

Chapter 1

The Not-Good-Enoughs

Don't pay any attention to me. Nobody ever does. - Eyeore.

A VW "Bug" was the "in" car. Anyone who was "cool" either wanted one or had one. The young couple sitting in the front seat had one. And I was lucky enough, along with my best friend, to be sitting in the back seat.

I was thirteen years old. Thirteen is a pretty traumatic age to be no matter who you are. Everyone is either plump and awkward or skinny and awkward. I was the latter. (When I got older in a household with two well-endowed sisters, one would jokingly call me the runt of the litter. Luckily she didn't say it when I was thirteen, or it would have shattered me.)

We were zipping down the highway on the way from Florida to Georgia. It was my first year to go away for a week of Bible camp for teenagers, and I was excited. Tom and Patty Green were going as counselors.

They were in their twenties and so freshly married that they seemed like teenagers themselves. They laughed and talked with Janice and me, and I fell in love with them. Could they really be that interested in what I had to say? In my interests, in my dreams? They seemed to be. They kept asking us questions and making us feel as though the answers were important to them.

And they laughed at my jokes. I was discovering that if I could make someone laugh, I felt accepted. And this wonderful young couple kept laughing at the things I said, making me feel very accepted.

It was only natural that when we arrived at the campground, Janice and I would try to nurture this newfound relationship. We sought them out in the mess hall; we tried to sit with them in chapel. During our free time we would hike to the top of the hill where the wild blackberries grew because Tom had expressed a real fondness for them. While we were at it, we filled cups with wildflowers for their room.

A few days later, our church group made plans to meet in the parking lot so that we could drive to one of the local attractions. Janice and I happily ran over to the Greens' little VW, only to be brought up

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short by a horrifying sight. They already had some of the older teens in the back seat. Our back seat.

I wish I could say the rest of the day was a blur in my memory. It isn't. I remember all too well the tears that filled my eyes as Patty smiled brightly and said, "Sorry, kids, but someone else is riding with us today!" Those tears worked their way into a full-blown sobbing pity party as we found another vehicle, and they didn't stop until I was threatened by my older sister.

I acted like a jerk. That memory is embarrassing to me, but what's even worse, I can still feel the terrible hurt that made me want everyone to know it was time to pay attention. You see, Tom and Patty had done more than just give my seat away and hurt my feelings. Tom and Patty had given proof to the one great fear that lived within my still-young heart - if people got to know the real me, they wouldn't like me anymore.

Why I felt that way I still don't know. Unlike some who can point to domineering, abusive, or neglectful parents, mine were pretty nice people. Sure, they had their faults and their own problems, but they never put me down or talked as though I were inferior.

I suspect that being a middle child had a lot to do with it. My older sister was always so smart, so mature. She had a tightknit group of friends, and they all seemed to love her. When she became a Christian, she was so much more spiritual than I could ever be. She did everything right, and in my own eyes I could never measure up. My younger sister was cute and funny. She was the baby everyone loved and laughed at.

No one ever told me I wasn't as cute, funny, or smart as the other two. I just felt it. I couldn't find a niche for myself, and so I thought there wasn't one. I'm sure once I was in that emotional condition, other events that occurred as I grew up only helped to reinforce my insecurity.

In the sixth grade, when one of my best friends yelled at me for being mean to her little sister, I slapped her across the face. I was as horrified as she that I had done it. And even at that young age, I knew I had done it because I couldn't stand to hear her being angry with me. I just wanted to make her words stop; I didn't mean to hurt her.

From that early age with my girlfriends, and then on into my dating years with young men, I never felt secure in a relationship. I was always waiting for them to "find me out," to discover that I wasn't the person they thought but really someone quite unlikable.

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That's not a very pleasant way to spend your life. If I had been able to look at the facts, I would have known it wasn't true. I never lacked for a best friend, and she was always an attractive person. My two boyfriends in high school were both very good-looking, and the relationships lasted for months.

But I wasn't able to take a rational look at the facts. I only knew what my fearful heart was telling me. While the other girls were filling out and getting a figure, I stayed skinny. Like all young girls, I was certain if someone would just get past my physical appearance and get to know me, they would love me. But once they got past the physical appearance, then the fear gripped me that it wouldn't last for long. Sooner or later they'd discover they had been taken in.

