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THE *Perfection* INFECTION

The phone rang in the chaos of the “after-school-almost dinner-time” hour. I was making a dinner salad (translated: I poured a bag of lettuce into a pretty glass bowl and threw some cherry tomatoes on for color!), helping two kids with their homework, and trying to keep my four-year-old busy enough not to whine for dinner.

I grabbed the phone and shoved it between my ear and my shoulder, answering with a quick, “Hello, this is Jill!” The voice on the other end of the line was obviously emotional. “Mom, this is Erica. Did you forget me?”

I quickly did a head count: one, two, three . . . four—oh my. *Erica’s not here. I thought all my chicks were in the nest, but there was one at basketball practice, and it completely slipped my mind that she wasn’t*

home and I needed to pick her up!

I couldn't lie. "Erica, I am so sorry!" I apologized. "I completely forgot to pick you up. I will be right there!"

The sniffing on the other end of the phone made my guilt run deeper. *How could I forget my own child? What kind of mom does something like that? How will she ever forgive me?*

Welcome to real life! If we're honest with one another, we all have stories like that to share. There are no perfect moms.

INSIDES AND OUTSIDES

Like most moms, I entered the motherhood scene wanting to be the perfect mom. I read. I prepared. I planned. I dreamed. I determined to be intentional about everything I did from choosing the laundry detergent that would be best for their skin to choosing the school that would

be best for their education. I was going to be supermom. I would do it all and do it all well. Then life happened.

People often say, "Hindsight is 20/20." Looking back on that late-afternoon scene now, eleven years later, I have a valuable perspective I didn't have then.

My daughter Erica, who is now twenty-one, isn't emotionally scarred because I forgot her at basketball practice. She's a well-adjusted young adult who has a great story to tell, especially when she wants to get a little sympathy or a good laugh at family gatherings.

I now understand that my pursuit of being the "perfect mom" set me up for failure from day one. There are no perfect moms—just imperfect women who will fall off the pedestal of their own expectations more often than they care to admit.

My pursuit of being the "perfect mom" set me up for failure from day one.

The Perfection Infection

A good friend once told me, “Jill, never compare your insides to someone else’s outsides.” She shared that wisdom when she heard me unconsciously compare myself to another mom after one of my many failures. That powerful statement still sticks with me. I now realize that most moms play the comparison game dozens of times every day. We constantly look to see how we measure up to those around us. And we *don’t* measure up. But how can we measure up? We compare ourselves to something that doesn’t exist. We compare our messy insides—our struggles, our failures, our less-than-perfect lives—to other women’s carefully cleaned-up, perfect-looking outsides. It’s a game we moms play that we can never ever win.

So if we insist on playing the comparison game (and most of us do!), then it’s time for a new measuring stick. Instead of comparing insides to outsides, we need to compare insides to insides. In fact, that’s what I hope to do by sharing honestly in the coming pages.

If we’re honest, too many of us wear motherhood masks that keep our insides from peeking out. Sometimes those masks are based on outward appearance. We wear fashionable clothes and never leave the house without our makeup done and our hair styled. In other words, on the outside we always look like we have it together. Others of us wear a mask in our conversations with other moms. We would never admit we are struggling in any way, even if others are openly talking about their struggles. Some of us wear masks of pride. We only share the good and never talk about the bad. We pretend we’re more confident than we really are.

Authors Justin and Trisha Davis talk further about masks.

We wear masks at church. We argue all the way to Sunday service and paint on a smile on our way in. We pretend to be more spiritual, more put together, more mature in our faith than we really are. We fear that if anyone knew the real us, they would think less of us . . . so we mask our brokenness.

We wear masks at home. We pretend things are okay in our marriage when there is distance. We say nothing is wrong when our feelings are truly hurt. We don't necessarily lie to our spouse; we just shade part of the truth. We don't feel comfortable being our true self with our spouse because we are afraid of judgment or ridicule.

The thing about masks is that they never bring us closer to who we were created to be. Masks always make shallow what God has intended to be deep. Friendships. Marriages. Families. Churches. Everything in our lives get cheated when we choose to be fake.¹

*Would you like to
live a grace-filled
life that loves
instead of judges?*

Have you ever thought about the fact that you are cheating yourself by wearing a mask? Have you ever considered that fake smile is keeping you from the depth of relationships you're really longing for?

