

Story of the guy at the VUW gym trying to do preacher curls.

This is what happens to us when we are driven by what other people think of us.

When we live for the opinions of others all kinds of distortions can happen.

The first distortion is that some people tend towards perfectionism – trying to make everyone happy all the time. A perfectionist is constantly watching themselves, as if from the outside, and trying to make sure they are always doing what pleases other people. When we live this way we can become very busy – saying yes to everything because we don't want to let other people down. I was probably like this as a teenager and through my twenties. I did everything. As a young teacher I was a rugby coach, helped with the production, was in a staff band, organised staff social events and was part of a whole lot of committees and groups that created a lot of extra work. Outside of my job I was also very committed to church, being part of the church music team, running a small group, being part of an outreach group and also helping out with the youth group. I was out almost every single night of the week, as well as being busy for most of my weekend. And this ended where most perfectionism ends – in burnout. At some point, we collapse and realise that we can't be everything, can't do everything and can't make everyone happy all the time. What I realised as a perfectionist was that it didn't matter how many things I was involved with or helping with, it never made me feel good enough, or as if I was loved. I was only ever aware of the things I hadn't been able to say yes to or the people who still didn't love me, despite me trying to be the perfect guy.

If we define ourselves by what others think of us, but do not head down the perfectionist track, we may go down the path of low self-esteem and withdrawal from life. We may decide that the expectations and opinions of others are too much for us as a person, and that we just do not make the grade. We then feel as if we are a loser, a failure or that we are less than other people. When we feel like this we will then begin to withdraw from society. We avoid social situations, or only go to things where we know everyone and feel safe, like with our families or a very small group of friends. We don't try anything new, even though we may want to be involved in certain things, and our lives become smaller and smaller as we do all that we can to avoid facing other people and their expectations of us. The goal is not to be noticed and not stand out in anyway. While the perfectionist and the social withdrawer may

look like completely different types of people, they are both suffering from the same sickness – finding their value from what other people think of them.

There is a third distortion that affects us when we are defined by other people's opinions of us. This is the rebel. While the rebel appears to not care what other people think about them, they are in fact still defined by other people's opinions because everything they do is a reaction to people's opinions. These people try to prove to everyone that they don't care about other people's opinions by getting into trouble, breaking the rules, deliberately failing things, being cynical about everything and especially about 'the system'. I think there is an element of this in the alternative movement. I say an 'element' of this, because I think that there is a lot of genuine self-expression in this too. But I think at the heart of the alternative movement is a rejection of mainstream images of beauty. Which means you are still defining yourself as being against other people's expectations and opinions. I remember when I was a student in wellington the alternative thing was huge. We all used to buy old men's clothes from the op-shop and wear them around. The thing about it though, was that there was still cool alternative and not cool alternative. And actually, a lot of alternative dressing can really look the same. I think if you really want to be anti-fashion and alternative then wear something like this – I never saw alternatives dressed like that.

So are these your three options: Conform and become a perfectionist, give up and withdraw from others with low self-esteem, or become a rebel and an alternative?

Thankfully not, although it may be a journey to get there. You will probably currently be taking one of these approaches to your life. It depends on your self-esteem, that is your opinion of your self. When your opinion of yourself is low, you will then allow yourself to be defined by the opinions of others in various ways.

In order to not be defined by the opinions of others you must learn to like yourself. For some of you this will be difficult, especially if you have had an experience that has told you that who you are is not ok, like some kind of rejection, harsh treatment from teachers or parents, or experiences of being bullied. These will all erode your opinion of yourself. And it will happen at some point in your life. As I have said to you before, at your stage of life, you have only become aware of others opinions of you recently. When you were a child you were blissfully unaware and were just you

without apologising for that. Now that you have become self-conscious you are faced with the challenge of learning to manage the opinions of others and how this affects your opinion of yourself.

So let me give you a few tips:

1. You can't please all the people all the time. And not everyone's opinion should be of equal value to you. There are some people's opinions who should matter – your close friends and family, as these people know you best. But even these people will not fully accept you as you are. As a parent I know how easy it is to put expectations on my children that really aren't helpful in letting them become who they really are.
2. No one is thinking about us as much as we think they are – we are all constantly thinking about how we look to others. And besides – other people's opinions of you is none of your business. You may never really know what people actually think, or why they really treat you the way they do. Often this will be more about them than it is about us. We just need to be true to ourselves and our opinion of ourself. There will always be haters. But this is all outside our control, and we will lose ourselves if we try and win everyone over.
3. This is a journey. You may not fully accept yourself right now. You may not even have a clue who you really are. That's OK. It's normal. But recognising that you are on a path that will lead you to failure is the first step. And taking the path of other people's opinions will lead to failure – it will not take you to the destination of happiness. Ever. And this is actually one of the definitions of what sin is – taking a path that will not lead us to the correct destination.
4. Sometimes in your life you need to distance yourself from other people to find who you really are. In the church we call this taking a retreat – we realise how easily we can lose ourselves in society, so we spend time alone in nature to remind ourselves that we are perfect just as we are. Just as nature is just what it is, and that is OK, so also we are good creations of God – we are loved and have immense value just by being ourselves.
5. No one really feels as if they belong when they are at high school. There is a whole genre of films all about this truth – that everyone at High school is lost, pretending, insecure to some degree. Wrestling with this feeling of belonging

is your spiritual work at this point in your lives, and many of you won't resolve it until your twenties, or even your thirties.

Let me leave you with this quote from one of my favourite authors – the monk Thomas Merton:

“The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of other men! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in somebody else's imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real!”

— **Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain**