

The perils of perfectionism

by Scott Grant

Imperfect rugs

Moroccans deliberately make rugs with imperfections, purposefully weaving mistakes into the patterns. Why? Because they believe it is audacious, even blasphemous, to attempt perfection when only God is perfect. The flaws in the rugs, then, remind them that they should not aspire to perfection in the rest of their lives, either. It's not a bad practice. And it's not a bad lesson. God's power is awesome. He is, in fact, "perfect in power," as the hymn goes. And because God is perfect, we don't have to be.

Moses himself learns this in Exodus 18. The lesson comes from a curious source: a foreigner, Jethro, his father-in-law, a priest of Midian. The two stories in Exodus 18 concern the observations of Jethro. In the first story, he observes what the Lord has done. In the second story, he observes what Moses is doing.

Jethro praises what the Lord has done (18:1-12)

Jethro "heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people." This is the key line that ties the two stories in Exodus 18 together. This refrain, or something similar, appears in the first story in 18:1, 8 and 9, and in the second story in 18:14. In each case, information is coming to Jethro about what someone, either God or Moses, has done on behalf of people.

The names of Moses' sons indicates his growth as a man. The first name was Gershom, which means "A Stranger There." It signifies Moses' woes as an alien in a foreign land after he had fled from Egypt. The name memorialized Moses' plight. But his second son he named Eliezer, which means "My God is Help." Though he was an alien, he came more and more to realize that God was helping him, so the second name memorialized not his plight but God, who helped him through his plight. This is similar to what was recorded in Chapter 17. Moses memorialized the first episode there by giving the place man-oriented names that commemorated his plight (17:7), but he memorialized the second episode by giving an altar a God-oriented name that commemorated the Lord, who helped him through the plight (17:15). We'll get a further opportunity to see Moses grow as he responds to the critique of Jethro in 18:24-27.

Both Jethro and Moses inquire of the other's welfare. How wonderful it makes us feel when someone inquires of our welfare in an honest, caring and non-formulaic manner. When we know that someone cares enough to ask about us, it makes us feel great.

This is a wonderful opportunity for Moses - to tell his father-in-law what the Lord has done. These are among the great moments in our lives - when we are given opportunities to share with an interested party what we have seen the Lord do in our lives and in the lives of the people we love. This is intimate fellowship.

This is also honest fellowship, which is also the only kind of real fellowship. Moses tells Jethro of "all the hardship that had befallen them on the journey." He doesn't sugar-coat it. He tells Jethro that life has been hard. We sometimes get the idea that as followers of Jesus, life shouldn't be hard or that the joy of following Jesus should be so great that it overwhelms the hardness to the point that pain is no longer felt. So if we have trouble overcoming hardship, we may feel embarrassed about it. But we have the freedom to be honest with people, to tell them that life has been hard and not be embarrassed about it. To share about one's difficulties and find a sympathetic, caring ear may be the choicest fellowship of all. It draws us together intensely and establishes intense bonds.

Yet Moses is also able to tell Jethro that "the Lord delivered them." This is what the Lord does - he delivers. Invariably, at some point we will be able to say, "Yes, it was hard, but the Lord delivered me. I am not where I was. I am not who I was." Again, this is sweet.

Jethro is ecstatic about what the Lord has done. He rejoices over what the Lord has done (18:9), he praises the Lord for what he has done (18:10), he acknowledges the superiority of the Lord (18:11) and he offers sacrifices to the Lord (18:12).

Moses' phrase "all the hardship" is contrasted with Jethro's phrase "all the goodness." Scripture affirms these two truths: 1) Life is hard. 2) God is good. To us, they seem contradictory. But in a way perhaps beyond our total comprehension, hardship in no way means that God is not good. The Lord is good, and remains good through the hardship. He never stops being good.

First, Jethro rejoices, or delights in, what the Lord has done for Israel. This is a response borne out of a deep concern for Moses and his people. An emotional expression of that concern bubbles up out of Jethro. When someone is legitimately excited about something that is happening in our lives, it makes our hearts sing. It must have made Moses' heart sing to see Jethro rejoicing.

