

Pleasing people model: the sponge and the fig

People pleasing is a common struggle. One that we see in Scripture – in our churches – and in our own lives. But how do we know if we are people pleasing? How can we tell if we have growing in this area to do? Start by reading **Luke 10:38-42**

Martha is sponge-like in her interactions with others, absorbing the stress of her environment. Sponges are made up of tiny holes and narrow interconnected passages filled with air making them porous. When a sponge is put in water, the pockets of air fill up, weighing it down. In this passage, Martha invites Jesus into her home, but instead of focussing her attention on her honoured guest, she becomes preoccupied by all the practical preparations she thinks are required to make him welcome. Martha becomes frustrated with her sister, who has left her to manage these pressures alone. There is a horizontal dimension to Martha's experience- she wants to please Jesus by opening her home to him, but saturation from domestic pressures leads to annoyance with Mary and even to her venting her frustration on the guest himself. Martha's words, "Lord, don't you care" are the same words the disciples use when Jesus is sleeping in the boat on lake Galilee: "don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38). These words reveal the vertical dimension of Martha's struggle. Her stance towards Jesus is not one of worshipful trust, but of irritation and doubt.

Mary is fig-like in her interactions with others. Apparently, figs are not technically fruit. They are something known as inflorescence - a cluster of flowers and seeds contained inside a bulbous stem.¹ All the life of a fig exists inside its core, hidden from view and protected from harm because of its inverted structure. Commentators liken Mary to a disciple, sitting at her rabbi's feet. This was more often what men would do when a visiting rabbi came to town, but Mary is commended for this break with convention. Jesus says she has chosen what is better: the "good portion". This phrase is also seen in Psalm 16:5, "Lord you alone are my portion and my cup, you make my lot secure." Mary may have felt the stress of her environment just as keenly as Martha (we do not know) but she is "fig like" in the way she responds. For Mary, the priority is the renewal of her inner person, which flowers and fruits, like the inside of a fig, when she hears the word of God. Mary's relationship with the Lord gives her a vibrant spiritual core- think of the pink flesh of a perfectly ripe fig. This core helps her to engage in the environment around her rightly. When Jesus is in her house, instead of frantically trying to serve him, she receives him as her portion.

In the model below I draw out the differences between “people focussed pleasing” and “God-dependent love”. Each column shows a range of options- these options are not directly linked to one another e.g. making everyone happy is not necessarily connected to making decisions based on the loudest demands and does not necessarily lead to exhaustion. However, as you read it you may find that some of these phases describe you and help you to identify elements of your own people pleasing. These are things we are unlikely to recognise very readily but be honest with yourself as you read it looking out for ways that you show up in the model.

STEP 1: Getting to know your people-pleasing (noticing where you are sponge-like)

Go through the 4 sections below and circle the words or phrases in each section that apply to you. What do you notice about your people-pleasing?

Section 1: Goals - Which of these priorities do you see in your life?

Making everyone happy - Keeping conflict at bay - An easy life - Personal glory

Section 2: Behaviours - Which of these behaviours do you see in your life?

Making decisions based on the loudest demands - Busy service - Anger when others don't meet your expectations - Frustration with others for not pulling their weight - Not “rocking the boat” - Appeasing others - Stepping in to rescue - Saying yes without prayer

Section 3: Motivation - Which of these motives do you see in your heart?

- Pragmatism- this is the easiest way to get things done
- Heroism- I can help and I will save them
- Shame -hidden beliefs that I matter less than others
- Independence- I have had to rely on myself, so I will carry on doing that
- A need for approval- that is ultimately self-serving
- A concern for myself - wanting praise, adulation, leverage, opportunities, love

Section 4: Outcomes - Which of these outcomes do you see in your life?

Anxiety – Frustration – Burnout - Strained relationships - Superficial relationships - Spiritual stagnation - Anger

STEP 2: Setting goals for change (Identifying where you want to be more fig-like)

As you become more aware of your people-pleasing, you may find yourself longing for change. In this second section, focused on God-dependent love, circle the 1 word or phrase in each box. In doing so, you can identify where you would most like to grow. Share your reflections with a friend and spend some time praying for the Lord to be at work.

Section 1: Goals - Which of these priorities do you want to see grow?

God getting the glory - Helping others to find joy in Christ not just in people - Transformation for me and for them

Section 2: Behaviours - Which of these behaviours do you want to pursue first?

Willingness to disappoint people when that is for everyone's good - Not doing everything that other people want - Not making other people immediately feel happy – Willingness to live with messier relationships and take time to work at loving each other well

Section 3: Motivation – In what way would you most like your heart to grow?

- Abiding in Christ so my agenda is his. (*John 15:4*).
- Growing in humility- knowing I need God and I need others. (*Proverbs 3:5*).
- Healthy interdependence with others within the body of Christ. (*Ephesians 4:15*).
- Love- knowing Jesus has loved me and I am secure in him. (*John 13:34-35*).
- Patience- acknowledging relationships may be messy (*Colossians 3:12*).

Section 4: Outcomes - Which of these outcomes do you most want to see in your life?

- Peace with God and with others. (*John 14:27*).
- Openness with God and with others. (*James 5:16a*).
- Intimacy with God and with others. (*Psalms 73:28*).
- Joy in the Lord and with others. (*Nehemiah 8:10b*).
- Freedom from preoccupation with myself. (*Psalms 63:3*).

Growth in this area is likely to be slow. But now you have identified some key areas to work on, you can actively pray and reflect on these things, alongside someone who loves you.