

AN *Imperfect*
WOMAN



Letting Go of the Need
to Have It All Together

Kim Hyland



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To
Jeff
Josh and Kim
Daniel, Hilary, and Amelia
Emily, Ethan, Elisha, and Ezra
Ben and Margaret
Joe
and
Sam

Your love and grace overwhelm me.

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An *Imperfect* Woman's Manifesto

The woman in the front of the room held up a terra-cotta pot. It was perfect, without chips or cracks, smooth. Just like it should be.

“This is how I would like to be. Pretty perfect,” she said. Then she picked up another pot. It had cracks and chips everywhere and had obviously been painstakingly glued back together. I could see where this was going.

That's nice, I thought.

“But *this* is how I actually am.” She held up the cracked pot.

Yep. Knew it.

My cynicism was more a response of my exhaustion than meanness. I'd been at this gig too long and had given up. Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick,” and I was sick of heart. My hopes to create a life that would please God and fulfill me were crumbling. I couldn't try hard enough or go fast enough to outrun my inescapable imperfections and flaws and had resigned myself to failure. I didn't expect what would come next.

She placed a candle in each pot. As she lit the “perfect” pot, a warm glow emanated from the top. Then she lit the candle in the cracked pot and turned off the lights in the room.

Light streamed out from every crack, illuminating the entire pot. It was beautiful. In that moment, my paradigm began to shift. Maybe my despised imperfections had the potential to become something of beauty. Could they possibly be the very conduit of the grace, love, and light of God? For the first time in a long time, I had hope.

As I began to better understand and walk in God's grace, I experienced a freedom I'd never imagined, and my eyes were opened to so many of my peers who were still walking in bondage to performance and perfectionism. I wanted to break the chains and expose the lies that I saw all around me. That's the thing about freedom—it makes an abolitionist of those who've experienced it.

Not long after I discovered this newfound freedom, I was having dinner with a good friend, a woman who loves God wholeheartedly and has poured her life and God's Word into her family. She said that she felt she was ineligible to encourage others in their mothering because of her children's struggles and failures. Driving home, I was reflecting on our conversation, and I got angry.

I was angry at perfectionism. Angry at lies that deceive and rob us of our inheritance as daughters of the King and *make little of grace*. What is this lie we've swallowed that says until we get it together (whatever *together* is), we're not fit to advance truth and the kingdom of God? As I drove, in my head I began to compose *An Imperfect Woman's Manifesto*.

An Imperfect Woman's Manifesto

The Gospel's Proclamation

I will reject spiritual perfectionism and *embrace gospel grace.*

I will reject pride and *embrace humility.*

I will reject condemnation and *embrace forgiveness.*

The Gospel's Promise

I will reject anxiety and *embrace true peace.*

I will reject false security and *embrace God's sovereignty and provision.*

The Gospel's Price

I will reject idols posing as ideals and *embrace sacrifice, suffering, and hope.*

I will reject dressed-up lies and *embrace naked truth.*

I will reject safety and *embrace the battle.*

The Gospel's Power

I will reject comparison and *embrace my story.*

I will reject myopic, earthbound plans and *embrace grand, eternal destinies.*



PART 1

The Gospel's Proclamation

Eden's Redemption

two trees stand before me
one I know well
its fruit luscious, heady, and ripe
the scent of knowledge, vanity, pride

my ancestors knew it
their lineage sustained and appetites sated
with its fallow fruit and empty promises

the knowledge of good and evil
the hope of immortality
to be like God

the same old lie
its deceit as fresh as the day
why is man so simple?

The Gospel's Proclamation

fig leaves make pitiful clothes
my nakedness and shame refuse to be covered
scrambling, dropping, hiding
(a lot like those dreams of being naked in public)

but simpletons love their leaves
their futile efforts to mask weakness and failure
refusing to acknowledge their desperate need
refusing to accept

only blood can cover sin

footsteps come near
questions too
“why do you hide from my presence?”

accusations abound
excuses fly
everyone else must be at fault
to bear the blame would be a burden that would crush

I know the sentence
he did not lie when he said
“you shall surely die”

so why does he fashion clothes to cover my shame?
from what cloth do they come?
skins?

death has come
blood does cover
but it is not mine
this blood is from another

a foreshadow stretching long
across ages and time
from earth's creation . . . to Gethsemane . . . to this
moment

