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How to Break Free from People Pleasing

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How many times have you heard or felt “You’re approved!”? You may have heard it when applying for a job or trying to buy a home, or felt it when agreeing to marry the love of your life.

Often, we don’t feel or hear that we are approved enough to cause us to believe it. Because we have not learned to rest in the fact that God approves of us all the time, many of us go through life feeling “wrong,” insecure, or rejected somehow. We don’t always love ourselves or feel that others really love, accept, or approve of us. The way we think about ourselves and the ways other people treat us cause us to lose our self-confidence and develop low self-esteem. This leaves us feeling empty and hungry inside, and we seek to satisfy ourselves by doing things we think will cause others to like us, affirm us, and approve of us. We end up with what I call “approval addiction.”

I believe approval addiction is rampant in our society today. It is not limited to any certain age group, gender, or
socioeconomic sphere. It can happen to anyone! When it does, people may feel insecure or rejected, and they may lose their unique, God-given sense of identity because they forsake their true personalities or don’t develop their gifts in an effort to do and be what they believe others want them to do and be.

I know firsthand how negatively the desire for approval can affect people’s lives, because I experienced it. Anyone who has been hurt badly through abuse or severe rejection, as I have, often seeks the approval of others to try to overcome feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. They suffer from those feelings and use their addiction to approval to try to relieve their pain. They are miserable if anyone seems not to approve of them in any way or for any reason, and they remain anxious about that disapproval until they feel accepted once again. They may do almost anything to gain the approval they feel they have lost—even things their consciences tell them are wrong. For example, if a person does not feel approved of when she declines an invitation, she might change her plans and accept the invitation simply to gain approval. She compromises herself for the sake of feeling approved. Unfortunately, people do things like this often; it’s the only way they know how to feed their need for approval and to avoid feeling rejected.

The good news is that no one has to continue to try to find worth, validation, or value in other people’s approval. No one needs to suffer any longer with insecurity or rejection.
Nobody has to strive to please others while being miserable doing so. There is a cure for the approval addiction! The Word of God says we can be secure through Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 3:17). That means we are free to be ourselves and to become all we can be in Him.

If you have found yourself addicted to approval, spending too much time and energy trying to get people to accept you, I believe this book can change your life in the most positive ways. The major change may not happen immediately, but the following pages include many proven principles that have helped thousands of people, including myself, break free from approval addiction. They also include a number of stories I believe you will identify with and from which you can learn valuable lessons for your life. I am living proof that a life filled with insecurity, rejection, fear, and pain can be transformed into a life of confidence, acceptance, love, peace, joy, and strength. Does that sound good to you? Then let’s get started!
PART 1

Accepting Who You Are
CHAPTER 1

God Loves You

Carol was a miserable and frustrated young mother. She constantly compared herself to other people she knew and struggled to be like them. She wanted to be the cook her mother had been, the parent her friends were, and the wife her overly demanding husband expected her to be. She was a stay-at-home mom with three young children and had her hands full, but she often felt that perhaps she should also work a full-time job to help with the family finances. She was never relaxed, nor did she enjoy feeling confident.

She tried so hard to gain everyone’s approval that she was mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted most of the time. She feared the rejection of the people she loved, and she lived her life every day trying keep them happy, rather than following God and her own heart. She felt imprisoned by her fears, and she was in a trap she did not know how to break out of. Carol was also starting to
feel bitter because she felt that other people’s demands were stealing her life, but what was really stealing her life was her unwillingness to trust God and be bold enough to be the person He wanted her to be.

She wanted other people to change and be less demanding, but God wanted her to change and be bold enough to stand up to them when she needed to. We must all learn to stand up for our right to be ourselves and not cave in to the pressure we frequently feel to be someone that we truly don’t know how to be.

Carol was searching for significance in all the wrong places. She kept trying to get from people what only God could give her, which was unconditional love and acceptance. The root of her problem was that she felt guilty and ashamed of herself due to some unresolved abuse in her childhood, and she needed emotional healing from God. No matter how many people she tried to please in her life, she would never feel whole and complete until she received Jesus as her Savior and learned to see herself through His eyes.

Do you relate to Carol? If so, I pray that you are ready to let Jesus set you free from the tyranny of being a people pleaser and an approval addict. Do you live under a burden of guilt or shame, feeling unworthy and insecure? Do you go through life feeling something is wrong with you
but are unable to articulate what it is? Are you a people pleaser, always looking for the approval of others?

If so, those feelings affect every area of your life. They affect your personal relationships; since you are a Christian, they also adversely affect your prayer life, your ability to grow spiritually, and your pursuit of your God-given destiny. They certainly steal your joy, your peace, and your ability to look confidently toward your future—and that is not God’s will for you. God wants you to live with confidence in His love for you, and to boldly do and be all that He has planned for you.

