

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules

Episode #11: How to Deal with a Difficult Person... Even When It's You

Cheri:

I'll tell you one thing I think we've found as we're doing this, is as we say out loud some of the things that go through our head as perfectionists, we have to laugh. It's either that or we have to start sobbing.

Amy:

It's true, it's true. I keep wondering when people will go, "These girls are completely crazy," and just tune us out. I don't know.

<music>

Cheri:

Hey, this is Cheri Gregory, and you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules.

This week, my de-LIGHT-full cohost, Amy Carroll and I are discussing the "ah-HA!" moments we had after last week's discussion with Michele Cushatt about "Overcoming Error Terror."

I kick off the conversation with an epiphany about why both my husband and I brought so much perfectionism to our marriage almost twenty-eight years ago.

Cheri:

This is going to be a 2 part "ah-HA".

Amy:

Go for it.

Cheri:

Most of mine are one "ah-HA", but this was an "ah-HA" that was then followed by another "ah-HA". Well I was mulling over this whole concept of good enough, because we've recorded one podcast together that we're going to have to re-record. We did it fairly late at night for you, and when I listened to it, the number one thing I kept telling myself —because I put a couple of hours into editing into it trying to make it good enough and make it ...

Amy:

I'm so sorry.

Cheri:

No no, it's not your fault. We both were flat. There's no question that we just were both tired, and I kept telling myself, "Well, it's not that bad. It's not that bad." Then I listened to some other podcasts where we were high energy and we were laughing and giggling and having a really obviously good time, and I suddenly realized, *Hang on a second. I think I may finally understand the concept of 'Good Enough', because I realized no matter how many times I say it's not that bad, it's really not something we want to put on air, especially compared to some of the others that we've done.* I was disappointed initially. I was like, "Oh bummer, it's going to be more work." Don't take that part personally. It was not "I have to spend more time talking with Amy." That was not the message at all.

But I did get really excited to go, *Hang on a second, I get it, I get what Good Enough means, because this isn't Good Enough.*

Then, I decided to try to draw this concept because I wanted to put it on Facebook, because I felt like I had this amazing discovery. There's perfection at the top, then there's this whole span known as good enough, and then the bottom limit for good enough is "Well it's not that bad." For me, that was really exciting.

Then I tried to draw it, and I was like how big is the span of Good Enough? I realized that that span is going to be different in different situations. If I'm loading a dishwasher, there are multiple ways to load a dishwasher effectively so that the dishes get clean.

But when my dad had quadruple bypass surgery, I really, really wanted that surgeon, I wanted his good enough to be as close to perfect as was humanly possible ... Forget humanly.

Amy:

Precision!

Cheri:

I really wanted that band of Good Enough to be very, very narrow and right up there with perfect. When I was thinking about the surgery thing, it suddenly hit me. Daniel and I both come from medical families. Not only do we come from medical backgrounds, but I spent three summers in college as a transcriptionist for a law firm. It was a medical malpractice law firm. Every single summer for three months, I was listening to depositions: In every single case, one mistake led to a death or horrible disability. We basically were set up from our childhood backgrounds, and then I immersed myself because of this job, into a mentality that says "Failure is fatal."

We have lived our lives not realizing that, to us, Good Enough and Perfect were pretty much identical, because of course. From that medical mindset ... But there's so much of life where that's not true.

Amy:

That is so interesting.

Cheri:

I'm not trying to place blame on anybody here, but for me it was like, *Oh, so that's one place that kind of came from.* It makes sense when I look back on it. I didn't have the ability to say to myself "Oh, okay, this is true in this area. This is true in a medical situation," but when it comes to an everyday ordinary life situation like loading the dishwasher or the hundreds of things we do each day where the good enough span is really quite large and we can relax. I took that rule and applied it to pretty much everything.

Now the question I'm trying to ask myself in each situation where I feel myself trying to push for good enough being perfect, I'm trying to ask myself, "Hang on a second, is this a life and death situation where the span for good enough is really, really narrow? Or

might this be a situation that really has a very large margin of error? Or where it's okay to have lots of possible good enoughs."

Amy:

That is fantastic, to be able to make a distinction that not everything is important. Even as I say that, I think about the exhaustion that comes with perfectionism, because in perfectionism Every. Single. Thing. Matters.

And that's just really not true. Fantastic, I love that insight.