The Gospel's Proclamation

the garden is not so far from here
its drama repeated in every mortal life
to listen to the deceiver
or to believe my maker

yes, the garden is near

but the verdict, it has changed
for my advocate spoke and took all my blame
his hands bear the scars of my heart's newfound
healing

he invites me to walk
to taste of the other
this fruit not forbidden
but offered freely
“come and eat”
he says
“of the Tree of Life”



The Gospel, a Perfect Fit for Your Reality

*I will reject spiritual perfectionism
and embrace gospel grace.*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus (Luke 4:18–19)

Amy Howard was my best friend in first grade. She lived close by, and I can still see the path to her house in my memory. Out the sliding back doors, across our postage-stamp townhouse lawn, through the gate, past the playground, up the hill, across the street, and I'd arrive. We would sing into hairbrush microphones in her basement as we dreamed up plans for our rock band. I don't remember if we had a name for our up-and-coming band, but I do remember our signature song! It was "Sugar Pie Honey Bunch" (aka "I Can't Help Myself" by The Four Tops), and it was going to make us famous.

Amy's mom was cool. She encouraged our dreams of fame and even joined our band practice on occasion. My fuzzy memories of her are all positive. That is until Amy told me her cool mom didn't believe in God. I was devastated.

If you don't believe in God, you go to hell. Period.

This was the first and most important fact in my nascent theological arsenal. I remember feeling a sense of panic that quickly turned into anxious efforts to fix this dreadful problem—a mental and emotional state I'd come to know well.

"She *has* to believe in God, Amy."

"Well, she doesn't," replied Amy passively.

"But she'll go to hell!"

"No, she won't!" This time not so passively.

And my pleading continued.

I don't have any memories of Amy or her cool, atheist, hell-bound mom after that. But I remember an overwhelming sense of helplessness and sorrow. I couldn't fix it.

A couple years later, I heard the gospel for the first time. The message truly was *good news* for my passionate, do-good, striving, seven-year-old soul. It was *great news*! I'd found the sure path to goodness, God, and heaven.

A Place of Power

Our salvation is a powerful moment in our lives—the most powerful. We receive this gift, the gospel of grace, that literally brings us to life and equips us to live every day for the rest of our lives. The gospel proclaims that as we humble our hearts, we receive forgiveness for our sins. As children of God, we're promised his sovereign care, provision, and peace.

While salvation is a free gift of God, the gospel calls us to a life of sacrifice—and even suffering—but always hope. Its truth becomes our standard, and we are equipped for the spiritual battle we've always fought anyway. The difference is now we are on the offense—and winning side.

The gospel comes with power! Its power is revealed through our stories and grand, eternal destinies designed by our Father for each one of us.

This gospel story of God's great love and grace through Jesus and its *proclamation, promise, price, and power* are at center stage when we first receive the gift of salvation. The gospel of grace has all our attention.

And our enemy Satan knows if we stay in that place of deep truth, dependence, and reliance on our Father—this deep awareness at the foot of the cross of his grace and our sinfulness, the forgiveness we receive, and the love exchange that takes place there, that place focused on God's grace—we will become a real threat in the spiritual battle. So he goes to task creating distractions, counterfeits, and whatever he can to get our eyes off grace.

My Story

I was raised in a churchgoing home by first-generation Christians. My father, a handsome Puerto Rican from Brooklyn, and my mother, a homecoming queen country girl from rural Pennsylvania, met in a laundromat in Washington, DC, in the late sixties. They quickly fell in love and married, and soon after, I joined them.

Dad had heard the gospel at the historic 1957 Billy Graham Crusade in New York City. He was twelve years old, and he went forward when Billy gave the altar call. Mom's encounter with the gospel was humbler but no less effective. She told stories of listening to her Pentecostal grandmother sing hymns on her porch in Hazard, Kentucky. Grea-Grandma was sowing song-seeds of love and truth in the soil of my mother's young heart—seeds that would take root, grow, and in time supply fruit that would feed my faith.

Along with my parents, many loving and *imperfect* people molded my understanding of God and the Bible. But even in the midst of a Christian home, church involvement, private school, youth group, and Christian college, I came to equate *pleasing* with love. Of course, my misunderstanding carried over into my relationship with God. I would hide from him when I wasn't performing well and come to him only when I believed I was *worthy* of his approval and love.