I didn't know then, of course, that the term for my condition was low self-esteem. I didn't know anything about technical language or what the pop psychology of the day was. Even today I like to keep away from trendy terminology. I keep it plain and simple. What I call my condition, or my disease, is the "not-good-enoughs." That strips it of all the fancy jargon and calls it what it is. I had a strong case of the not-good-enoughs, and it was making a cripple out of me.

When I entered high school, I had a plan. It was going to help me break out of my shell and get me the approval I needed to become "good enough." In high school, the separation between the "classes" becomes much more defined. There you receive your "ranking," and there is no breaking out of it. We had the "in" group, which in those days were the Surfers. There were the Greasers on the other end of the spectrum and of course a group for the brainy kids who were not good at socializing. I fell somewhere in between, but like every other "out" person, I longed to be "in."

There was a uniform that went along with being "in." The brand name of the day was Villager, and that was what all the girls who were well liked wore. It consisted of button-down tailored shirts, A-line skirts with the brand-new feature of a zipper in the front, and penny loafers.

My plan centered around that uniform. I worked at my summer job until I had saved enough to buy it. On the first day of school, I walked proudly down the hall, watching out of the corner of my eye for the looks of appreciation, the nods of acceptance. They never came. No one noticed. No one noticed that this year I was "in." No one cared.

Nothing had changed. Though I had a close circle of friends, I felt rejected because none of the "in" crowd wanted me. It was about that

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time that I learned the value of being outrageous, just a little bit different. If I wasn't trying to be accepted by them, I couldn't be rejected.

In Florida in the late sixties, surfing was the "in" thing. Even though the Beatles were popular, the Carnaby Street look had not yet caught on. We were into Villager, bikinis, jams, and dark, dark tans. But when the uniform didn't work, I turned to the mod look of the Beatles, even to having my hair cut in their trademark pudding bowl. I wore wildly flowered bell-bottoms with matching vests that I made myself from upholstery fabric. When I wore dresses, I completed the ensemble with white fishnet stockings. To the outside world I looked like a self-confident girl who had developed her own look. Inside, I loved the look because it separated me from those who had rejected me. It protected me from the hurt of trying to conform and not succeeding.

Now I couldn't be a part of the "in" crowd no matter what. By being outrageous, by setting myself apart, I had eliminated the chance of rejection because I could pretend I didn't want in anyway.

The not-good-enoughs hurt me academically as well. As a sophomore, I made top grades in classes like biology and geometry, subjects others were struggling with. This was a wonderful discovery for me, because for the first time I excelled in something. I was better than someone else. I remember lying in bed with my younger sister one night, telling her my plans to graduate summa cum laude and then go on to medical school.

But the not-good-enoughs ate away at me. The little voice inside kept telling me I could never make it, and I began to believe the little voice. When I was a junior, I took chemistry. Before then, I had breezed through every bit of math and science I had taken. Suddenly, I met a formidable opponent. Chemistry class might as well have been taught in a foreign language. I simply could not get it, no matter how much after-school help I got, no matter how long I puzzled over a word problem. In the end my teacher gave me a C, only because he knew I had tried so hard.

Now, besides feeling I was a social failure, I had also discovered I wasn't so smart either. Just one more area where I was afraid people might discover the true me. But the not-good-enoughs had a grip on me, so instead of working harder or simply changing my career aspirations, I gave up.

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Chemistry is the only course I ever got a C in, yet I took that as proof that I couldn't make it. I found with a minimum of effort I could easily produce B's and some A's, so I settled for that. After all, if I didn't shoot too high, I couldn't fall short, right? Besides, I really didn't feel like getting any further proof that I was a loser. If I settled for second best, first best couldn't reject me.

If I didn't set myself a lofty goal, I couldn't fail. As I had done with the uniform, I pulled myself out of the game. Temporarily, I put a stop to the little voices that told me I couldn't measure up. I wasn't even trying, so what was the difference?

When I was a junior, I dated a good-looking college student. When a senior, I found true love with a darling young motorcycle rider who seemed to adore me. Neither of these relationships was enough to convince me that I was lovable. I went with the young man in my senior year for nine months. During that entire time, I doubt that we ever had a truly meaningful conversation, mainly because I never felt secure enough just to be myself with him. I was always awkward on dates, afraid I would somehow make a fool of myself. All my friends assumed we would someday get married, but the thought panicked me. How on earth could I marry someone with whom I couldn't even have a conversation?

