded and I remember the only thing I could hear was my heart pounding and my mind pleading with my eyes to hold back the tears. *Of course it was 56. Why did I put 35?*

"OK! If you got 100 percent and your time improved, go ahead and move your car to the next track."

I held my head down while large tears dropped onto my paper. I hated the tears. I wanted to hide. I pulled myself together and managed to make it through the rest of the day until I got home and saw my mom. She's my safe place. Always has been, and always will be. She's loved me through the darkest of times and cheered me on through the best. A million people can ask me how I am, and with a big smile I can answer "good." But with my mom, all walls come down, every single time. They always have. I sat there sobbing in her arms, telling her how hard I had tried and how embarrassed I was.

"I'm the dumbest one in class!"

My mom sat there holding me, saying all the right things that a mother should say, but I didn't listen. Nothing was settling my heart, and my hurt was turning into anger. I was mad. I hated that feeling and I never wanted to feel it again. Ever.

The next day my mom and I met with my teacher after school. She really was the kindest lady and one of my favorite elementary teachers. To this day I know she only hoped to help and make me the best she could. After explaining my frustration and sadness, she graciously gave me a large stack of multiplication sheets to take home for practice. For the following weeks, I spent hours and hours making my way through the stack. I'd race the timer, race my dad, and then race my mom. I would do them after school and before bed. I was determined. I'd like to blame genes, but I'm sure I would have become this way no matter what: competitive. It runs deep in me, and you could say this incident may have been the spark that woke the beast.

I practiced, and practiced, and practiced. And you know what? My car started moving, and it started moving fast. In fact, by the end of the year, it had moved to the very front of the track. I was rewarded with a special lunch date with my teacher and the only other two kids who were able to do a full sheet of multiplication problems in less than two minutes.

Now, I know what you may be thinking, “Tiffany, this is a great story! A story of triumph, hard work, and dedication. A story with a good ending.” OK, sure. It is. And don’t get me wrong, I’m a big believer in the power of hard work and perseverance. But this story? It isn’t about that. It’s about something much deeper. It’s about something much more. Because that moment, as rewarding as it was, wasn’t born out of hope. It was born out of fear—fear of failing, fear of not being enough, fear of not fitting in, and fear of never measuring up. For the next twenty years, fear sat in the driver’s seat behind all that I did. And let me tell you—fear isn’t that great. It’s kinda awful, and it almost ruined my life.

—

I was lucky enough to be born to parents who loved the Lord. They raised me in the gospel of Jesus Christ where the motto “choose the right” became the measuring stick to everything I did and the imprint that laid visibly on my heart and soul. I’m passionate and stubborn, but my heart is tender. I’m a people pleaser and empathizer. I hate seeing people sad, and I hate letting others down. I’ve always been this way. You know what I mean? I believe we each came to this earth with certain attributes and characteristics embedded so deep within us that there is no other explanation to why we are the way we are except for the truth that we are spiritual beings who have existed forever. If you are a parent, you may understand what I’m talking about. Shortly after having a child, it becomes obvious that they came to earth with attributes that you, as their parent, couldn’t have possibly taught them at such a young age. Some kids come running out of the womb with a fierce determination to conquer the world. Others are calm, patient, and easygoing. Some a little more stubborn, independent, and fearless.

Me? Well I was inherently what you would call a “good girl.” Not to be confused with “perfect,” but rather I was naturally born with an eager spirit to do and be good. I didn’t enjoy getting in trouble, and for the most part I tried hard to be obedient. I remember specifically the first time I lied to my mom. I was in fifth grade, and I was struggling with some health issues and insecurities of being “bigger” than all my friends. These struggles made me keenly aware of how much junk food I ate, and my sweet mother knew I was trying to eat healthier.

One day while doing the laundry, my mom found two full-sized candy wrappers inside my pant pockets. I was standing there, and she innocently asked me if they were both mine. There were those feelings again: shame, panic, embarrassment. I looked at her and told her that one was mine, but the other was a friend's who had "asked me to take her trash for her."