I was distracted from grace, to say the least. I'd fallen for subtle yet destructive lies. My eyes were focused intently on my own beleaguered efforts to perfect myself. *Perfectionism* is defined as (1) any of various doctrines holding that religious, moral, social, or political perfection is attainable; (2) a personal standard, attitude, or philosophy that demands perfection and rejects anything less.¹ I'd forgotten the gospel message.

Being the fixer and planner that I was, I began strategizing for my future early on. I would do this thing right! I was ambitious

through high school, graduating at sixteen and going off to college the following fall. I found my knight in shining armor, Jeff, and we were married when I was eighteen. I finished college at twenty, and our first son, Joshua, was born nine months later. My plans were coming together. I was determined to create a godly home and to continue to make myself worthy of God's love and blessings.

One child after another came rapid fire—a second boy, a girl, two more boys, and after deciding we were done having children, another boy four years later. As each child joined our family, I decided not only to carry the responsibility of my own sanctification but also to take charge of sanctifying my children's souls as well.

The years flew by, as they tend to do. I was living my dream, and I knew it. But why was it so hard? We homeschooled, Jeff was an elder, I taught Bible studies, I kept a *ridiculously* clean house for a family of eight. And I yelled a whole lot at my kids. I was a Bible-toting, churchgoing, song-singing, hard-striving young wife and mother.

For all of my striving, we were doing . . . *okay*. I was stressed out all the time, my oldest son and I argued constantly, and our second son was running away. But we were okay, because we homeschooled, my husband was an elder, I taught Bible studies, and the house was clean most of the time. And *Emily*.

Emily said, "Yes, ma'am," taught Bible studies to her little friends in the neighborhood, helped me all the time, was a leader and example among her peers, and loved Jesus wholeheartedly.

She also had nowhere to go with the reality of her sin. Emily had embraced the same striving, try-hard life as her mother and was a really "good" girl. When it came to my only daughter, I felt successful.

Until the day I walked into her room unexpected and discovered Emily was cutting. It looked like a cat had attacked her stomach. Had you told me that my sweet, little thirteen-year-old daughter was cutting, I would have said you were crazy. Emily said, “Yes, ma’am,” taught Bible studies, and truly loved Jesus wholeheartedly! Cutting wasn’t part of my plan.

We went on to discover that Emily was deeply depressed and had an eating disorder. My world crumbled. It crumbled not because I loved Em more than her brothers, but because I felt like she was the *one* I was getting it right with, and now I’d failed with her too. And I gave up. I kept going through the motions, but my heart wasn’t in it. *How* could I work so stinking hard and still fail so profoundly as a mom?

The helplessness and lack of control I felt were paralyzing. As a mother, you will do anything to protect your children. But what do you do when their enemy is themselves? My mind was frantic, but every strategy and fix I could conceive came up to a dead end. I would lie in bed at night begging God to protect Emily from herself. Begging him to fix *us*. My heart was breaking. What I didn’t know was that in my desperation God was breaking the back of perfectionism in my life. My life’s greatest failure would become the means of my freedom.

In his wisdom, love, and mercy, God had begun to sabotage my strategies.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

The word translated “abide” in this verse is the Greek word *meno*. It means “to remain; not to depart; to continue. To remain as one; not to become another or different.”² At the

moment of salvation, we literally become *one* with Christ. I don't know that I think of myself as *that* integrated, that I am *one* with Christ and therefore I'm not to *become* another or different.

Our family lives on seven acres tucked into the side of a mountain. A couple years ago, my son Ben and I were out hiking. As we walked through our woods, I began to notice places where dead trees had fallen over and landed in the crook of a live tree and, after some years, had literally become a part of the living tree. It was fascinating to see these odd branches sticking out of what seemed like two trees, but on closer examination I could see how they'd actually *become one* as the tree that was alive grew around the dead tree.

