

S E E K I N G  
I M P E R F E C T I O N

# SEEKING IMPERFECTION

Body Image,  
Marketing,  
and God

EVAN M. DOLIVE



THE PILGRIM PRESS  
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*to* **Violet, Reid, and Charlotte,**

May you never think you are less  
than who you are created to be.

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# Foreword

 On March 22, 2013, I shared a blog post that was written by my friend Evan. The blog post was really good, and I connected with it as a dad and as a pastor. It was an open letter to a large company about their advertising practices. I share blog posts all of the time, but I could have never dreamed of the response the post would eventually get. I shared it on Twitter and Facebook on that Friday and went on with my day as I would any other. Well, a lot of other people shared it too. I received a message from Evan later that afternoon, and he told me that several thousand people had read the blog. The next day Evan and his wife came to my house to celebrate my son's fourth birthday. At the party I asked Evan how many views he was up to. He casually exclaimed that the last time he checked it was more than sixty thousand views. "What?! That's crazy! Congrats, man!" I yelled. By the beginning of the following week the post was circling the globe and millions of people were connecting with the words of my friend.

I think it's simple why his post went super viral and connected with men and women from all over the world. The post was written out of love and not anger. Evan didn't set out to bring down a company, but to share that as a society we can do better. He brought aware-

ness to a topic that we encounter so frequently we often never even pay attention to the effect it can have.

Growing up is hard. Parenting might be harder.

Our children experience thousands of messages every day. At times, we have very little control over what they see and what they experience. And in many ways, that is the point of parenting. I had a boss who explained parenting to me as a series of letting go more and more each day. We let go of their little hands when they take their first steps, walk off to kindergarten on their own, go on their first date, drive for the first time, go off to college, and on and on. In the meantime we do our best to prepare them for the challenges they will inevitably face. It is instinctive to most parents to protect their children. But how do you protect them from a culture that tells them over and over they aren't good enough? How do we utilize the Bible and our own experience to communicate to our children that the God who created the universe also created them for a purpose? Evan tackles this topic with the love of a caring dad and the insight of a trained theologian. With love and openness, he weaves together divinity and modernity in such a way that everyone can connect with it.

As a father and with more than eight years of experience working full-time with teenagers, I am acutely aware of the challenges that our children face with concern to body image. What effect does advertising and messaging have on my family and me? When did we allow a company and their advertising to dictate how we feel about ourselves?

Advertising in any of its forms isn't horrible, but a commercial or what clothes a celebrity chooses to wear should not determine how we feel about ourselves. God isn't guiding us to be perfect or to even try. God is simply moving us towards selflessness. The world around us attempts to tell us the opposite: that we need to change ourselves to achieve physical perfection. God doesn't want us to be perfect. God wants us to be honest—to be honest with ourselves and with each other. It is unbelievably empowering for all people when we draw our

self-esteem and confidence from God rather than the culture around us. As a youth pastor the most powerful moments I experienced with students were when they would drop their façades and just be honest with the persons God created them to be. In many cases it's life changing for anyone to accept and love himself or herself. How can I love myself when everything around me tells me I need to be more beautiful, more fit, and more intelligent?

Evan offers encouragement and support to press on and to ask the hard questions, to lovingly guide your children and engage your local church to focus on the image of God that we were all created to reflect, and not the image some company is trying to sell you.

—*Ray Miller IV*

# Introduction

Where It All Began

*We don't get a chance to do that many things, and everyone should be really excellent. Because this is our life.*

—STEVE JOBS, CO-FOUNDER OF APPLE, INC.

I am the product of the late twentieth century—the 1980s and '90s more specifically. In my short time on this earth I have seen a lot of changes within society. It is amazing to look back through one's life and see the evolution of technology, society, and life that has taken place right before one's very eyes. It might be hard for some to fathom, but I remember a time when the Internet was not as accessible as it is today. For some this was a time when life was simpler and slower, while for others not having instant access to information and social media would be akin to living in the Stone Age. When I was growing up, my family did not have the latest techno-wizardry or an onslaught of television channels (seventy were ample for us).

I received my first cell phone when I was sixteen. It was a Nokia 5190 and I loved it. Its greatest features? It made phone calls, you could change the faceplate color, and there was a game called Snake . . . that was about it. No picture messages, no applications, no unlimited text messaging, no color screen, no front-facing camera for “selfies” . . . just phone calls. You could text but no one ever did. It was expensive and it was seen as a luxury feature. Cell phones back then were not used in the way they are used today. Blackberry was for business users and Nokia was for everyone else. Texting for most people was a stupid form of communication. Why would you type a message when you could just call someone? On top of that, it took forever to compose a message; there were no QWERTY keyboards, swipe typing, or predictive texts. You would have to push the seven button four times just to produce the letter “S.” Texting was a slow and inefficient mode of communication.