Second, Jethro blesses the Lord. This is the same word that is used when it is said that the Lord blesses man. When God blesses man, he gives to him in some way. When man blesses God, he recognizes God as the source of blessing. So when Jethro "blesses" the Lord, he's praising the Lord. The Apostle Paul does the same thing in Ephesians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... "

Third, Jethro acknowledges the superiority of the Lord, proclaiming that he is "greater than all gods." This is something that Jethro now "knows." God wants to be known. This is clearly seen in the book of Exodus, where he wants not only the Israelites to know him but the Egyptians as well. Jethro's statement contains echoes of the familiar Exodus refrain from the mouth of the Lord: " ... that you may know ... that I am the Lord." Jethro, a pagan Midianite, and a pagan Midianite priest at that, now says he knows this, and he proclaims the Lord's superiority over all gods. He's agreeing with the Israelites, who sang rhetorically, "Who is like thee among the gods, O Lord?" (15:11).

Fourth, Jethro offers up a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. A burnt offering was representative of full devotion to God. In making these sacrifices, then, Jethro is offering up his life to the Lord. Based on what he has seen the Lord do in the lives of the Israelites, he devotes himself to the Lord. This is the kind of thing that can happen when others get a good look at what the Lord is doing in our lives.

Then the Israelite leaders share a meal with Jethro. Sharing a meal was the highest form of fellowship. And they share the meal in the presence of God, no less. So the sweet fellowship between Jethro and Moses reaches its peak here as others join in and God pulls up a chair. Can life get any better than this?

What is it that has caught Jethro's attention? It is what the Lord has done to Egypt on behalf of the Israelites. This shows Jethro not only how powerful the Lord is but how loving he is as well.

The Lord hasn't delivered us from bondage to Egypt, but he has delivered us from bondage to sin (Romans 6:6), and he continues to deliver us. And so people will have the opportunity to view God's great work of deliverance in our lives, as we become less dominated by sin and more like Jesus. Often times we don't see it, because we live with ourselves day to day. But if the Spirit of the living God is dwelling inside you, amazing things are happening, even now. And once in a while the Lord will bring a Jethro into our lives to take notice, rejoice and praise the Lord. And that leads us to worship the Lord.

This story also offers strong encouragement for us to be a Jethro in others' lives - to legitimately ask of another's welfare, to watch for the Lord's activity in the life of another, to rejoice over another, to praise the Lord in another's presence, to acknowledge the greatness of the Lord, to enter into intimate fellowship with another in the presence of God. So the Lord will send us Jethros, but we can also be Jethros.

And what was it that Jethro did? He took notice of the greatness of God, as seen in the lives of Moses and the

Israelites, and he extolled his greatness. He extolled the greatness of the Lord. He lifted up the Lord, and everyone was able to see his greatness more clearly.

A few months ago, a Jethro wandered into my life to proclaim the greatness of God. He made no observations about God's activity in my life, because he didn't know me. I just heard him speak for two hours. His name is John Piper, who I had never heard of before. A pastor from Minnesota, he is the author of "Desiring God." He spoke to a group of pastors about "expository exultations," encouraging pastors to see the greatness of God in every biblical text and to preach the greatness of God in every sermon. Essentially, I listened to him extol the greatness of the Lord for two hours. He simply showed me who the Lord is. That's what Jethro did for Moses.

Jethro, then, observes what the Lord has done and is ecstatic. He has a far different reaction when he observes what Moses is doing.

Jethro critiques what Moses is doing (18:13-27)

Moses acts as arbiter of every dispute that the Israelites have, and not surprisingly this activity goes on "from the morning until the evening." Jethro sees all that Moses is doing for the people. This is parallel to his observations about what the Lord had done for the people (18:1, 8, 9). This story also has Jethro in common with the previous story. Therefore, the author intends us to understand them as related. The previous story, in 18:1-12, is therefore important in our understanding of this story.

Jethro uses the same words in his observations of both the Lord and Moses. Both were "doing" something "for the people." Moses, then, is acting just like God, but not in a good way. He is putting himself in the position of God, trying to be God. Whereas Jethro was thrilled with what the Lord had done, he is not thrilled with what Moses is doing. He asks, in so many words, "What are you doing?" and "Why are you doing it?"

