

Plastic Jesus sermon series  
Imperfection: The Curse of the Unmowed Lawn  
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We finish our “Plastic Jesus” sermon series today, and I hope God has spoken to you at some point through it. Our goal was to go deeper than our suburban spirituality, which is defined by values like comfort, convenience and security. Jesus is calling us to a more authentic, more sacrificial, quieter kind of life. But to live out these Christ-like values means being willing to admit we’re not perfect, that we don’t know everything, that we don’t always have our lives together.

Here’s an example. In my house in Chicago, we had some pretty bad flooring that needed replaced. One day, I noticed a neighbor had a bunch of floor planks and tools in his garage, so I walked over to see what he was doing. Sure enough, he was replacing his own hardwood floors. “It’s so easy and it’s saving my hundreds of dollars!” Ding! Now, I knew absolutely nothing about installing hardwood floors, and I could barely find the nearest Home Depot, so of course I immediately decided I was going to do it myself.

My neighbor gave me a simple tutorial and let me watch him for a few minutes, so armed with his vast knowledge and expertise, I Googled the location of Home Depot and set about my journey. I bought the flooring, got some new tools that I knew I would never use again, and even rented a big saw. This was exciting! I got to work and realized within about ten minutes that I was in way over my head. But I pushed through and finished the project and it looked like it was done by someone who had no idea what they were doing. Thankfully, along the way I gained a new appreciation for just how many mistakes a well-placed rug could cover up.

About a week later, my neighbor saw me and asked how it went. “Great! Fine! Piece of cake.” He then asked if he could come see it. “Oh...well...not a good time right now, you know.” Rather than admit my mistakes, rather than ask for help, I pretended like I knew what I was doing and that my new floor didn’t have a bunch of rugs on it.

Now, I know I don’t know everything. And I’m sure my neighbor knows I don’t know everything. And I know that you all know I don’t know everything. Even my daughters eventually found that out. But there’s something in us that is hesitant to admit the undeniable fact that we are all imperfect. So, we mow our lawns and wash our cars and put on nice clothes to cover up the imperfection and brokenness on the inside.

Amy and I see this in our neighborhood all the time. There are some houses that are nice and quaint, but there are others that just run-down and not taken care of. But if someone mows the lawn and puts some rustic wooden shutters on them, all of a sudden they become cute little bungalows. We’ll say, “Look, they’ve really done some work on that house.” It’s two pairs of shutters! Inside, it could look like a teenager’s bedroom. It’s amazing how a few cosmetic changes can cover up the mess that’s on the inside.

I talked a few weeks ago about image management, how we work hard to maintain a certain image, and will go out of our way to keep up that appearance. For example, we hate the idea of dandelions in our lawn and what it says about us, so we water it and fertilize it and manicure it and spray chemicals on it to keep up its appearance. And we do the same thing with our lives; we put shutters over what hurts or

what we consider socially unacceptable in order to keep up the perfectly pristine exterior we present to others.

Therefore, perfection, as defined by the world, means a life where nothing is broken, out of place, or damaged. The marriage is fine, the kids are fine, the finances are fine, our health is fine. But is it? We're called to be authentic with each other and with God. The opposite of authenticity is pretense, which is defined as "an attempt to make something that is not the case appear true." Eric Sandras says, "Life in spiritual suburbia encourages us to hide the ugly or uncomfortable or painful parts of our lives from others and from God. After all, no one else seems broken."

This whole demand on our lives that we be perfect is enough to drive you crazy. We easily fall into the trap of envy, like I did with my neighbor's floor-installing skills. Now, I don't know this guy; he might secretly chew with his mouth open or forward chain letter emails. I'm sure if I went digging through his garbage I'd find at least one or two recyclables that he had thrown in the trash. But all I saw, when looking at his work, was the stark reminder that I'm not perfect enough. In our reading today, Paul said, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong." That makes no sense. Nobody wants to be thought of as weak. Frail. Feeble. Flawed. Imperfect. And yet Paul lifts it up as a desirable goal in life, to be weak.