It’s mind-boggling to think that now we have cell phones that are basically mini personal computers with high definition cameras and access to thousands of applications, ranging from productivity to business, social media, and games featuring flying birds attacking pigs. So much of the world around us has changed and is still changing. Many things that we use and take for granted are actually quite new—such as Facebook (introduced in 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), and the iPhone (2007), just to name a few. It is amazing to think that my children (born in 2010, 2012, and 2014) will never know a world without the Internet, color TV with thousands of channels, high-definition smart phones, and FaceTime.

I’m not trying to be overly dramatic or nostalgic, but when I reflect on my childhood, some things stand out to me. I can remember when my dad brought home our first desktop computer. It was a beige rectangle Compaq (for anyone under the age of eighteen, just Google it). It came with all the features you could ever want: a mouse with a rolling ball, a CD drive, Microsoft 3.1, and Microsoft Works, which

could only be accessed via the DOS prompt (again . . . Google it). I played Jeopardy! on a 3.5-inch floppy drive and accessed the World Wide Web via a dial-up connection, thanks to my friends at America Online (AOL). It was the greatest thing I had ever seen.

During the mad rush to join the Internet, AOL had a wonderful marketing plan. Back then the idea of unlimited Internet access was unheard of. People connected to the Internet and generally were billed by the hour, or they would prepay a certain amount of hours per month. To get the consumer in its system, AOL was willing to give away hundreds of hours of Internet time for free. The thought was that when consumers experienced the product or even got used to the interface system, they would not want to leave and thus would have to sign up for AOL for a longer period of time. AOL made consumers realize that they could not access the Internet any other way. Because of this, its name was synonymous with the Internet for years.

AOL didn't really invent this type of marketing; it is actually the central key to all advertisements—make people want something even if they don't know they need it. Marketing and advertisements exist for this sole reason.

Marketing has a way of staying with you and, to be honest, that is the point. Have you ever caught yourself humming an ad jingle during the day? Advertising companies spend millions of dollars on campaigns to get you to remember their particular brand over the competition. Even today there are some advertising slogans that are synonymous with a particular company. Marketers want a small collection of words to remind you about the product, the image, and the level of sophistication.

How about some of these popular slogans in advertising?

- Just Do It—Nike
- Breakfast of Champions—Wheaties
- Challenge Everything—Electronic Arts (EA)

- The Happiest Place on Earth—Disney
- Think Different—Apple, Inc.
- Save Money. Live Better.—Wal-Mart
- I'm Lovin' It—McDonald's
- Finger Lickin' Good—Kentucky Fried Chicken
- Melts in Your Mouth, Not in Your Hand—M&Ms

What images, feelings, or products come to mind when you read these slogans?

These slogans are not merely in print but more often are in some form of visual medium. The invention of the television has been seen by many as one of the greatest inventions in human history. While this might be debatable on several different fronts, the fact remains that TV commercials constitute the majority of ads that people see. These commercials can range from an over-exaggeration of a common problem around the home to a side-by-side comparison of two competing brands to everything in between.

TV ads have become commonplace, almost expected. When TiVo was first introduced there were conversations about whether or not users could be forced to watch commercials instead of fast forwarding through them.

In 1984, during Super Bowl XVIII, Apple Computer broke the mold when it came to TV commercials. Apple hired Academy Award-winning director Ridley Scott to direct a one-minute commercial introducing the world to the Apple Macintosh personal computer. The commercial was a takeoff of the acclaimed book *1984*, which tells the story of a society where conformity is demanded and is seen as correct and true. It was during this period in American history when the personal computer was starting to become more popular and available for public consumption. The main player in the personal computer industry was IBM. Apple during the commercial made IBM the “Big Brother” character who demanded conformity when it came to per-

sonal computers. The commercial concluded with a voice-over: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like 1984.”

This was a pivotal moment in television marketing, and, over time, as the Super Bowl has grown in popularity not only in the United States but around the world, companies are willing to spend millions of dollars for a mere thirty seconds of airtime. For some the Super Bowl is less about determining the champion of the National Football League and more about seeing the creativity of these companies. It has become part of the cultural norm to stay transfixed to the television not to miss a moment of these million-dollar commercials. With the rise of social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), the reaction to poorly written or acted commercials can come pouring in immediately, thus making the company infamous for the wrong reasons.