There are at least 600,000 men in the Israelite camp at this point (12:37). But it apparently has never occurred to Moses to ask even one of them to help him with this burdensome task. Apparently it had never occurred to any of the Israelites to suggest that someone help Moses. Oftentimes, it would just never occur to us to do something another way, even if another way would be obviously better. We become culture-bound. We can't see. We do things simply because we've always done them this way.

For us to change our tired old way of doing things, sometimes it takes a fresh pair of eyes. In this story, those eyes belong to Jethro. What Moses is doing immediately strikes Jethro as odd.

Moses' answer to Jethro's question, "Why are you doing this?" is essentially, "Because the people want me to." That raises the question that the text doesn't ask directly, "Why do the people want him to?" The answer isn't difficult to discern. In the people's minds, Moses is the one with the pipeline to God. He's the one who can solve their problems. He's the expert.

The culture of Israel is not unlike our culture today. We have developed a culture of so-called "experts." If we have a problem, we read a book by an expert or seek out the advice of an expert. Nothing is wrong with doing these things, but often our motivation is to solve the problem instead of using the problem as an opportunity to know God. Second, we fail to avail ourselves of God's greatest therapeutic device: the body of Christ. Because we fail to cultivate mutually caring friendships in the body, we have no one to turn to but an "expert" who we may not even know. And often our problems in the first place are *because* we haven't cultivated friendships.

Another question to ask is, "Why does Moses do what the people want?" Again, the text neither asks nor answers this question directly, but the answer isn't difficult to discern. Moses might say, "Well, judging the people is an important job, and it's got to be done right. I'm the only one who can do it." Does that sound in any way familiar? We've not only cultivated a culture of experts, we've cultivated a culture of perfectionists - a culture of people obsessed with doing things perfectly.

When I was given the editorship of my college newspaper, I was well aware of the expectations. The paper

had won a series of awards in the past, and I felt it was up to me to continue the tradition. I was determined to make that newspaper not only good but perfect. I checked and double-checked until I was bleary-eyed. It was difficult for me to delegate, because I was certain that no one could do the job as well as I could. Not surprisingly, the paper wasn't perfect. Sometimes a glaring mistake appeared in the paper. My anger seethed within me and sometimes boiled to the surface. Sometimes, I wasn't a very fun person to be around. As the saying goes, perfectionists take great pains, and they give them to others.

Well, what is this? This is nothing less than idolatry. Only God is perfect. When we aspire to perfection, we are making ourselves out to be God. But deep down we know we're unqualified to be God, at the very least for the simple reason that we can't control things. Therefore, we become obsessive about control, and we are reluctant to trust anyone with anything that might reflect poorly on us if it isn't done to our exacting specifications.

How does this story of Jethro relate to the previous story of Jethro? The previous story represented a glorious testimony to the greatness of God. In this story, Moses is trying to be God. But if God is so great, so awesome, so powerful, that means Moses doesn't have to be so great, so awesome, so powerful. Jethro has just told Moses how great God is. If that's true, then Moses doesn't have to break his back from morning to night to make sure everything is done just right. Things aren't nearly so urgent as they appear. The Lord will take care of things. He even turns our mistakes and oversights into beautiful things. That means we can stop obsessing over our mistakes and oversights. And if he does this with our mistakes and oversights, he does so with those of others as well. That means we can let go of things, let others do things without obsessing over whether they're done right. God is able.

Jethro's first response to what the Lord was doing was to rejoice over the Lord's "goodness" (18:9). His first response to what Moses is doing is to tell him that what he is doing is "not good." Again, the grammatical parallel is clear. The Lord does something for people, and it's a good thing. Moses does something for people, and it's a bad thing. That's because the Lord is God, and Moses is not.

Jethro explains why what Moses is doing is not good. If he keeps up this pace, he'll wear both himself and the people out, as he sits before them all day and they wait all day to see him. The task is too "heavy" for Moses. This advice represents a continuation of what Moses began to learn in the battle with Amalek, when he needed Aaron and Hur to prop up his hands because they were "heavy" (17:12). Moses is learning that he needs people to lighten his load. Just like Moses, we need people, too - even those who don't do things exactly the way we want them done (which probably includes everybody!).

