

CAN YOU Relate?

PEOPLE – PLEASING

Hi. My name is Paul and I'm a people-pleaser! Let me tell you a story.

As part of a summer job during my college years I was working for the Public Utilities Department in my home town—Oak Harbor, WA. It was early afternoon in June when the shop foreman, a gruff, tough-as-nails kind of guy looks at me, takes a long thoughtful drag on his cigarette—as if anticipating my reaction to what he's about to ask me to do, and says, "I need a volunteer." He was a really crusty guy. He reminded me of General George Patton. And if you remember the movie from 1970—especially the first ten minutes of the movie, that's what my boss was like. When he told you to do something, you'd sure better already be doing it. I wanted to be on his good side. I wanted to impress him; I didn't want to disappoint him. Not only that, but I knew that my buddy on the job with me would really have had a hard time doing this and I didn't want him to have to struggle with the job. So when my boss asked for a volunteer, I raised my hand right away because in spite of my discomfort, I wanted to please him. So my boss points to his pickup truck and says to us, "Get in, let's go!" So we climbed into the truck.

Fifteen minutes later, we're removing the heavy cover to the utility hole in the street revealing an access shaft of about four and a half feet in diameter descending nearly fifteen feet below street level. A metal ladder bolted into the concrete wall of the vertical shaft extending downward into the abyss is the only access to an even darker network of concrete drainage systems. These 'storm drains' continued maze-like under the streets carrying runoff rain water to where it empties into the bay on the eastern side of the Island. The task, I learned quickly, was to put on waders and climb down that ladder into the concrete conduit. Half-crouching, half-crawling, I would make my way through the storm drain clearing away debris—driftwood, small tree limbs and other assorted objects of refuse—three-headed creatures, gigantic Amazonian snakes, lost communities of people living in the subterranean city under the city—which posed the threat of clogged drains during times of severe weather, flooding and tidal movement of this inland water way. The distance to my destination, I am told, is the next vertical entrance, roughly two blocks away. I think to myself, "Okay, fine. This is going to be very dark and dank, and in spite of the small flashlight I'm holding, very creepy. Dark, dank and creepy; it can only get better, right? I have just two city blocks to check on my stretch of this task before I trade places with another worker. It certainly cannot get any worse."

So when we pulled that cover off and I looked down into that black hole that seemed to go to China, it got a lot worse. And I

knew I was in big trouble because in my heart I wanted to please my boss. But the rest of my entire body was rebelling. You won't believe what happened next. But I'll come back to that.

People pleasers—can you Relate? Ever done something that seemed to go against every shred of comfort, reason or conviction because you wanted to please someone else? There are all kinds of ways that we do this and I'll go into that in a moment, but for starters, let's acknowledge that we all do this; this is very common. And it's really unhealthy. The Apostle Paul went after this with the early church because it was impacting the way that they related to each other in the early Christian community. Let me read the passage from Galatians 1:6-10.

Am I seeking human approval; am I trying to please people? Good questions. Let me give you some background on the passage and then draw some conclusions for the passage. The book of Galatians is all about freedom in Christ. Paul was writing to new Christians in the 1st century to encourage them in this freedom. He had proclaimed boldly that they had been set free in Christ to love and serve one another, free to do what is right and good and helpful. But the Galatians had gotten stuck in 'pleaser behavior'. They had gotten caught in the middle of complicated theological debates and arguments about ancient Jewish laws and practices and their new found faith in Christ and they were getting pushed all over the place. Paul encouraged them to stand firm in their faith and in the freedom Christ brought and not to be so wishy-washy trying to please both sides. That was not helpful in their relationships.

We often confuse people-helping with people-pleasing. A people-pleaser is one of the nicest and most helpful people you know. They never say "no." You can always count on them for a favor. In fact, they spend a great deal of time doing things for other people. They get their work done, help others with their work, make all the plans, and are always there for family members and friends. So far this sounds like a good thing. Unfortunately, it can be an extremely unhealthy pattern of behavior.

People-pleasing or pleaser behavior goes way beyond helping, serving, loving, caring; and this can become really unhealthy. What many people-pleasers don't realize is their pleaser behavior can actually have serious risks. Not only does it put a lot of pressure and stress on you, but you can make yourself sick from doing too much. If you're overcommitted, you probably get less sleep and get more anxious and upset. You're also depleting your energy resources. In the worst case scenario, you'll wake up and find yourself depressed, because you're on such overload because you can't possibly do it all. Let me give you some examples of pleaser behavior: Pleaser behavior is when you say "yes" to something that you really don't want to do just to keep someone happy and have an 'easy' life. Pleaser behavior is when you feel uncomfortable about a situation that you're in but carry on in spite of that—like when you've been asked to do something dishonest or that isn't in line with your values. Pleaser behavior is when you feel depleted, even exhausted from putting everyone else's needs before your own and not taking the time out to practice self-care. I'll bet every one of us has done that at least a thousand

times! Pleaser behavior is when you say “no” to something and then make all kinds of excuses and spend a lot of time feeling guilty afterwards. When we do these things—when we fall into pleaser behavior, there’s usually an unhealthy cost like giving up our integrity, bypassing clear thinking, caving on self-discipline in order to do that. That’s probably a problem because when we give something up, when we sacrifice the best of ourselves in order to win the approval of someone else, we’re less of ourselves in the end. But the goal, really, is to be more of ourselves through whom God can bless others with life.