Whether in an ad for laundry soap ad or a perfume commercial, all of marketing contains an element of fantasy, an element of perfection, an element of the ideal. Marketers are keen to understand this concept; they are aware of the ways that people perceive their brand and the products they are trying to sell. You will not see a “high end” or “couture” dress in some big box store. No, those are reserved for posh, well-lit, shiny stores on Rodéo Drive. They are sectioned off in a special part of the country. Ads for these products use words like “exclusive,” “luxurious,” “unique,” and “exquisite.” These words are emotionally charged; they make us think that there is something in them that will make us just like the celebrities who wear and “endorse” the clothes. People justify paying astronomical prices for shoes, dresses, jeans, and purses. Does the name really mean better quality? Does the logo signify status and worth?

Marketers sure hope so. I believe deep down we all know that wearing the same clothes as a model or celebrity does not make us famous. Sure, it might make us feel better, but if we have learned anything from addiction science it is that the feeling things give us goes away over time.

Marketing is about fantasy, but the line between fantasy and reality can begin to blur. When this happens people start to believe the message or that the outcome of owning this particular product can be attained.

Some messages that some advertisements endorse are: If you want women to like you and flock to you, wear this deodorant. Drink this beverage to ensure that you have a great time; wear this particular piece of clothing to look and feel beautiful and attractive. Unfortunately we have bought into these great lies.

When I was in seminary, one of the big Christian education projects I had to do was known as the “slices” project, and I have to admit that the project was a big part of this book. The “slices” project asked students to consider the congregations they were serving and look for what the church was teaching either implicitly or explicitly. This project made each person in the class look at a situation or “slice” in a deep theological way. Theological concepts and postulations would pop up out of nowhere; they were there all along, but this was the first time they were brought to the forefront. It was through this lens that I began to look at the world. I tried to see how Christianity and the modern world were intersecting. I started to see them not as items that were polar opposites, but rather as two entities co-mingling all around me; it was happening all the time and in the most unexpected places.

All of this led me to March 21, 2013. It was a typical day in my life. I got up with the kids, made breakfast, got ready for the day, and went off to work as an interim minister at a medium-sized Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in Houston, Texas. During the day, I found a free moment and logged onto Facebook to see what was happening in the world and with my friends. I was looking at pictures and reading statuses when I stumbled upon the status of my friend and colleague in ministry, Rev. Cory. It was a link to an article describing the Spring Break collection for Victoria’s Secret, entitled “Bright Young Things,” which was part of the company’s PINK line. According to Victoria’s Secret, PINK is aimed at college-aged women.

For me, the line was pretty racy; it had undergarments that had suggestive phrases such as “Dare You,” “Call Me,” and “Feeling Lucky?” on the front. To be honest, I didn’t know what to do. I was shocked and appalled; I couldn’t believe what I was reading.

So many different questions began running through my head. Could a company be that blatant about their marketing? Was this real? If it is, what does this say about our society and the way it views women? Am I the only one upset about this? What can be done . . . anything? One of the quotes that stood out to me in the article was, “Our daughters are precious, intrinsically valuable, and deserve better—they deserve to be cherished and protected.” I couldn’t agree more.

I never knew how scary the world could be until I became a parent. When I was single or just married, the world was my playground and I had free rein in it. But something happens when you become a parent—the world becomes a place where germs and sharp objects lie. You spend the majority of your time preparing for the coming of your first child by reading books about parenting, “baby proofing” your house, and ensuring that everything that could possibly injure or harm the child or possibly get broken is moved to a safe location. In that moment when you bring your child home, you have this sense of obligation and duty to safeguard this little human against the ills of the world. Your eyes are opened to things you never knew existed. You have feelings that you never knew were there. Kids have a way of making protectors out of us.

After reading about Victoria’s Secret’s campaign and reflecting on how it made me feel as a dad, minister, and follower of Christ, I began to think about the things I would want to tell my then three-year-old daughter when she was faced with the difficult situations of adolescence. I did not want her hardest decision to be whether someone would like or accept her by the underwear she was wearing. Adolescence is already difficult enough. It is around this time when popular kids sit on one side of the cafeteria and the labels on the clothes determine

your “status” in the hierarchy of middle school. Cell phones are a must-have and there is a constant fear of rejection, bullying, and scorn. Never mind the fact that the workload is tougher to prepare the students for high school and, in the midst of all of that, your body is changing at such a quick clip that a general malaise sets in. Shouldn’t our adolescents be faced with different struggles? How can we empower them to do great things?

