

## The Performance Trap: God's Answer To Our Need To Succeed

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As a college student I pastored Mt. Zion Baptist Church near New Hampton, MO for a year. They had Sunday School every week but held morning and evening preaching services twice a month. It proved to be a rewarding experience and I hold memories of that one room, open country, church with great fondness.

However, the agony of preparing to preach still haunts me. I was so concerned about not preaching a terrible sermon signifying personal failure that I procrastinated until the last minute to get ready for Sunday morning. Frequently, I would not start on my sermon preparation until Saturday night at 10:30 p.m. after I'd closed down the Baptist Student Center. I would throw something together, sleep fitfully, then drive 50 miles to preach. The afternoon would be spent trying to get ready for the Sunday night service.

I was basing my self-worth on preaching a "good sermon" but was not mature enough to handle a paralyzing fear of failure. Attaching our self worth to our ability to live up to some set of expectations is a performance trap.

### **I. The Performance Trap and It's Consequences.**

The performance trap is woven into the very fabric of life. We all need to be encouraged to do our best. However, in our broken world, we are often programmed at an early age with the message that to earn the approval of others, we must measure up! This is the performance trap. We must strive to meet the expectations of those who are important to us. We may have learned that if we don't measure up love and positive reinforcement will be withheld. In its place, will be abusive and demeaning words, perhaps even physical abuse.

The older we get the more complicated and demanding these expectations become. Sometimes they come from persons in authority. They can also come from memories played and replayed over and over in our minds. As we compare our performance with the accomplishments of others we typically see their strengths and compare them with our short comings and end up feeling about an inch tall. Feelings of failure and inferiority seem well deserved..

This deep inner need to prove ourselves, to gain self worth through succeeding, becomes a driving motivation. We unconsciously begin living by a "**have to**" mentality. We believe we must perform, we have to do well, we have to succeed or else we are worthless and have no right to feel good about ourselves. Driven by this "**have to**" mentality leaves no room for relaxation, playfulness, joy, and creativity. We become human "doings" rather than human "beings".

Naturally there are consequences to such a performance driven, life behavior. Interestingly, the consequences can head in opposite directions. **One direction is compulsive achievement.** This is a driving compulsion to push ourselves toward achieving goals. To fail is unthinkable. We are not talking about a healthy attitude of doing the best job we can and taking some natural pride in our work or achievements. The person who "must" achieve ties one's self image and self worth tightly to how much can be produced. Workaholism falls into this category. Even the slightest shortcoming signals that they are not worthy of love and positive feelings about oneself.

Perfectionist also belong to this category. They are often prized as employees because they do such a good job,

but they can also make life miserable for those around them. How is that? You don't want to stand in the way of a person who sees only one way something can be done, their way. If you block the goal achievement of the perfectionist, you are liable to wake up an angry bear.

Both the Compulsive Achiever and the Perfectionist are often manipulators. They've learned how to get what they want and how to use others to achieve their goals. They can be a workaholic, overly responsible, and prideful. They are frequently praised for all that they get done. But deep in the core of their being, they are driven by the false belief: ***I must meet certain standards to feel good about myself.***

**This same false belief can lead others to respond to the Performance Trap in an opposite manner. These folks are ruled by an overwhelming fear of failure.** Failure has become a part of their self-identity. Their attempts to perform well tend to end in perceived failure. So every perceived failure reinforces the previous one until nothing better can be envisioned. The following typical behaviors accompany such fear:

**Withdrawal** is pulling away from other people, especially those who might ask them about their lack of success or performance. This is where a dark closet and curling up in the fetal position comes in handy!

**Avoidance** is refraining from new experiences, taking risks, or being caught in a situation where they won't know what to do. They avoid the slightest chance of not measuring up.

**Depression** is a sign that self loathing, and tons of negative feelings have been called down upon oneself until the sun light of hope has been blocked out by despair.

**Safety Seeking** is when a person dominated by a fear of failure will seek out safe situations and safe people. They will avoid successful, self-confident people out of shame and embarrassment. They will only attempt those things they think they can make happen.

Do you see glimpses of yourself in some of these characteristics? Perhaps for the first time you are beginning to see that the way you have approached life all these years isn't emotionally or spiritually healthy nor have you found the inner self worth and identity you've been trying to achieve.

