

Pleasing people model: the sponge and the fig based on 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 actually 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 phrases describe you and help you to identify elements of your own people pleasing. These are things we are unlikely to acknowledge very readily, but be honest with yourself as you read it looking out for ways that you show up in the model.

STEP 1: Go through the 4 columns of the people pleasing section and circle the 3 words or phrases in each column that applies to you. What do you notice about your people-pleasing?

STEP 2: Go through the 4 columns of the God-dependent love section and circle the 1 word or phrase in each column that you would most like to grow in. Share your reflections with a friend and spend some time praying for the Lord to be at work.

¹ "The Story of the fig and its wasp", *Ecological Society of America*, 20/5/2011, [accessed 27/04/2026].

	Goal	Looks like	Flows from	Leads to
<p>People focussed pleasing</p>  <p>Like a sponge</p>	<p>Making everyone happy</p> <p>Keeping conflict at bay</p> <p>An easy life</p> <p>Personal glory</p>	<p>Making decisions based on the loudest demands</p> <p>Busy service/ministry</p> <p>Anger when others don't meet your expectations</p> <p>Frustration with others for not pulling their weight</p> <p>Not "rocking the boat"</p> <p>Appeasing and pleasing people</p> <p>Stepping in to rescue/ saying yes without prayer</p>	<p>Pragmatism- this is the easiest way to get things done</p> <p>Heroism- I can help and I will save them</p> <p>Shame -hidden beliefs that I matter less than others</p> <p>Independence- I have had to rely on myself, so I will carry on doing that</p> <p>A need for approval- that is ultimately self-serving</p> <p>A concern for myself-wanting praise, adulation, leverage, opportunities, love</p>	<p>Exhaustion</p> <p>Anxiety</p> <p>Frustration</p> <p>Burnout</p> <p>Strained relationships</p> <p>Superficial relationships</p> <p>Spiritual stagnation</p> <p>Anger</p>
<p>God dependent love</p>  <p>Like a fig</p>	<p>Goals are aligned with Christ's</p> <p>God getting the glory</p> <p>Helping others to find joy in Christ not in people</p> <p>Transformation for me and for them</p>	<p>Messier relationships with conflict and time taken to resolve things</p> <p>Willingness to disappoint people when needed</p> <p>Not doing everything that other people want</p> <p>Not making other people immediately feel happy</p>	<p>Union with Christ- Christ abides in me and I in him so my agenda is his. <i>Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me (John 15:4).</i></p> <p>Prayer and humility- I am not self-contained; I need God and I need others. <i>Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5).</i></p> <p>Dependence- on the body of Christ. <i>Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (Ephesians 4:15).</i></p> <p>Love- Jesus has loved me so much that my identity is secure in him. <i>A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34-35).</i></p> <p>Patience- God's way in this relationship might be messy and time consuming. <i>Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).</i></p>	<p>Peace with God and with others. <i>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).</i></p> <p>Openness with God and with others. <i>Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (James 5:16a).</i></p> <p>Intimacy with God and with others. <i>But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works (Psalm 73:28).</i></p> <p>Joy in the Lord and with others. <i>The joy of the Lord is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10b).</i></p> <p>Freedom from preoccupation with myself. <i>Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you (Psalm 63:3).</i></p> <p>Prayerful dependence on God. <i>Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal (Isaiah 26:4).</i></p>

Pleasing people worksheet: exploring your relational goals

“What a task have men-pleasers! They have as many masters as beholders!”

Richard Baxter from “Directions Against Inordinate Man-pleasing” published in *A Christian Directory*, 1673

The following worksheet helps you to analyse your people pleasing by doing an inventory of the people in your life you are seeking to make happy. It is designed to be done with a trusted friend or mentor. There will likely be many ways the Spirit is prompting you to love God and love your neighbour in God honouring ways. However, this exercise aims to help you to notice the subtle ways you might be ruled by different goals in your relationships, before helping you realign these hopes to be more in line with Christ’s plans for you and the people you are trying to please.

STEP 1: In the table below list who you are trying to please and note how you are trying to please them.

STEP 2: What do I want most for this person? E.g. A hassle free life, to save them, their approval. How does that compare with Christ’s priority for this person?

Talk about what you have discovered with a friend and commit your findings to the Lord in prayer.

People I am trying to please	How I am trying to please them	What I want most for them	What Christ wants for them

People Pleasing Portraits

1. Alexandra has always been responsible. She is the oldest sister and has gone through life collecting responsibilities because she always rises to the challenge. She is now a mum of four teenagers and every day after school she is busy driving them around to their sports clubs and cooking huge meals for them all. Life is busy and she works in her local GP surgery as a nurse while the kids are in school. She is an established member of the pastoral team at church and takes these duties very seriously. When the children were smaller so would often have people from church or school back for a meal or to hang out for the day. She could see the struggles other people faced and she wanted to make things easier. As the kids got older, she has carried on with this and still has people over every weekend and invites them for lunch on her day off from work. Sunday is an intense day while people queue up to talk to her after the service. She sometimes wishes she had a bit more space, time or energy left for the people who live in her own home. Often by Sunday evening she is feeling fragile, exhausted and tearful. Last Sunday she couldn't stop crying when she thought of the week ahead.
2. Barbara grew up in an unhappy home; her father experienced seasons of severe depression and often for months at a time the whole family had to tread on eggshells to keep the equilibrium. Barbara knew her job was to keep the peace and to hold things together. She holds things together at work too. She is the manager of a Christian food bank, but she often works unpaid overtime and picks up shifts when the volunteers don't turn up. She feels increasingly exhausted. Barbara got married later in life and at first, she was happy: her husband isn't like her dad was, he's a gentle and unassuming guy but she still feels worried about inconveniencing him and is rarely honest with him about how she really feels. Barbara got flu a few weeks ago, but she still powered on with all the things she normally does at home. When her husband asked, "you don't need my help today do you?" she replied that she didn't, even though she felt terrible and couldn't get out of bed. They never argue and Barbara tries to be the kind of wife her husband would like, but they have begun to exist like housemates, and she feels like she is alone in her life with no one to help her.
3. Clair was married to an unfaithful man. He was cheating for a long time before she found out. After many years trying to reconcile, Clair realised her husband was not going to change and sought a separation and divorce. Years after they separated, she found a new job- it was the perfect job for her, and she felt like she had been given a fresh start. She works hard and gives it her all, but often lacks confidence in decision making. At first, the job was great, but then her appraisal came up and she could barely sleep worrying about it. Her boss was kind, but suggested she needed some training in an area she was inexperienced in. She felt completely flattened by the conversation and miserable about the work she used to love. She avoided her boss for the next few days and experienced waves of self-recrimination and misery. She is convinced that she is going to lose her job and that if she doesn't, she will have to work extra hard to prove herself.