My daughter’s first three years of life went by so quickly, and I wanted her to be a little girl as long as possible; I didn’t want her to grow up too fast or even feel like she had to.

So I put digital pen to digital paper and composed an open letter to Victoria’s Secret, which I posted on my website on March 22, 2013. I wanted Victoria’s Secret to know that, as a dad, I did not want my daughter to be targeted. I didn’t want her to be seen as a “thing” and that the company’s new campaign was wildly inappropriate for any age. The line “Bright Young Things” did not sit right with me; I believed that Victoria’s Secret was putting profits above girls’ self-esteem, self-pride, and self-worth. I wanted my voice to be heard even though I had no idea if they would even listen. I wanted to share my feelings with other parents, and maybe we could band together and take a stand for young girls and women everywhere.

What happened next I never saw coming. I posted my letter around 5 P.M., and by 11 P.M. I had nearly six thousand hits. Up until this time, my best day was about eleven hundred hits in a twenty-four-hour period. Over the course of the next few days, my letter was read on my site more than 3.5 million times. I received e-mails, Facebook messages, and tweets from all over the world, and my story was picked up by national and international news organizations such as Headline News, CNN, the International Business Times, and the Christian Science Monitor. The overwhelming majority of the response was positive; people from all walks of life, ages, education levels, and even religious beliefs wrote me to say thank you for taking a stand on this particular issue.

While I never thought so many people would read my blog post, it was nice to know that so many other people agreed with my position. Some of the most meaningful e-mails I received were from parents of teenage girls, especially single fathers, who were concerned about how they were going to broach this topic with their daughters. I can only imagine their fear of having to have “the talk” about sexuality and body image with their daughters. Many people wrote me that they were going to use the letter as a gateway to conversation. The people writing me did not have to agree with my stance on women in the ministry or even my Christology or even be a Christian; they merely agreed with me that Victoria’s Secret’s Spring Break campaign crossed the line.

As the feedback kept flying in, I kept coming back to one main issue—the *imago Dei*, or the image of God. The Bible reminds us that all of humanity is created in God’s image. But as marketing tries to sell products, can ad companies distort the *imago Dei* in a negative way? Why does Victoria’s Secret (and other clothing retailers) feel that it is necessary to distort the human body in a way that sets up an image of beauty and sexuality that is unattainable to 99.99 percent of the world’s population? Has the notion of being created by God, the way that you are, been lost? Or was it ever there to begin with?

These are some of the questions you will explore in this text.

This book should not be seen as an attack on the marketing industry or even some radical religious rant about media and Christianity. This book is, however, centered on the notion that Christianity and society come together. At times Christianity is seen as something that is done within the four walls of a stained-glass building on Sunday morning. There is a disconnect between the world outside those walls and the message of Christian love, acceptance, hope, and self-worth that is professed from pulpits and Bible studies. I’m not saying that marketing companies are evil because they do not hold the same viewpoint that many Christians do, but as followers of Christ

we have an obligation to view the world through the eyes of Christ. Holding this worldview, Christians are able to filter the world through the lens of Christ. In fancy theological terms this is called having a hermeneutic. Every person has a way that he or she interprets the world and biblical text.

At the end of each chapter you will find discussion questions about the material, but do not feel that you are limited to just the questions presented (if using in a small group or church school class); allow for open conversation and the free flowing of ideas. This will allow you to have a discussion that will be significant for all parties involved.

Use this text as a conversation starter; this is not intended to seek out problems or make a mountain out of a molehill. Neither is this book intended as the be-all, end-all on the correlation of marketing and Christianity. Be open to the possibilities of a different way of thinking about the world around us. Allow God to move in your life and do not be afraid of the changes that you might have or the ways that you look at the world differently.

It is my hope and prayer that at the end of this text you will be able to look at the world around you and see how God is ever present.

Along the way it is my hope that you will begin to see the world as a place where God is dwelling, living, and alive. Too often we can limit the scope of God to just a one-hour service on Sunday morning or believe that God only resides in the sanctuary of our faith communities. For God to have any relevance in the twenty-first century we need to be mindful of how God is actively seeking out all of God's children.

How is the message of God's love, inclusivity, and grace being propagated in all aspects of a person's life? Is the message of God's radical love and grace shown in a commercial where bikini-clad women are trying to sell a car? Is the message of wholeness and restoration found in a cosmetic line ad showing perfect, flawless, airbrushed skin? How is God's most beautiful creation, the human body, being distorted in an effort to raise the bottom line and appease stockholders?