That is a picture of us! Our spiritually dead lives have been incorporated into the living Christ just as the dead branches I saw became actual parts of the living tree. The difference is, unlike the dead branches, we are made alive and able to produce spiritual fruit. Like branches that can't survive without connection to the vine, we can't do anything apart from Jesus. The commentary of the *New Geneva Study Bible* describes our ongoing dependence this way: "The total inability of the unregenerate sinner makes saving grace absolutely necessary for the beginning, the development, and the completion of salvation."³

This passage is an undeniable affirmation of the gospel's relevance in our lives, not just at the moment of salvation but every single day! If we stay in relationship with God but don't *abide* in grace, we inevitably fall into spiritual perfectionism. A genuine love for God turns into performance-based striving leading to either pride or condemnation or, more likely, a miserable mix of both. When I'm doing well, I'm proud. When I fail, I feel condemned.

Relevant

Years ago I prayed that God would make the gospel relevant to my daily life. I embraced its truth, but in all honesty, I failed to see its relevance beyond a prayer I'd prayed when I was seven and something I was supposed to be telling others about. It seemed like Christianity 101, and I considered myself well into the 300-level courses. I genuinely loved Jesus, sought him daily, and yearned to obey his Word. My prayer was motivated by a desire to relieve my guilt for not sharing the gospel. It seemed like such an effort to tell others about him.

His answer surprised me. It still surprises me. *Every day!* What I'd hoped would be a renewed conviction for loving the lost instead became a profound realization of my own need for gospel grace every day.

The gospel—or *good news*—is God's perfection and righteousness given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. You probably already know that, but do you see how perfectly that news fits with your imperfection? Every single day!

In her remarkable book *Counsel from the Cross*, Christian author and psychologist Elyse Fitzpatrick warns that Scripture can become like Christian "white noise."⁴ We acknowledge it but really don't notice it. It's like the hum of a fan running in the background of our spiritual lives. We need to turn up the fan, point it in our faces, and feel the power of its presence and truth as we take a close look at the gospel and its proclamations!

The crux of the gospel is this exchange: God's righteousness for our unrighteousness, his holiness for our sin, his perfection for our imperfection, his amazing grace for our lawlessness.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for

sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3)

God's perfect law is a reflection of his perfect righteousness. It must be kept. Perfectly. The "righteous requirement of the law" must be fulfilled. The law of God is perfect, but I was born imperfect and flawed beyond hope and bear the fruit of the seed of sin. On my own I am helpless and hopeless to overcome sin and keep God's law, no matter how much I want to.

So in comes my hero, my Savior. He takes the punishment for my sin and gives me his righteous perfection. What a trade! "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). But why? "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (v. 2).

What a beautiful title: *the law of the Spirit of life*. This is the law that set me free from *the law of sin and death* and the law *to* which I have been freed! I am now freely bound to this law of the Spirit of life. This is why the apostle Paul called himself a *bondservant* of Christ. A bondservant is one who has been freed, but by his own volition he chooses to bind himself to his master.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. (v. 12)

The *flesh* either rejects God's law or demands perfect obedience to the law walking in its own strength.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, (v. 13a)

You will die, whether in arrogant sin and rebellion against God or in a self-determined pursuit of God, aka spiritual perfection-

ism. A life lived according to the flesh is marked by confidence in self.

but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, (vv. 13b–15a)

Notice what emotion marks the spirit of slavery to the law of sin and death. It's fear.

but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (v. 15b)

Abba is the Jewish word for daddy. This is the image of a beloved daughter who cries out in humility and weakness, but in power too because of the strength of her daddy.

A proper understanding of the role of law and grace in our lives leads us to a proper response to the reality of the sin we are faced with daily, both our own and the sin of those around us. A *law*-informed response is marked by a discouraging and defeating progression: the delusion that we are capable of perfection on our own; denial of our imperfection; condemnation when we can no longer deny our imperfection; frustration, anger, and rebellion because we are faced with a hopeless task; and ultimately destruction, because we have no refuge from sin.

But a *grace*-informed response to our sin is marked by a path that leads us to Christ again and again: recognition of our failures and imperfection; conviction of the Spirit; repentance in response to his kindness; and ultimately restoration and a deeper intimacy with our Father, our Daddy, because of his love.

Too many women who are followers of Christ are living in the strength of the flesh and the spirit of slavery. They are

fearful and impotent in their spiritual lives because of a flawed understanding of sin and who we are in Christ and with a death grip on the law for security.