I'd like to put "being fake" away for good in the journey of motherhood. Masks do not serve us well. They keep us at an arm's length from our friends, our family, and our God. Not only that, but wearing masks breeds judgment. It keeps us judging ourselves and others instead of living in and loving through grace.

Are you ready for a new lens through which to view life? Would you like to live a grace-filled life that loves instead of judges? Would you

like to leave perfectionism behind and find freedom in authenticity? I know I would!

So where do we start? To understand where we are and where we need to go, it's wise to start with a sense of how we got here. Let's explore this: Just how did our lives become so infected with perfectionism?

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I noticed it for the first time just a couple of years ago. There was a little box I could check on my boys' school picture order form if I'd like the photographer to provide "touch up services" for their school pictures. You know: remove a zit here, fix an out-of-place hair there. Many of us no longer want a "real" picture of who our kids are. We want them to look better than they really do. Given the option, we choose to remove their "imperfections" because we're not okay with anything less than perfect. After all, we're comparing ourselves—and our kids—to those around us.

The temptation to compare ourselves to others goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were two people in the most perfect setting. No worries. All of their needs provided for.

Satan came along and started feeding them lies about themselves and about God. They compared their situation to his lies and decided that life in the garden wasn't all it was cracked up to be. They acted on impulse and broke the only rule God had given them—not to eat of just one tree in the garden. Despite their perfect existence, Adam and Eve still felt the need for something else, something more. Their children carried on the comparison game when Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. And the saga continues: Story after story in the Bible illustrates that people have always played the comparison game.

So it's human nature to compare, to be discontent, and to want something different from what we have. But what has driven us to try to attain something as unattainable as perfection? The culprit is in front of our faces every day.

Our generation of mothers is more socially connected than any previous generation. The explosion of media in the past fifty years and social media in the past ten years has connected us to so many more people to whom we compare ourselves. Think about it: all you and I have to do is stand in the checkout aisle at WalMart and we are assaulted by the headlines, "Lose 30 lbs. in 30 days!" "Meet Brad and Angelina's Perfect Family!" We see pictures of "perfect" houses, "perfect" bodies, and "perfect" families splashed on the front of the magazines we walk by as we pay for our groceries. The hard part of this comparison game is that we aren't comparing ourselves to reality. The photos are Photoshopped and airbrushed, the stories are edited, and the guarantee of perfection is overpromised in order to sell magazines.

More than ten years ago, I personally had the privilege of being on the cover of a Christian magazine. What an experience! A photo shoot, several outfit changes, a makeup artist—wow! I could never have dreamed I'd get to experience something like that. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that my photos had been edited: a little removal of a blemish here, airbrush the skin there. That's right, even in the Christian media, we've fallen prey to presenting perfection. After all, our culture demands it.

When you see a picture of a kitchen makeover in a magazine, remember those pictures are staged. That's not how that kitchen will look when someone cooks in it. Then there will be crumbs on the counter,

something sticky on the floor, and a sink full of dirty dishes that need to be washed. When you see a picture of a family playing together in a magazine, on a billboard, or in an advertisement, remember the picture is set up to create a certain feeling—and those people in the picture probably aren't even related. It's even possible these actors argued with their real spouses before they left the house or are dealing with financial issues in their personal life. When you see pictures of a movie star who has slimmed down to her pre-pregnancy weight just three months after giving birth, remember she's not only likely had a personal trainer and a chef, but the photos have probably been retouched to give an illusion of perfection.

While magazines give us unrealistic visual pictures against which to compare our real bodies and our real homes, we can thank Hollywood for painting unrealistic relational pictures for us. Every sitcom presents and resolves some kind of problem in a thirty-minute time span. Every movie presents some event or season of life that gets tidily wrapped up within a mere two hours. Sure they show conflict or even messy relational challenges, but usually the good guy wins and the bad guy gets his deserved justice by the end of the show. Even the reality shows aren't real. They have been cut and edited so much that they sometimes misrepresent what really happened in a scene.

Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest can be culprits, too! As we look at the status someone posts, we think, *I wish my kid would say something cute like that.* Or *I wish I could say something nice like that about my husband.* On Pinterest, we can find ourselves wishing we had more creativity or better ideas as we look at all the great organizational tools or craft projects people share.