I was also gifted with the ability to harbor immense guilt. I carried that dumb lie with me for five years until I was fifteen. We had had a lesson on honesty in Sunday School, and I came home crying to my mom confessing that both those candy wrappers had indeed been mine, and that I was so sorry I had lied to her! I then begged for her forgiveness. She obviously forgave me, and today we both laugh at my . . . well, I don't even know how you would label that. But every time we talk about it, we laugh.

Needless to say I didn't get in trouble very often. Not because I was "just so good," but because I had a real fear of messing up or doing something wrong. Even the slightest disappointed look sent me spiraling. It's almost unexplainable, but it was real. Like I said, I was born a "good girl."

Don't be deceived, this doesn't mean that I didn't have struggles. Oh no, I had plenty of those. I was 100 percent awkward and insecure, plus I grew what felt like one thousand times faster than all my friends. Today, I stand at a solid five foot eleven inches. I don't remember the words *petite* or *small* ever following me anywhere. As a young girl, this can completely wreak havoc on your self-esteem.

I was cut from the school choir, *twice*, and I was told I didn't get the part of Clara in the *Nutcracker* in third grade because they needed a girl who was small enough for the prince to lift in the air. Then there was that time I misjudged the velocity of the playground slide, and I found myself lying in a giant puddle. With mud covering my backside, I rushed inside to call my mom. As I walked to the office I heard the fifth-graders making their way to lunch. I panicked and pressed my backside up against the wall. Hoping, praying that they wouldn't notice me. I mean, maybe they wouldn't notice a second-grader pressed up against the wall, shuffling to the office with a trail of mud behind her?

I won't even mention the time the entire school saw my bright-green underwear during a school performance. So, yes. I definitely had plenty of problems without breaking the rules. I know most of this is 100 percent worse

in my head. Those who knew me at a young age have completely different views of who I was, but this was my reality. I was a tall, awkward girl who feared failing and desperately yearned to be enough. And in a world that tells us to cover up even the slightest flaw on our face, this can be terribly hard. I hated that feeling—that fear and sadness that comes from feeling like you are “less than,” that you don’t belong, and that you don’t measure up. But it’s been there, staring me in the face since I was young.

At its root, perfectionism isn’t really about a deep love of being meticulous.

It’s about fear. Fear of making a mistake. Fear of disappointing others. Fear of failure.

—Michael Law¹

And this fear—it didn’t just stop at me feeling like I didn’t have worth. No, because fear feeds fear. And fear and I, we developed a tight relationship. I knew it well at an early age. It’s cruel, with the ability to suck joy out of every situation—family vacations, school, relationships, having a child, marriage, careers, the world. It’s right there, every second, desperately trying with all its might to hologram the worst possible scenario that could happen. Nudging and reminding you of the costs and pain to every situation: ATV rides, lake trips, sleepovers, the dark. When my parents would go out of town, I was certain they wouldn’t come back. It didn’t matter what it was, there was fear, causing me all kinds of anxiety while breathing toxic darkness into every aspect of my life.

—

Sure, your fear may not look like mine; fear has endless masks and comes in all shapes and sizes. It has different voices and different levels. But in the end, it affects us all.

Fear is everything that God isn’t, and it is the catalyst to each and every weapon that Satan uses against us. Fear is the parent of shame and the driving force behind anything that keeps us away from God. “Fear . . . is a principal weapon in the arsenal that Satan uses to make mankind unhappy.”² It always has been.

GUILT → FEAR → SHAME

Let's go back to the Garden of Eden, shall we? Adam and Eve are living "unashamed" in their nakedness in the Garden of Eden with two commandments that they are to obey:

1. To not partake of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
2. To multiply and replenish the earth

Then, who shows up? Satan, tempting and trying both Adam and Eve to partake of the fruit that they had been forbidden to eat. The story unfolds as Adam and Eve become conflicted, and in temptation they both end up partaking of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Naturally, this choice brings with it guilt, as guilt is the direct consequence and feeling we get from disobeying God's commandments. What follows next is extremely important. Satan, knowing exactly what has transpired, then feeds fear into Adam and Eve's natural feelings of guilt. This fear then becomes shame. And that shame drives Adam and Eve to hide themselves from God.

