

People Pleasing

Could it be possible that when attempting to show kindness to others we might subtly be moving away from God rather than toward Him? This may seem like a strange question. After all, kindness is a virtue to value in believers. In *Ephesians 4:32*, Paul calls us to “*be ye kind one to another.*” We are to be considerate and pleasing to one another. Consider *Philippians 2:3* “*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*” And yet, certain approaches to pleasing each other may possibly lead to unhealthy emotions and relational patterns. Rather than serving others unselfishly, is it possible certain types of pleasing can perpetuate patterns of manipulation, insensitivity or defeat? And, if so, how does this happen?

Signs of Unhealthy People Pleasing

There are a number of markers that may indicate an individual is engaging in unhealthy people pleasing. Such behaviors may include: allowing other people to determine one’s value, schedule, and priorities; being other-centered without first being God-centered; or serving out of “duty” whereby service to others is often associated with a “should”, “supposed to”, or “must.” Consequently, individuals struggling with unhealthy people pleasing behaviors have difficulty living within God-designed limits (i.e., time, resources, roles). They may tend to assume more responsibility for others’ emotional reactions than is necessary or warranted. At times, they may have a tendency of viewing decisiveness as the same thing as hurting others. Each of these behaviors leads toward enslavement rather than freedom in serving and pleasing others.

Likely most of us would review the unhealthy patterns of behavior above and agree these would not be healthy. So why are such behavioral patterns so difficult to break? How do we serve one another with the right motives? There are likely a number of reasons unhealthy behavioral patterns can become rigid and set in our lives. These can include incorrect beliefs about what it means to serve like Christ and not being in-tune with the Holy Spirit. In addition, various underlying emotions such as paralyzing fear, false guilt, and worry can motivate unhealthy people pleasing behaviors.

Underlying Emotions

Proverbs 29:25 reminds us “*The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.*” The emotion of fear often flows out of an assumption that harmful experiences are inevitable. It leads to a posture of being on guard or defensive around others. Fear can also lead to pessimistic patterns of thinking where uncertainty and doubt consume an individual’s thought life. It is normal to experience fear. At times, this fear flows out of painful and difficult experiences. However, if left unchecked, it becomes a snare that prevents authenticity in relationships and can counteract the things about you that are right and good.

Scripture calls us to be peacemakers, not peacekeepers or peace-fakers (*Matthew 5:9*). When we fall into patterns of faking peace or seeking to keep peace at the expense of the truth being shared in love, we likely are becoming ensnared by the fear of man. We are powerless to change ourselves or quiet ourselves in order to hear the Spirit if we are ruled by the fear of man.

Another common underlying emotion of unhealthy people pleasing is false guilt. True guilt is a normal emotion. God uses true guilt to bring awareness we have done something wrong. It is meant to lead to repentance, an acknowledgement of error or wrong behavior that leads to a freeing response and brings us back into relationship with God and others. While true guilt is meant to help with relationship restoration, false guilt often leads to a continual wallowing within guilt. It can lead to ongoing judgment and condemnation which in turn, leaves an individual seeking to prove their worthiness for forgiveness while rarely believing they are worthy. This can be a difficult cycle to break.

To accurately discern true guilt from false guilt, we must remember a believer is called to life-long sanctification. The reality is believers are not perfect, nor will we ever be perfect in this life. As a result, individuals will mess up and disappoint

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others at times. Even Jesus, though He was perfect, disappointed people. He traveled away from villages where individuals remained sick, blind, or lame (*Mark 1:33-38*) while doing His Father's perfect will. Jesus was grounded in who He was, and He maintained a laser focus on God's call for His life. Each of us have been given innate worth through our Father that transcends performance or appearance. Consider, how our lives would change if we acted consistently from a place of God-given worth rather than a place determined by the words/actions of broken individuals with a less-than-perfect frame of reference. This is a powerful question to consider.

While the underlying emotion of false guilt can lead to the "if only" mindset, the final emotion in unhealthy people pleasing behaviors tends to ruminate on "what if" scenarios. For example, "what would happen if I do or say that?" The longer we stay in the whirlpool of worry and doubt, the more it takes a grip on our mind, body and soul. There is a never-ending list of possible scenarios that worry and doubt desire us to consider. Unfortunately, most of these scenarios are often considered from a place of uncertainty, leaving us focused on what is not in one's control rather than focusing on God's grace and provision for the future.

How to Overcome Unhealthy People Pleasing

The initial step for loosening the grip of these underlying emotions of unhealthy people pleasing is to identify their presence. Pay attention to your experiences in relationships. Do you notice the gripping presence of the fear of man or the gnawing and relentless companion of false guilt? Be curious about this experience. What do you notice about the fear of man? How is it different from the fear of God? Begin to label such experiences and emotions as "false guilt" or "fear of man" or the "whirlpool of worry." This step in itself can help reduce the stickiness of these underlying emotions.

Regarding fear, remember that disagreeing with others does not mean you need to let go of your sense of inner trust. Next time someone disagrees with you, rather than avoiding conflict or fearfully defending your position, seek to calmly state your rationale and allow the other person to disagree. Meditate on God being your refuge, fortress and defense (*Psalms 46:1, 62:7-8, 91:2, 94:22*). If false guilt shows up, it can be helpful to pause and reflect – Is there anything I did that I can specifically identify as morally wrong? Something I need to repent for? Consider meditating on your completeness and unblameable position in Christ (*Colossians 1:21-22, 2:10*). Within the whirlpool of worry, it can be helpful to identify the values and attributes you want to exhibit and move towards such values even before it "feels right." The size of the step is not as important as the direction you are headed. Once moving, it will likely help you shift out of questioning your every move. You will live according to your values, not "what might happen." Consider repeating *Psalms 40* and notice the settling effect of establishing your grounding on the Rock and moving from this place with a "new song."

Many believers actually struggle with the patterns, emotions and encounters described above. It is helpful to continue to learn ways to identify such patterns and move toward God. It begins through acknowledgment and repentance. The worship of people and their approval/disapproval can be idolatry and God calls us to break free from such bondage (*Gal. 1:10*). As you learn to say "no" to others, you will likely feel anxious or guilty. This is normal and it will take time for these feelings to shift. Remember, loving God first never excludes us from loving others. Rather it frees us to love them well instead of worrying about whether they love us back or not. Finally, remember there is nothing virtuous about playing along with an unhealthy, destructive relationship pattern. God desires us to walk in grace and truth. May we look to Jesus as we move toward Him even when it is uncomfortable or scary at times: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (*Hebrews 12:2*).

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