

# 5 Signs You Are a People Pleaser

There is an unsettling reality that many of us live with each day – the reality that you can't please all people all the time. An over focus on pleasing people can be a difficult snare that often leaves people feeling stressed, anxious, or discouraged. Learning the signs of people-pleasing and how to overcome people-pleasing can help lead to a more God-centered life that experiences peace and joy.

## 5 SIGNS YOU ARE A PEOPLE-PLEASER

Several markers may indicate an individual is engaging in unhealthy people-pleasing:

1. Feeling guilty for saying “no” and/or having a difficult time saying “no.”
  - a. This can lead individuals to struggle to live within God-designed limits.
2. Being preoccupied with what others think.
3. Regularly finding yourself saying sorry.
4. Neglecting your own legitimate needs to do things for others.
  - a. This can lead to allowing other people to determine one's value, schedule, and priorities.
5. Pretending to agree even when you feel differently.

Some of the items above don't sound all that unhealthy. After all, kindness is a virtue to value in believers. In *Ephesians 4:32*, Paul calls us to “be ye kind one to another.” We are to be considerate and pleasing to one another. Consider *Philippians 2:3* “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” And yet, certain approaches to pleasing each other may possibly lead to becoming enslaved in painful emotions and unhealthy relational patterns. Rather than serving others unselfishly, is it possible certain types of pleasing can perpetuate patterns of manipulation, insensitivity, or defeat?

How then do we serve one another with the right motives without people-pleasing? There is nothing wrong with wanting to please others - unless that desire controls our choices. When this happens, we don't say no when we need to, and we no longer exhibit authentic, heartfelt kindness. There are likely a few reasons unhealthy behavioral patterns can become rigid and set in our lives. These can include incorrect beliefs about what it means to serve like Christ and not being in-tune with the Holy Spirit. In addition, various underlying emotions can drive people-pleasing such as fear, false guilt, and worry that can motivate unhealthy people pleasing behaviors.

### UNDERLYING DRIVER: FEAR

*Proverbs 29:25* reminds us “The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.” The emotion of fear often flows out of an assumption that harmful experiences are inevitable. It leads to a posture of being on guard or defensive around others. Fear can also lead to pessimistic patterns of thinking where uncertainty and doubt consume an individual's thought life. While experiencing some amount of fear is normal, left unchecked, fear can become a snare that prevents authentic relationships. Scripture calls us to be peacemakers, not peacekeepers or peace-fakers (*Matthew 5:9*). When we fall into patterns of faking peace or seeking to keep peace at the expense of the truth being shared in love, we likely are becoming ensnared by the fear of man.

### UNDERLYING DRIVER: FALSE GUILT

Another common underlying emotion of unhealthy people-pleasing is false guilt. True guilt is a normal emotion and God uses true guilt to bring awareness when we have done something wrong. It is meant to lead to repentance, an

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acknowledgement of error or wrong behavior that leads to a freeing response and relationship restoration with God and others. False guilt can lead to feeling ongoing judgment and condemnation due to the difficulty in identifying wrong behavior aside from disappointing another. The reality is we will not please everyone, and we must live in this reality. Even Jesus, though He was perfect, disappointed people. He traveled away from villages where individuals remained sick, blind, or lame (*Mark 1:33-38*) while doing His Father's perfect will.

### **UNDERLYING DRIVER: WORRY**

While the underlying emotion of false guilt can lead to the "if only" mindset, the final emotion in unhealthy people-pleasing behaviors tends to ruminate on "what if" scenarios. For example, "what would happen if I do or say that?" The longer we stay in the whirlpool of worry and doubt, the "what if" mindset, the more it takes a grip on our mind, body and soul. There is a never-ending list of possible scenarios that worry and doubt desire us to consider. Unfortunately, most of these scenarios are often considered from a place of uncertainty, leaving us focused on what is not in one's control rather than focusing on God's grace and provision for the future. This inaccurate focus leads to our world shrinking and us feeling unable to live a life of joy and peace.

### **OVERCOMING UNHEALTHY PEOPLE-PLEASING**

The initial step for loosening the grip of these underlying emotions of unhealthy people-pleasing is to identify their presence. Pay attention to your experiences in relationships and seek to understand what is going on in your heart. Do you notice the gripping presence of the fear of man or the gnawing and relentless companion of false guilt? What do you notice about the fear of man? How is it different from the fear of God? Begin to label such experiences and emotions as "false guilt" or "fear of man" or the "whirlpool of worry." This step of identifying relational patterns itself can help reduce the stickiness of these underlying emotions.

It is good to remember that overcoming often goes deeper than skill development – i.e., setting boundaries or practicing assertiveness. While skill development is good and healthy – the reality is there is a need for a change in heart. What rules your heart? We all worship something or someone. The choice we have is who or what we will worship. We are called to love God with all our being (*Mark 12:33*). God needs to be our first love, not pleasing others. If God is not, God calls us to break free from such bondage (*Gal. 1:10*). God has provided repentance to help believers turn away from worshipping people and people's approval to Him. Call out to Him and acknowledge the fear of man or false guilt and ask Him to set you free.

Another step in overcoming people-pleasing is remembering that disagreeing with others does not mean you need to let go of your sense of inner trust. Next time someone disagrees with you, rather than avoiding conflict or fearfully defending your position, seek to calmly state your rationale and allow the other person to disagree. Meditate on God being your refuge, fortress, and defense (*Psalms 46:1, 62:7-8, 91:2, 94:22*). If false guilt shows up, it can be helpful to pause and reflect – Is there anything I did that I can specifically identify as morally wrong? With false guilt there is not a specific behavior that is clearly wrong but a gnawing suspicion that lacks clarity. Consider meditating on your completeness and unblameable position in Christ (*Colossians 1:21-22, 2:10*). Within the whirlpool of worry, it can be helpful to identify the values and attributes you want to exhibit and move towards such values even before it "feels right." The size of the step is not as important as the direction you are headed. Consider repeating *Psalms 40* and notice the settling effect of establishing your grounding on the Rock and moving from this place with a "new song."

Many believers actually struggle with the patterns, emotions and encounters described above. It is helpful to continue to learn ways to identify such patterns and move toward God. As you learn to say "no" to others, you will likely feel anxious or guilty. This is normal and it will take time for these feelings to shift. Remember, loving God first never excludes us from

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loving others. Rather it frees us to love them well instead of worrying about whether they love us back or not. Finally, remember there is nothing virtuous about playing along with an unhealthy relationship pattern. God desires us to walk in grace and truth. May we look to Jesus as we move toward Him even when it is uncomfortable or scary at times: *“Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrew 12:2).*