With all of that said, we are going on a wild ride. Thanks for having the courage to come along; you never know what you might find.

Be sure to follow the conversation on Twitter (@RevEvanDolive) and on Facebook (FB.com/evandoliveauthor). Also check out [www.evandolive.com](http://www.evandolive.com); there you will find more resources and information.

The original letter to Victoria's Secret has been reprinted in the appendix along with a brief follow-up.

The book has been a wonderful journey. Along the way I have met some delightful people and have learned so much about how God and society interact and coexist. As you read this, keep an open mind, heart, and spirit. It is always a good thing to expand our horizons and understandings of God, Jesus the Christ, the church, society, and humanity.

I would love to hear about how you are using this book in your own life, congregation/faith community, or ministry setting. Feel free to contact me anytime ([seekingperfection@evandolive.com](mailto:seekingperfection@evandolive.com)).

# Appendix

## Letter to Victoria's Secret and Follow-up

*Published on March 22, 2012 on evandolive.com (bitly.com/VSLetter)*

Dear Victoria's Secret,

I am a father of a three-year-old girl. She loves princesses, Dora the Explorer, Doc McStuffins, and drawing pictures for people. Her favorite foods are peanut butter and jelly, cheese, and pistachios.

Even though she is only three, as a parent I have had those thoughts of my daughter growing up and not being the little girl she is now. It is true what they say about kids, they grow up fast. No matter how hard I try I know that she will not be the little ball of energy she is now; one day she will be a rebellious teenager who will more than likely think her dad is a total goof ball and would want to distance herself from my embarrassing presence.

I know that this is far down the line and I try to spend as much time as I can with her making memories of this special time.

But as I read an article today posted [online], it really got me thinking that maybe the culture that we currently find ourselves in is not helping the cause.

[The article stated] that Victoria's Secret is launching a line of underwear and bras aimed at middle-school-aged children. The line will be called "Bright Young Things" and will feature lace black cheeksters with the word "Wild" emblazoned on them, green and white polka-dot hipsters screen printed with "Feeling Lucky?" and a lace trim thong with the words "Call me" on the front."

As a dad, this makes me sick.

I believe that this sends the wrong message to not only my daughter but to all young girls.

I don't want my daughter to ever think that her self-worth and acceptance by others is based on the choice of her undergarments. I don't want my daughter to ever think that to be popular or even attractive she has to have emblazoned words on her bottom.

I want my daughter (and every girl) to be faced with tough decisions in her formative years of adolescence. Decisions like should I be a doctor or a lawyer? Should I take calculus as a junior or a senior? Do I want to go to Texas A&M or University of Texas or some Ivy League School? Should I raise awareness for slave trafficking or lack of water in developing nations? There are many, many more questions that all young women should be asking themselves . . . not will a boy (or girl) like me if I wear a "call me" thong?

I want my daughter to know that she is perfect the way she is; I want my daughter to know that no matter what underwear she is wearing, it does not define her.

I believe that this new line "Bright Young Things" thwarts the efforts of empowering young women in this country. "Bright Young Things" gives off the message that women are sex objects. This new line promotes it at a dangerously young age.

I implore you to reconsider your decision to start this line.

By doing so you will put young girls' self-esteem, self-worth, and pride above profits.

Sincerely,  
Rev. Evan Dolive

As of the writing of this text, Victoria's Secret has not contacted me directly regarding my letter or the issues that I bring up in it. The only response I have received has been a formal statement that has been used over and over again since this letter went viral.

Victoria's Secret posted on their Facebook page on March 25, 2013:

In response to questions we recently received, Victoria's Secret PINK is a brand for college-aged women. Despite recent rumors, we have no plans to introduce a collection for younger women. "Bright Young Things" was a slogan used in conjunction with the college spring break tradition.

This does not, however, address the issue of using women in advertisements that overly sexualize them. Victoria's Secret still has not addressed the issue that they are setting an unattainable standard for sexuality and beauty—*that* is why I wrote my letter.

The fact remains that when PINK was started in 2004 it was aimed toward fifteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, so whether or not Victoria's Secret is "targeting" a younger demographic, the company is already targeting fifteen-year-olds. This is something that cannot stand any longer.

According to Business Insider, the CFO of Limited Brands (the company that owns Victoria Secret) stated, "When somebody's 15 or 16 years old, what do they want to be? They want to be older, and they want to be cool like the girl in college, and that's part of the magic of what we do at Pink."<sup>42</sup>