The more we compare, the higher our expectations are set and the more the Perfection Infection sets in. Without realizing it, we want our problems to be solved in thirty minutes to two hours. Unconsciously, we long for our skin to look like the model in that commercial we just watched. Instinctively, we long for a pretty house with flowers on the counter and no toys strewn across the floor. Our expectations are fueled by a constant barrage of “perfect” scenes and images we see in our media-saturated society.

Not only does this increase our desire for a perfect house, perfect kids, a perfect body, and a perfect husband, it actually causes us to be discontent with our real houses, our real kids, our real bodies, and our real husbands. Even worse, most of the time we don’t even realize that’s what we are doing. It’s a subtle erosion of our satisfaction. If we don’t recognize it, the discontentment can turn into disappointment, and then the disappointment can eventually turn into disillusionment. However, the disillusionment cannot really be resolved because what you are longing for—the perfect house, the perfect job, the perfect husband—simply does not exist.

A REALITY CHECK

There are so many magical moments in motherhood: when your child is first placed in your arms, when you watch your toddler marvel over holding a caterpillar for the first time, when your preschooler first writes her name, when your fourth-grader wins the spelling bee, when your special needs child overcomes an obstacle for the very first time, when your pre-adolescent says, “You’re the best mom in the world!,” when your teenager is respectful over at the neighbor’s house, and

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when your young adult walks across the stage to graduate from high school or college. Those are beautiful moments in the motherhood memory bank.

There are other delightful times: watching your kids play in the snow, playing Uno as a family, laughing around the dinner table, playing together at the park, camping for the first time, and enjoying vacations you'll never forget. Sometimes spontaneous and sometimes planned, these joy-filled, memory-making moments keep us going.

However, you and I both know those moments are not the stuff that happens 24/7/365. Life is full of challenges, mundane responsibilities, and difficult relationships. On one of my recent blog posts, I asked my online friends to share a one-word description of how they were feeling that day. Here are some of the responses shared from moms all over the world:

Worried

Stressed

Tired

Hopeful

Overwhelmed

Sad

Emotional

Exhausted

Scared

Waiting

Blessed

Anxious

Grateful

Joyful

Encouraged

Abandoned

Stretched

Angry

Happy

Busy

Not-good-enough

Stuck

Thankful

Fearful

Betrayed

Confused

Discouraged

Lonely

Excited

Drained

Vulnerable

Broken

Can you relate to any of those words? If so, which ones? Whatever you are feeling, it's obvious that you are not alone. The responses are telling: more than 90 percent of the answers expressed negative emotions. Life is hard sometimes! If you feel this way and think no one understands, I hope you're starting to realize that many other women *do* understand.

You are not the only mom who feels worthless sometimes.

You are not the only mom who yelled at your children today.

You are not the only mom who is trying to blend two families into one and finding it far more difficult than you thought.

You are not the only mom who has struggled with infertility.

You are not the only mom who has had trouble bonding with an adopted child.

You are not the only mom who wishes her husband would just hold her and listen to her.

You are not the only mom who isn't making enough money to make ends meet.

You are not the only mom who constantly battles a weight issue.

You are not the only mom who struggles with your faith and understanding God.

You are not the only mom who is critical of her husband.

You are not the only mom who has said something to a friend that you later regretted.

You are not the only mom who feels as if she has no friends.

You are not the only mom who is struggling in her marriage.

You are not the only mom who has dealt with depression.

You are not the only mom facing conflict in her marriage about sex or money.

You are not the only mom who has a difficult child or a wayward teenager.

You are not the only mom who has discovered your husband is addicted to pornography.

You are not the only mom who has discovered your husband has been unfaithful.

You are not the only mom who can't seem to keep up with the laundry and the house.

You are not the only mom who carries the title of "single mom."

You are not the only mom who struggled with breastfeeding her baby.

You are not the only mom who sometimes wants to run away.

You are not alone. You are among friends who struggle with these same issues. Unfortunately, most of us just don't talk about these "inside" issues often enough. That's why we feel alone or feel as if we've failed.

We're going to change that starting today. We may be contaminated with the Perfection Infection, but it's not without an antidote. Turn the page to discover the freedom found in authenticity.

You are not alone. You are among friends.

Note

1. Justin and Trisha Davis, "The Masks We Wear," refine us (blog), May 9, 2011, <http://refineus.org>.