The fruit of this kind of life is rotten. The denial of our absolute inability to keep God's law results in exhausting and futile efforts to attain spiritual perfection. We're reluctant to acknowledge our own sin, or we deal with sin harshly, condemning our loved ones and ourselves. When we put all hope in the law and flesh, we make Jesus's death on the cross to no effect. This is a crushing burden to bear.

I wonder how often the choice to reject faith in Christ or to settle for mediocrity is due to this burden and frustration with the inability to overcome sin in the flesh. How many women find themselves in a swirling vortex of confusion, condemnation, and destruction that feeds off itself and leads to the professed or passive abandonment of their faith?

It is vital for women to understand truth regarding the process of redemption and sanctification. Otherwise, at best we miss an incredible opportunity to walk in truth and grace. At worst we fall into rebellion against God, and by our example we lead others astray, teaching them to walk and put confidence in the flesh, which, according to Romans 8:5–8, is “death, . . . hostile to God,” and “cannot please God.”

For we are the circumcision [we are the ones who have been chosen, marked, and set apart], who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. (Phil. 3:3 NKJV)

We should not be surprised at how frequently we fail but rather that we walk at all in righteousness! The accuser of my soul wants to fix my focus on all my failures, flaws, insufficiencies, and imperfections. But the *lover of my soul* beckons me

to look up to the cross, remember the reality of his perfection sacrificed for my imperfection, and embrace his grace.

For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Gal. 3:21–26)

Through my ongoing struggles and failures, God has revealed to me the deep, deep relevance of the gospel in my everyday life. I choose each day to respond to my sin either with condemnation, hopelessness, and beleaguered efforts to perfect myself or in the light of the gospel, which purifies my heart and motives for obedience. When I remember grace, I am affirmed as *completely* accepted and loved by God because of Christ, and I respond in gratitude and trust. The very good news of the gospel arrives every morning and meets me right where I am. *It is a perfect fit.*

Before I began to embrace practically the grace found in the gospel each day, most of my mornings started out with big plans. But even after spending time praying and reading the Word, I'd be two feet outside my bedroom and everything would crumble as I was bombarded with my inescapable imperfection. Fussy children, unending to-do lists, emails, bills, and life's myriad challenges would upend my resolve in a moment to "do this day right."

Darn. I guess I'll try again tomorrow, I'd think. And I would trudge through my day.

But when I began to see the relevance of the gospel in my everyday life, I saw how it was a perfect fit for my reality. The gospel enables me to live in joy and freedom *here* with *these* people and in *these* circumstances. Nothing needs to change. *That* is good news!

Feeding Grace

Slowly, carefully, and so humbly, she lifted the cup to the young woman's lips.

I watched the caretaker and how she served the young woman, severely handicapped and bound to her wheelchair. The caretaker's beauty was radiant. Peace oozed out of her. She seemed to have true joy in her serving.

And now the generous servant held life to the chair-bound's lips. A remembrance of sacrifice, forgiveness, grace, and hope. An offering the weaker couldn't experience on her own. Someone needed to help her. She needed someone to feed her grace.

I wept, stifling sobs, as I witnessed this act of incomparable beauty. As long as I live, I will remember this image when I take communion. It was a picture of all the sacrament encompasses. The communion of strength and weakness, of grace and need, of lover and beloved. Body broken for broken body.

Later, I discovered that the caretaker was the young woman's mother. Who better to serve grace to her daughter? She was a picture of all I want to be as a woman who cares for my loved ones. Humble, careful, slow. Considerate of weakness, brokenness, and need. Strength that serves. Feeding grace.

And her beloved daughter? She was a picture of who I truly am! Helpless to save myself. In perpetual need of another's constant care. Dependent, loved, and secure because of the love and sacrifice of another.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



Spiritual perfectionism relies upon perfectly keeping the law, while the gospel is the good news of God's grace in our imperfection. In your day-to-day life, which of these do you tend toward?

What are the areas in your life in which you need to reject spiritual perfectionism and embrace the grace of the gospel?

What are some practical ways to “turn up the fan” so the gospel of grace is more than white noise in your spiritual life?

Why is there “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1)?

According to Romans 8:13–15, what spirit have we not received? And what spirit have we received?

How much confidence should we put in our flesh, our own ability to achieve righteousness (Phil. 3:3)?

What was the intended role of the law until Christ came (Gal. 3:21–26)?

What are some ways you can demonstrate a “grace-informed” response to your sin?