Cheri:

Yeah, and it gives me insight into why others would say to me, "Chill out, take a chill pill, it's not that big a deal." They were doing the best they could, and it wasn't sinking into me because I had this pre-programmed mindset — the hyper-vigilance that comes with feeling like everything matters

Amy:

Well, and I think about how that mindset of thinking that failure is fatal is so damaging to our relationships. Again, circling back around to that ... A family member this weekend was sharing about a VBS experience with a perfectionist. They just wanted to kill her by the end of the week.

She had this thing in her mind about how to do the decorations. Did it really matter how it was done? No, but she spent 2 hours doing something and driving everyone else to do something that should have taken 15 minutes. Nobody wants to spend time with that person. Go figure. I've been that person.

Cheri:

I'm just sympathizing with that person. I wish I could go there and put my arm around her and say, "Come over here for a while."

Amy:

Yes, I know. Until she sees it about herself, she can't change. That's the devastating thing.

Cheri:

That is the hard part. I kind of feel like, having been there and done that and knowing what that feels like, because I'm listening to you tell that story and I feel bad for everybody involved. I understand where the woman is coming from. I understand where everybody else is coming from. Boy, how to say to the perfectionist in this scenario, "It's not your fault. You didn't ask to be this way ... but it is our responsibility to pay attention to start seeing these patterns in ourselves."

I've been reading a lot of Henry Cloud's stuff lately, and he has this great distinction between a **problem** and a **pattern**. He says that a problem is something that, once you address it, it gets resolved. Maybe not perfectly, maybe not right away, but it's going to resolve. A pattern is something that when you treat it like a problem, it just keeps recurring. I read his material specifically because I wanted to identify a pattern in somebody else. But all his material is very focused to recognizing the patterns in our own lives.

Amy:

Bummer.

Cheri:

I know.

But to recognize, like you said earlier, the common denominator in all of these failed friendships was yourself. I think that's one of the hardest things as a perfectionist — I got really caught up in this sense of injustice, because here I care so much, I try so hard, and nobody appreciates it all.

Amy:

Oh, the martyr.

Cheri:

I know.

Amy:

So, I have a question for you. What do you think that my relative could have done in his interaction with this perfectionist? Or, to put it more personally, what could your friends who backed away instead of staying engaged, what could they have done in their relationship with you that would have helped you? That would have been gentle and kind and helped you rather than confrontation. Confrontation doesn't usually help a pattern or a problem. What do you think?

Cheri:

That's hard. That's hard because, as Michelle pointed out, she misdiagnoses things as failure that aren't actually failure. If somebody seems disappointed, that's a failure. If somebody's upset, that's a failure. This is where I think perfectionists, we end up with people telling us later, "We have to walk on eggshells around you. We can't say anything. You won't hear anything."

I'll theorize.

Amy:

Sure.

Cheri:

I think in the situation, it's hard ... because you say something, it's going to go wrong. You don't say something, it's going to go wrong.

I think asking questions is always safer than making statements.

Amy:

Great observation.

Cheri:

("Why can't you take a chill pill?" is not the example of a question I would suggest.)

- Why does this matter so much to you?
- Why is this so important?
- This seems to be a really big deal — can you help me understand it?
- Can you share with me your perspective?
- Can you let me into your thinking?

Amy:

That idea of asking a question is excellent. That is actually one of my husband's fortes. I remember years ago, I had been estranged from my childhood best friend, Josie. We had gotten back into contact and I was kind of in a snit, to be honest. I was verbalizing all of this to Barry when we hung up and I said, "I don't know why she has to go back and talk about all this stuff. I wish we could just let that be water under the bridge and we could just move forward." It was some decisions she had made that I really struggled with. I would just rather have not talked about them at all, but she wanted to explain and talk.

My husband looked at me and he said, "What do you think about how God feels about Josie?" It stopped me in my tracks. The question made me realize that my reaction to her was completely inappropriate. It made me see myself as that older brother in the prodigal son story, standing with my hands on my hips because Josie had wandered for a time. She's now come back to the Lord, but I just didn't want to hear it. I just didn't want to hear it. I thought, wow, I am the older brother. My sister, my friend, my best friend from my childhood had wandered away, and instead of being glad she came back and that she wanted to tell me her story about how God had restored her, I wanted to push that away.