Where did God fit into all this? I think the saddest result of my not-good-enoughs came in my relationship with Him. Instead of becoming the new creation that Scripture talks about, I still wallowed in a mire of self-pity and self-hate. I knew the Lord, or thought I did, but it wasn't making a difference.

When I was twelve years old, my mother started taking us to a new church. There she found a new understanding of God, and one night as she tucked us into bed, she told us what had happened.

"Remember how we used to think that if you tried really hard to be good, you might someday make it into heaven?" I lay at the end of my bunkbed and nodded. "Well, I've found out it isn't like that at all."

This was interesting news to me, as you can well imagine. I had always wondered how someone with the not-good-enoughs was ever going to make it into heaven. So I was all ears.

"I've learned at our new church that because you can never be good enough to go to heaven, Jesus died on the cross for your sins. All you have to do is believe and accept Jesus' gift to you." While I could see she was very happy with this news, it confused me a bit. I had always believed that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. That's who

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Jesus was - the man who died on the cross to save the world. I just had never understood what to do with that information.

That summer at Bible camp, I learned. There I heard the entire story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. I couldn't hear enough as it all started making sense. God did love me. He did care about what happened to me, and He had made a way for me to be good enough to get to heaven.

I lay on my cot that night, watching the moon through the window and talking to God for hours. I made everything right with Him as I confessed my sins and gave my heart to Him.

I was excited about starting my new life as a Christian. Because I really didn't know much about being a Christian, I was vulnerable to whatever teaching came my way. Unfortunately, we moved again, and the church I began attending only confused me further.

Not that the people in that congregation weren't good Christian people. But they talked so much about following the rules that I totally missed the part about having a personal relationship with Jesus. As they saw it, if you followed the rules, you were a good Christian, and God would smile on you. If you didn't follow the rules, you were considered "backslidden," and God would not be pleased. At that point you would have to go forward in church and "rededicate" your life. Once again the burden of being "good enough" had fallen back on me and my own human strength and efforts.

I'm not saying rules are necessarily bad. Rules can be bad, though, when you try to make them do what they aren't intended to do. Unfortunately, I knew nothing about living by faith, about the indwelling Christ who would help me live a life pleasing to Him. All I knew were the rules I was being given.

They told me not to go dancing, they told me not to go to movies, they told me not to play cards, they told me not to wear slacks. Bowling was bad because there was liquor served on the premises, and skating was bad because of the distinct possibility of bodily contact with the opposite sex. The list went on and on. Instead of enjoying my newfound relationship with God, I was having a terrible time trying to keep up with what I could and couldn't do.

None of those rules were bad in themselves. Indeed, many people have made the choice of conscience to abstain from these activities. When done because you feel it enhances your Christian witness, it can be a beautiful testimony. When done because you're afraid God won't like you otherwise, it turns your testimony sour.

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Because of the unbalanced teaching I received, I ended up with a warped idea of the nature of God. I understood Jesus as a form of glorified fire insurance - He had saved me from the fires of hell, but that was as far as His involvement went. And God was the Great Guilty Conscience in the Sky. You know, "He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake; He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake!"

Soon I found I couldn't keep all the rules. Many of them were against things that I, as a teenager, liked to do with my friends. So I did them anyway and then lived with the guilt that, even in God's eyes, I just couldn't be good enough. Perhaps good enough to be saved but not good enough to be a witness for Him or live a life pleasing to Him.

My solution to this dilemma was the same one I'd used in school when I tried to wear the uniform of the "in" crowd or had tried to be a star student. If I wasn't good enough, I would just give up. If I wasn't trying to live up to the high standards called for in the rules, I couldn't be a failure, right?

By the time I graduated from high school, I was pretty messed up inside. I had failed at everything that had been important to me. My personal relationships were often in turmoil because I was constantly trying to be whatever I thought others wanted me to be. I had lots of dreams but no confidence in myself to go after them. And God had been pushed to one side in my life.

And that was only adolescence. I had no idea that adult not-good-enoughs were about to strike, and strike hard.