Jethro concludes his evaluation of Moses' actions with the words, "You cannot do it alone." I hate those words! Many of us have been born, bred, educated and inculcated to be independent. To ask for help is a sign of weakness, supposedly. But to not ask for help is a sign that we have delusions of deity. Only God doesn't need help. We need help.

A few weeks ago I spent the better part of a Saturday in a battle to the death with my broken car stereo. I am an electronic nincompoop. Eventually, I won a partial victory. Now, I have an electronic engineer for a roommate. Did I think to ask him if he wouldn't mind taking a look at my stereo? Well, I thought about it, but I didn't. I didn't want to bother him, and besides, I wanted to do it myself. So I wore myself out, and the stereo as well!

"You cannot do it alone." This is a good thing to admit.

After observing the problem, Jethro offers a two-part solution. First, Moses is to teach all the people "the statutes and the laws" and to "make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do." If Moses teaches all the people, this will have at least two effects that will likely result in less legal cases: 1) Well-taught people are less likely to be contentious. 2) Well-taught people who are contentious are more likely to be able to work things out on their own. The application of this advice in the body of Christ is to teach everyone the word of God.

The first part of the solution is to teach everyone. The second part is to appoint a few. These people will help

Moses with the task of judging the people. Jethro instructs Moses to delegate.

But Moses isn't advised to appoint just anyone. The task is indeed important, but there are other qualified people who can do it. Jethro tells Moses to look for four qualities in appointing judges: They must be "able," they must "fear God," they must be men "of truth" and they must "hate dishonest gain." In choosing leaders today, often these qualities are not at the top of the list. We're easily impressed by flash and image and personality, which are readily discernible at first glance. But true competence, a true reverence for God and integrity often are not so readily apparent.

Letting go of something that we think is important is difficult, but Jethro offers Moses, and us, three incentives: 1) Simply, it will be "easier" for Moses. We make life so much more difficult than it needs to be by obsessing over every detail. Letting go of things, allowing them not to be perfect and allowing other people to help us, is a much easier way to live. 2) The other judges will "bear the burden with you." This is shared leadership, which is so much more exciting than individual leadership. It's so much more fun to do an important task with people than by yourself. People who share something important get to know each other in a deeper way. 3) The people will be able to go home "in peace" instead of waiting around all day for a chance to see Moses. Moses is clinging to responsibility because he doesn't want to disappoint the people, but if he lets go of responsibility it will actually be a blessing to people. His thinking has been all wrong, just as ours often is. If I had been able to let go of responsibility for my college newspaper, it would have been a blessing to the other staff workers. As it was, I had a lot of them on pins and needles as they worried whether their mistakes would earn my wrath.

In the first story, Jethro heard of "all" that God had "done" (18:1, 8, 9), and it was described as "goodness" (18:9). In the second story, Jethro observed "all" that Moses was "doing" (18:14), but it was "not good" (18:17). Finally, Moses "did all" that Jethro said, and although the text specifically doesn't say it was "good," it leaves no doubt that what Moses finally did was good. It is good for him to do all that Jethro said, which means that it's good for him not to do everything.

I have found that letting go is easy in theory and excruciating in practice. It's very easy for me to study it and teach it. It's very easy for me to think about letting go of things until a specific thing is before me. Then all my fleshly patterns of perfectionism, obsession and control tie my insides into knots. But the word of God keeps telling me, "Let go." And my painful experience of holding onto things says, "Let go." Ever so slowly, I'm starting to make those difficult decisions to let go. The results are just as Jethro depicted them: a lighter load, the joy of shared leadership and blessing in the lives of others.

A few weeks ago someone did some beautiful work for me. It was perfect - almost. All it was missing was one comma. One little comma. Now there would have been nothing wrong with asking for the comma to be inserted. It would have required almost no extra effort. Not long ago, I probably would have said that the biggest challenge in my life is to do things well, even perfectly. Now I think that the biggest challenge in my life may be not to panic when things aren't done perfectly. So I endorsed the almost-perfect piece of work. And it was exciting to be excited about something that was almost, but not quite, perfect.

Letting go

The Lord is perfect in power, infinitely able to do more than we ask or think. Because this is so, we can relax. Because God is perfect, we don't have to be. And we can let others help us.