I think we need to redefine perfection. I think we need to get off the hamster wheel that is the pretentious pursuit of the perfect life. "Don't tell people you're in anti-depressants, don't let them know your kid is in rehab, don't let on that your marriage is struggling." Our culture finds no value in broken things, but God finds redemptive value in them. As Paul says, God's grace is sufficient for us because God's power is made, not good, not better, but perfect in our weakness. Author Parker Palmer writes, "Wholeness does not mean perfection; it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life."

Maybe the perfection we seek in our suburban spirituality isn't to be found in trying to be more and better than we are, but in being authentic in who we really are, with God and with others. Maybe being perfect means being willing to invite others – including God – into our lives, past the shiny façade and into the dusty crawlspaces. What we'll likely find is that not only does everyone have baggage, but some of it may even match ours. C.S. Lewis says the mark of true friendship is when one person says to another, "What? You, too? I thought I was the only one." Being perfect means opening yourself up to relationships with others at a deep, human level, and being willing to discuss doubt, discouragement, and dandelions.

Not only will we grow in our relationships with each other, but also in our relationship with God. The pursuit of perfection in this world contaminates our spirituality, because we believe we have to achieve certain prerequisites – be clean enough or respectable enough or religious enough – before we can come to God. Some people believe it is possible to sin too much, wander too far, or mess up too big to come to God, that our lives have to be dust bunny-free before we can invite God over. But I believe the opposite is true. God loves us not in spite of who we are, but because of it. Jesus, wasn't born in a sterile hospital room or a lavish palace, but in the brokenness of poverty, in a manger. God is drawn to people who invite him into their brokenness.

Here's the truth, as I see it and have experienced it. Perfect floors don't mean perfect people. Clean houses don't mean clean lives. Big homes don't mean close family relationships. Cross necklaces and Christian bumper stickers don't mean a faithful,

Christ-like life. But somehow perpetuating a socially acceptable image has become more important than being authentic. So, we busy ourselves pursuing perfection on the outside so as not to have to face what's inside, the damaged relationships or failing health or nagging doubts.

But God loves you because of those things. God created you, so God knows you better than anyone else, even better than yourself. God knows where your shutters are. And God wants us to drop any pretense that we're anything other than who we are, and then to simply ask, "God, here is my weakness. Make me perfect." The areas of our deepest pain and imperfection are the places where God can bring about the greatest joy and redemption. God wants nothing more than to bring light to our darkness, to recycle our garbage, to clean out our crawl spaces.

What does that mean for us to be truly authentic? It means admitting our weaknesses to God and letting God get to work. We pray for God to take away the things that keep us from being perfect, and instead God gives us the strength to endure those things, or the grace to live with them. I pray for God to take away my life as a control connoisseur, and instead God constantly puts me in situations I can't control. I pray for God to take away my impatience, and instead God puts me in situations where I have to practice being patient. I pray for God to take away the imperfections, and instead God gives me a new appreciation for the grace offered to me when I mess up.

This extends to how we see our children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews, as well. In this age of social media, the tendency toward comparison has increased exponentially. If our kids aren't doing as well as it seems like all the other kids are doing, then we feel like something is wrong. We are conditioned to praise kids for coming in first, getting the best grades, winning the science fair or essay contest. But we also need to praise them for being generous, or being kind, or being responsible, even if they finish fifth or get a C. Society's definition of perfection is being the best, but God's definition is being the most Christ-like. Christ did his best and still died on a cross, so I think it's OK that your kid didn't make the team or got an average grade.

As I understand Jesus, in his teachings and his life, being perfect simply means being our authentic selves. With Christ's help, we can strive each day to be a little more faithful than we were yesterday, loving each other and caring for each other and serving each other because of who we were created to be. Perfection is not a destination; it is in the journey itself. If we are faithful in our love and service, no matter how imperfectly, then we can trust that, in our weakness, God will make us perfect. All we have to do is be ourselves.