God’s will is for you to enjoy your life and fulfill the purpose for which He created you. To live a life you enjoy, a life filled with purpose, you will need the confidence that comes from knowing you are right with God through Jesus, a healthy, positive self-image, and good relationships with others. These things cannot coexist with an approval addiction, so the addiction has to go.

The first step to understanding and breaking free from approval addiction is to understand fear, because fear of some sort is at the root of an unbalanced need for approval. People deal with an endless variety of fears, but one I discovered in my own life—and one you may also be dealing with—is the fear of not being pleasing to God. This is common among Christians who struggle with approval addiction.

If you have ever been hurt by someone who is difficult
or impossible to please, you may think God is the same way. He isn’t! In fact, pleasing God is not nearly as hard as you may think. Simple, childlike faith pleases Him. He already knows we are not perfect and will not behave perfectly all the time. That is why He sent Jesus to pay for our failures and mistakes.

Believers Believe

For many years, I struggled in frustration trying to please God with good or even perfect behavior. At the same time, I was always afraid I was failing. No matter what I did right, I always seemed to find something I was doing wrong. I never felt good enough; regardless of how well I did certain things, I always felt I needed to do more. I thought God was displeased with me, and even though that was wrong, it was true for me because I believed it.

Many people, maybe even you, have believed lies that have kept them in bondage. They have been unable to break free and move into the great life God has for them simply because of wrong belief systems. If you have believed lies in the past, you can let them go, begin to believe truth, and enjoy the awesome future God has planned for you.

Christians are called believers. God accepts us because of our faith, not our good works. If our job were to achieve, we would be called achievers, not believers. We often want to emphasize what we do, but our focus should
be on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We have a choice: we can concentrate on our sin and be miserable, or we can concentrate on God’s forgiveness and mercy and be happy.

Once we see this truth, we can enjoy our relationship with God. We don’t have to feel pressured to behave perfectly and then be afraid we have failed when our performance is less than perfect. If we want to please God with all our hearts, all we need to do is believe in His Son Jesus Christ and believe what He says in His Word.

It’s a Trap!

Believing we must perform perfectly to be accepted is a snare of the enemy; it is not from God. I lived in the performance-acceptance trap for many years because I was addicted to approval. I felt if I performed well, then God and others would accept me and approve of me. I did not feel good about myself, nor did I accept myself unless my performance was admirable. When I did not perform well, I automatically assumed God rejected me, because experience had taught me to expect such behavior from the people around me and I believed God was just like they were. God does not reject us when we make mistakes, but if we think He does, if we fear He does, that lie becomes truth to us, because we believe it.

I once had an employee who had experienced much rejection from her father when she did not do well in
school or perform perfectly in other areas. When she came to work for our ministry and her job performance was anything less than perfect, I sensed her withdrawing from me, and I felt she was rejecting me. Not only did she withdraw, she also went into a frenzy trying to get more work done. If I asked about the status of her work, she only seemed calm and happy if she could tell me everything was done, and done exactly right.

I did not understand my employee’s behavior at the time, but through prayer and sharing openly we finally discovered that she was extremely afraid of being rejected if she did not perform perfectly. Thankfully, she eventually learned to believe I loved and accepted her even though her performance was not always perfect. This enabled us to work together in joy for many years.

Just as I had learned in my own life, my employee had to learn to believe what I said rather than what she felt. We must choose to do likewise in our relationship with God. We must learn to trust His Word more than our own feelings. We often bow down to our feelings without realizing how fickle and unreliable they are. God loves us and accepts us unconditionally. His love is not based on our performance; He does not “grade” us. Ephesians 1:6 says we are made acceptable in the Beloved (NKJV). Our faith in Jesus, not our performance, is what makes us acceptable to God and pleases Him.
Relax. God Is Pleased.

Anyone who loves God wants to please Him. The fact that we desire to please Him pleases Him. We want God's approval, and there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, a desire to please God is necessary because it motivates us to seek His will in all things. People who have a deep desire to please God may not perform perfectly all the time, but they keep pressing forward and continually want to improve. Their attitudes and motives are right before God, and that pleases Him.

Second Chronicles 16:9 says God is searching for someone in whom He can show Himself strong, someone whose heart is perfect toward Him. This verse does not say He is looking for someone with a perfect performance but for someone with a perfect heart—a heart that desires to please Him, a heart that grieves over sin and evil, a heart that believes in Him and in His willingness and ability to forgive and restore. God knows we cannot achieve perfection. If we could, we would be perfect in our performance; we would not need a Savior, and Jesus would have come in vain.

God is a God of hearts. He sees and cares about our attitudes of heart more than our performance.

You can relax and take comfort in the fact that God approves of you completely and is pleased with you. His approval and pleasure do not depend on you; they rest completely on the fact that you are in Christ and on
everything Jesus has done for us. God is not surprised by your inabilities, your imperfections, or your faults. He has always known everything about you, things you are just now finding out, and He chose you on purpose for Himself. Jesus presents you blameless and faultless before God if you place your trust in Him (see 1 Corinthians 1:7–8). He loves you and values you more than you know!