## **II. Justification and God's Smile**

Though I've studied similar material in the past, I am only now beginning to see how the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ serves as the foundation for emotional renewal which can then contribute toward growth in spirituality. When I use the term spirituality, I am not referring to the "PC" version, or the New Age definition.....I am referring explicitly to our personal relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord as empowered and made real by the Spirit of Christ who lives within us as the result of our salvation.

No one has to tell us that there is a **black hole** in the center of every person that sucks the life out of us. Many refuse to attribute this void to the reality of sin. Sin, in their estimate, is a man made concept therefore of no real consequence. All a person needs is the knowledge that they are in fact divine and the back hole of inner chaos and incompleteness will disappear or at least can be filled with enlightenment thus setting them free of the trappings of outdated Christianity. ***Hog Wash!***

There is but **One Creator God** and He has revealed himself through the natural order and through special revelation. He is in charge. He sets the standards. I find it at once marvelous, comforting, and frightening to realize that God reveals himself as a Loving, Holy, Righteous, and Just God.

The prophet Hosea declared on behalf of God: ***“For I am God, and not man - the Holy One among you..”*** (Hosea 11:9). Do you understand what he is saying? He is saying, you human beings are not God, I am! The essence of sin is the denial of God’s claim on your life. To refuse to acknowledge God as God is to rebel against him and to stand guilty in His sight. Deny it if you wish, but you will one day stand before Him. The sheer magnitude of His awesome Glory will compel everyone to acknowledge Him as the One True God...but by then it will be too late to yield your life to Him! That is why the Bible declares that ***“today is the day of salvation!”***

Because God is Holy and Just, he must stand against anything that is an affront to his righteous character. Moral accountability is sewn into the fabric of human existence. The **“black hole”** in every human heart is the need to be forgiven for our self-deification and to be joined to the Father in loving submission.

We often try to fill this hole through self-effort, pursuing some religion, or through a vague spirituality. But self-effort doesn’t work because it is flawed from the get go! According to Psalm 143:2, ***“no one living is righteous before” God.*** Even though we may think we measure up to our own moral standards, the Scripture declares that ***“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags”*** (Isa 64:6). Don’t you see, we don’t have any foundation to stand on which qualifies us to approach a Holy God. No matter how good we think our performance in life is, we are not good enough to merit God’s acceptance. God is perfect; we are far from it! Because we cannot fill the black hole in our soul.... **WE NEED HELP!**

Enter the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ***“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..”*** (Rom. 5:1). What does it mean to be “justified”? It means to be placed in right standing with God. It means to be acquitted of our guilt. It means to be declared righteous before God. One way to think of this is to see God as the Judge. When he declares his verdict of “acquitted” it is so and immediately goes into effect. Another way to think of this is to realize that God creates by fiat. Out of nothing God declare the universe into existence. When God declares that we are justified, he calls into existence a new creature in Christ...a Believer! How does God deal with our sin? The Bible explains it like this: ***“God made him who had no sin [Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”*** (2 Cor.5:21). He provides the help that we cannot provide for ourselves.

Recently our son purchased a couple of packs of athletic socks. When he got them home he discovered that they were the wrong ankle height. So, he took them back to the store and exchanged the wrong ones for the right ones. There was an exchange that took place while Jesus hung dying on the cross. Jesus was perfectly sinless and righteous. His Father was pleased with him for His Son was fulfilling his mission to earth. The most important part of His mission needed to be completed. An exchange was to take place.. Our sin was placed upon Jesus, and in exchange, His righteousness was made available to us. He became our sin and took our punishment. In turn, when we trust our lives to Jesus as our Lord and Savior, God credits the righteousness of His Son to our personal account. Our sin debt was paid by the death of our sinless Savior. Now, with Jesus Christ living within us through his Spirit, God sees us as righteous, justified. The black hole is gone, removed for eternity, in its place is peace with God and the peace of God.

As a result, we do not have to strive to impress God, or earn His approval. We are fully accepted by Him and since we stand in the righteousness of His Son, we are fully pleasing to God. It doesn’t matter that we are still frail human beings. He is pleased with us because we have trusted His Son and have become a part of His family. This reality frees us from the performance trap. Our self worth no longer rests on our performance; it rests on Christ living in us. The black hole has been replaced with the living Spirit of Christ. We are to embrace our new standing before God and live in the freedom and joy it makes possible.