So, what are some positive steps can we take in a healthy direction? The key to understanding how to avoid pleaser behavior is in understanding why we do it. There are basically two common reasons: the fear of rejection and the fear of rejection. Let me break these down a bit and then give you some suggestions from moving into healthier behaviors. First, the fear of rejection. The fear of rejection often comes from not wanting to disappoint someone else. We’ll sacrifice all kinds of things—“go out of our way” (which is a telling phrase) to please someone because we don’t want to fail them, disappoint them, or put ourselves in a vulnerable position. The underlying feeling here—the voice in our head says: “If I don’t do everything I can to make someone else happy they might leave me or stop caring for me.” Can you see just how unhealthy that kind of thinking is? The fear of rejection can come from early relationships in which love was conditional or in which you were rejected or abandoned by an important person in your life—perhaps a parent left or was emotionally unavailable or inconsistently available. The fascinating thing about this—and just to show how insane this really is: when we behave this way, we’ve really already been rejected by the very person whom we want to please because we fear rejection. This then feeds right into the second fear—the fear of failure. The fear of failure is the underlying feeling that “If I make a mistake, I will disappoint people and/or be punished.” Fear of failure can arise from early experiences with severe punishment for even small mistakes. People who had highly critical parents may develop a people-pleasing pattern. Early experiences with harsh criticism or punishment can lead to significant anxiety upon attempting a task. Even though the parent or other important person in your life who doled out the criticism may no longer be in your life, anxiety is an emotion that can live on for a very long time. To deal with that anxiety, again, we’ll sacrifice all kinds of things—“go out of our way” (which is a telling phrase) to please someone and do everything we can to get things right, finish the job, and make sure everybody is happy. In the end, this kind of behavior is absolutely debilitating. And this is nothing new. A couple thousand years ago, Solomon in all his glory wrote, “The fear of human opinion disables; trusting in GOD protects you from that.” (Proverbs 29:25) The fear of rejection and the fear of failure can incapacitate us, spinning us right down right into the ground which can ultimately lead to depression, or worse. It’s a vicious cycle.

But friends, there are all kinds of ways to live well and healthy beyond this and avoid pleaser behavior. So what I’ve done for you this week is give you a whole list of ways to stop being a people pleaser. You’ll find that list on the back of your bulletin this week, and I’d encourage you to take it home and put it where you can easily find it because there’s a really good chance that some of us will need to refer back to it by the end of the day! So let me talk

through a few of these so we have an idea of how to move into healthier behaviors as we consider some ways to avoid pleaser behavior.

- First, realize you have a choice. People-pleasers often feel like they have to say “yes” when someone asks for their help. Remember that you always have a choice to say “no.” If you have to practice that a few times, that’s okay. Go ahead and practice. You can say something like, “Thanks for asking, but I won’t be able to do that.” You can even play with that a bit by saying, I have another commitment/appointment at that time.” They don’t need to know that that other commitment or appointment is with yourself.

- Another way is to set a time limit. And if you absolutely can’t say no when someone asks you for help, you can limit the amount of time you give to them: “I can help, but “I’m only available from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.” At first this is going to seem really weird. But practicing this, rehearsing this is the key. Make it a mantra: “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me.” “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me.” “Thanks for asking, but that’s not going to work for me.”

- Consider if you’re being manipulated. Sometimes, people are clearly taking advantage of you, so it’s important to watch out for manipulators and flatterers. They’re easy to spot. Often the people who flatter you will make statements like ‘Oh you’re so good at baking cakes, would you make a cake for my child’s birthday?’ or ‘I don’t know how to put this bookcase together, but you’re so handy, can you help me out?’” A classic line is “Nobody does this better than you do.” Another thing here is that manipulators and flatterers will either coax you into doing something or try to tell you what your availability is or what your time frame is. Basically, before you know it, they make the decision for you. When you feel like this is happening, you go back to your [happy place] and tell them you have another commitment, that it’s just not going to work for you.

So back to where we started.

I wanted to please my boss, but when I came to that point where my legs just wouldn’t go any further, I had to turn around and go back. With thirty yards to go to the ladder that would take me back up to face my boss and my peers, I had to come to grips with my fear of rejection and failure, the fear of ridicule from my peers and the others with whom I worked. I was so afraid of what my boss would say to me and what he would do. I came to the surface and he was there, waiting for me—my boss, the George Patton of the Public Utilities Department. Wiping the sweat from my face, I looked at him and simply told him what has happened. I told him that I couldn’t take one step further into the darkness. I was sorry, but I was just too afraid to go any further. And my boss looked right at me, he took a long, thoughtful drag on his cigarette, smiled and with a twinkle in his eyes said, “I don’t blame you. I couldn’t do it either!” It was a moment of grace, for sure.