And they knew that they had been naked. . . .

And they heard the voice of the Lord God . . . and Adam and his wife went to hide themselves from the presence of the Lord God. . . .

And I, the Lord God, called unto Adam, and said unto him: Where goest thou?

And he [Adam] said: I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I beheld that I was naked, and I hid myself." (Moses 4:13–16)

In only a few short verses of scripture, we go from an Adam and Eve who are unashamed of their nakedness to an Adam and Eve who have now spiraled from guilt to fear and to shame and hiding.

Growing up, I didn't understand the difference between *guilt* and *shame*. One of my favorite contributors in helping me understand this topic more clearly is expert researcher and author Brené Brown. Brown has spent years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. She states:

I believe that there is a profound difference between shame and guilt. I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.³

In the context of the gospel, we know that guilt stems from truth. It's a natural emotion that comes as a consequence of sin. For "the Lord cannot look

upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31). Hence, there must be some sort of emotion that motivates us to be better, to change and to repent. However, guilt should never keep us from God. The purpose of guilt is to turn us back to Christ and back to our God, having hope in Them because we know that through Them we can become more. Guilt should be a healthy emotion that brings change.

Our sins and weaknesses should never define us. When guilt turns us away from God, when it tells us that we are unworthy or that we need to hide our brokenness and flaws—you can absolutely know that Satan has stepped in, that he has fed our guilt with fear and shame, and that he is doing everything he can to keep us hidden and distanced from God (and not just God, but from all and any connection that he can).

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12)

I hate giving the adversary any more attention than I already have, and I hate acknowledging him, but I believe it’s crucial. This war we are facing, it’s not against each other or against God—it’s against him. Satan knows us. He knew us before we came here. He knows our weaknesses and our inadequacies. He knows that we chose Christ, and he hates us for that.

Satan is miserable and will do anything to destroy our happiness and light. Everything that he does is driven from one core mission and goal: to keep us away from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Eating disorders, drugs, pornography, bullying, immorality, lying—sure, these are all different behaviors and different lures. But ultimately, they all have one purpose and are each driven from a place of fear, shame, and pain. Perfectionism? It’s no different. At the end of the day, it’s just another lure disguised in beautiful wrapping that seems harmless. But of course, that’s how each of his lures start, clipping themselves into us carefully while we aren’t looking.

You remember the famous frog analogy, right? In order to kill a frog using water, you have to start by placing it in water that it’s comfortable in. If you immediately set it into boiling water, it would jump right out. So rather you set it in water that seems pleasant and unharmed. Then slowly you turn up the heat, one degree at a time. Eventually, the water is boiling, and before the frog realizes what is happening, it’s too late. He’s gone. Actually, why are we allowed

to tell that story to our kids? It's a little more graphic than I realized. But it's real. And it's true.

I remember brushing this lesson off, thinking that it only applied to addictive behavior such as pornography, drugs, or alcohol. But it doesn't. Satan has a tactic for each of us and little did I know that while I was busy brushing it off, I had actually fallen into my own pot of comfortable water. I mean, the scriptures do tell us to "be ye therefore perfect," right? (See Matthew 5:48.) Plus, all I was trying to do is be highly successful at everything I did. "And now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which I, the Lord God had made" (Moses 4:5). Perfectionism was an easy fit, and Satan knew it.

"Drugs and alcohol aren't gonna work as well on this one. Let's tell her she isn't good enough, bind her with perfectionism, and shame her into hiding. She'll never see it coming!"

NOTES

1. "Michael Law Quotes," Goodreads, accessed June 21, 2017, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/664650.Michael_Law.
2. Howard W. Hunter, "An Anchor to the Souls of Men," *Ensign*, October 1993.
3. Brené Brown, "Shame v. Guilt," [Brenebrown.com](http://brenebrown.com), posted January 14, 2013, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://brenebrown.com/2013/01/14/2013114shame-v-guilt-html> [URL inactive].

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