That simple question, so gently, so sweetly said, stopped me in my tracks.

So I think you've got something there.

Cheri:

I think *you've* got something there. "What do you think God things about ..."

So, if I'm thinking about this woman who's driving us all crazy with the decorations ... I'm trying to just imagine walking through it ... to pull them aside to a separate room, maybe, and to say "I'm concerned" or "I see this seems really important to you" or "I feel like maybe you're frustrated that we're not supporting you enough," or whatever it might be.

Then here, I think, is the interesting thing, because to see a person the way God sees them doesn't mean we have to buy into what they're seeing.

It means we can treat them with compassion. We can reach out to them and engage with them. And I think that's why I shut down; that's why I tend to withdraw. If I reach out at all, I then have to agree with them. I then have to do what they want.

That's not necessarily true.

So to pull a person aside, to express the concern, to empathize ... But then I could say, "It seems to me that what you want is this. I don't think I could do *that*, but I could do *this*." Maybe to offer a compromise. "How do you feel about that? What do you think about that?"

Because what they need is they need to be seen. They need to be heard. They need to be valued, because that's what Christ would do.

Amy:

I think if someone had treated me like that when I was behaving badly, that it would have stopped me in my tracks. That concern, that care, that love instead of confrontation would have given me a glimpse into how that other person was seeing me.

Cheri:

If somebody had been able to gently ask me or get me to re-evaluate why this thing that I was all frenzied about mattered so very, very much, I might have been able to exhale and go, "Oh, it's not that big a deal."

I didn't have the ability to discern big deals from not big deals. So, if they didn't care about what was important to me, I would have then interpreted that as they didn't care about me.

But if they could've demonstrated care for me while making it clear that maybe this didn't have to happen quite this way, I probably could've let go of it.

If I had been that woman who needed to do that decoration, that thing that took 2 hours, the problem would have been that my identity was too wrapped up in that thing.

That was my role. That was my contribution. The decorations *were* me, and I wouldn't have had the ability to separate them.

So, somebody coming in with compassion, and seeing me and hearing me and caring for me, while at the same time being realistic and saying, "I can't buy all the way into that with the decorations, but I'm bought into you. I care about you."

Amy:

That's fantastic.

Cheri:

I think that would have made a really big difference.

Back to this decorating perfectionist. I'm sorry, I'm stuck on her. I want to go rescue her, poor thing. I feel so bad.

Amy:

She needs us.

Cheri:

I feel so bad because I know I can ...

Amy:

How can we secretly send her the link to this podcast?

Cheri:

Again, she probably felt like, if things didn't go the way she had planned, then **she** would be a failure and **it** would be a failure and **everything** would be a failure.

Of course, people are going to back away, or if they felt like they were forced to participate, then they're going to be resentful and prickly. She's still not going to feel like it was a success. But she's not going to know why, because the thing got done.

If there could be the reassurance that even if it didn't turn out okay, that she would still be accepted and loved and part of the group and valued ... over time ... I don't think this

is a one-time deal, but I think over time of repeated reassurance, without going into codependence or people pleasing or rescuing, and that's the hard thing.

This is hard stuff!

Amy:

It is. It goes back to what Michele said, that was just my blinding "ah-HA!" moment in that recording, was that she talked about how we have to filter failure through the sovereignty of God and our own humanity.

That moment when she talked about her illness and how she realized *she's just human*, and I don't know what just created that reaction in me that I wanted to break down and put my head on my desk and just sob.

I thought, *I'm just human*. There's a release in that, when we let God be God and we just take our place as who we are.

Cheri:

You know, you may not have come from a medical family like I did or like my husband did. But maybe you also recognize the bad rule that "Failure is fatal."

Now, of course, it's true: Some failures are fatal.

But it's also true that a lot of failures aren't fatal. They're part of being human.

The only perfect being is God. And we're not Him.

We're just human.

On the website for this week's episode, you'll find a free download of "Compassionate Questions to Ask to Keep Perfectionism From Taking Control."

And we're giving away a set of laminated Bible verse cards.

You'll find the website at CheriGregory.com — that's c-h-e-r-i-g-r-e-g-o-r-y.com

We hope you've enjoyed Episode #11 of Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules!

Amy and I will be back next week with another fabulous guest interview. For today, grow your grit. Embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do: by all means, break it!