

# The gospel frees us from: Comparison

## Various passages

When you become someone whose life is centred on Jesus, there's all sorts of changes that you might expect - getting free from guilt for the past, free from fear about what happens after you die, free from purposelessness or meaninglessness...

The gospel (which means the 'good news' about Jesus) sets people free bit by bit, and in the end completely, from sin, death, poverty, illness, injustice, oppression, loneliness, fear and pain. But it also sets people free from other life-sapping things that we hadn't realised were so draining; and that we might not even have noticed Jesus addressing.

One of them is *perfectionism*. We're going to look at how the good news about Jesus sets us free from that next week. And another of them is *comparison*. The ways we look around us and assess ourselves against other people - ways we're conscious of, and ways we're not. Here are some of the ways we're constantly living in comparison...

'They're richer/cooler/better looking/smarter/funnier/wiser/nicer/more popular/more sorted/more successful than me.' (You can insert your own neurosis if one of those doesn't fit). An unspoken and very direct comparison with the person before you, where you wish you were more like them in some way.

'They seem to manage this in life, and that in life - why can't I?' You look at someone at a similar stage in life (or faith maybe), and wonder, 'How does she fit exercise in and I don't? How does he keep the house so neat and I can't? How have they got a family by now and I haven't? How do they still manage to get about so much and I don't?' It's a spot-the-difference with emotional baggage.

Then there's comparing ourselves with those around us on 'the latest.' How does my car reg plate compare to the '67 plates? How new is my phone? Are my shoes and clothes keeping up with what's in this season? Is my knowledge of what happened in the footie or the rugby up to date enough to join in the chat at the pub? It's a sense of 'compared to others, am I keeping up with the society standard?'

Then we've got those awkward conversations where other people draw you into comparing your life with theirs. This happens with a wearisome predictability at dinner parties... Sometimes they don't mean to start a

competition. Sometimes they do. They talk about how well the kids or grandkids are doing, or what's been going well at work, or where they're going on holiday. So often, over the washing up you think about how your life compares, and it feels ugly and awkward.

Then there's how you stand out compared to others. For some, there's something difficult about not standing out enough - how am I different? Who am I, amongst all these impressive people around me? For others, there's something difficult about standing out too much - the ways you feel different compared to 'normal' people, the ways you stick out like something undesirable.

There's comparison stuff around finding your place in the pecking order - amongst your colleagues at work, amongst your friends, your family - any group of people to which you belong. Stacking yourself up against those around you and thinking, 'who am I? Am I no.1 here? No.2? That'd be okay to be no.2, if I'm in favour with the Alpha dog in the group... Am I bottom of the pile? How can I rise up here? Maybe if I put some others down...'

There's also looking around at others and seeing the qualities in them that you don't have, the things they excel at that you don't. This is a little different to the 'he's better looking/richer/cooler than me' thing, because it's about an actual talent or contribution that someone else makes that you feel deflated by because you can't do it.

There are inferiority and superiority complexes. Most of us have one or the other, many of us have both. We look around and think 'I'm not as good as them' or 'I'm not as bad as them' and define ourselves against each other. Sometimes we say this stuff out loud: 'I'm not as bad as them' when we're trying to rise above those around us, and 'I'm not as good as them' when we're giving up the fight.

And there is a form of comparison that's not so much about who you want to be identified with as who you don't. This is more particularly in groups and communities, where 'we' look at 'them' and say, 'we're not like them, they're not like us, and that's why we're apart.'

Have you ever thought about how draining all this comparison stuff is? Every one of these examples of 'living in comparison,' far from being part of 'life to the full' feels like part of the life-sapping stuff that so much of human culture and the world's kind of humanity exists in.

*What forms of 'living in comparison' have you noticed (either around you, or within you)?*

The problem with all this living in comparison is that it's essentially competitive. In different ways, all of this is about getting ahead of others, or perhaps just keeping up with them. Because who are you if you've not risen above the others? Or who are you if you've been left behind? 'Survival of the fittest' is not just the narrative of our science, but also the slightly unnoticed narrative of our culture.

Bring the gospel - the good news about Jesus - into this life, and here's what happens: Life in Jesus sets us free from from life in comparison. It's infinitely better. Let's look at how, with a little comment on a few little passages. First of all, we've got the great leveller of Romans 3:21-24...

*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Paul wrote in Romans 1 about how God-less people were sinning, and making idols and identities for their lives in all sorts of damaging ways. Then he wrote in Romans 2 that the churchy people who were shouting 'Amen, brother' were just as fallen, broken and sinful in their competitive and hypocritical quest to be 'holier than them.'

And he sums it up like this in Romans 3 - '*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*' Boom. Into this comparative, competitive living of our world where we're positioning ourselves as stronger or weaker or better or worse, God's bombshell news is, 'I have reset the whole race. You're *all* right down here at the bottom. *There is no difference.*' God says, 'Compared to *my glory* - this whole living in comparison is just you lot splitting hairs in the gutter.'

If you believe the gospel, you believe that we're all equal - not just because we're all been made in the image of God, but because we've all been levelled at 0 by that Holy, majestic God who is infinitely better than any one of us. 'Okay, Scott' you say - 'where's the good news you were talking about?'

It's in the same sentence. *'There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **and (all)** are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'*

The good news about Jesus is that He died to take the guilt and punishment of equally condemned people, and rose to lift us to a life beyond compare. Jesus' redeeming grace to us was to give *His* righteousness - His 'rightness of life in God's eyes' - to those who *accept* that grace. And so we're lifted.

Lifted beyond comparing and competing. Because each one of us is equally offered a life and identity in Jesus of being totally cherished, treasured and welcomed by the God of all glory Himself. We've been lifted from the gutter to Heaven itself. There's nowhere higher to strive for now.

When we talk about 'life in Jesus' being distinct and infinitely better than life apart from Him, this is part of how we find that to be true of our new life in Him. Here's 2 Corinthians 5:16-17...

*So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ (that is, your life is 'in Jesus'), he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

The world looks at each other in comparison and competition. It even looks at Jesus that way. In Eminem and Beyonce's song 'Walk on Water,' he raps out the pain of competing with his own reputation and mythology never mind competing with everyone else, and she sings 'I walk on water... but I ain't no Jesus... I walk on water... but only when it freezes.'

The world sees Jesus as someone about whom we say, 'Yeah, He was *really* good. Okay, I can't compete with Him. He's better than me. I could learn a bit from him, but I won't bother competing there.' But the *gospel* sees Jesus not as someone to compare ourselves with or even just learn from, but actually to put our lives *into*. To have our identities sourced in Him, and find our whole way of thinking, living, dying, relating and being changed by that.

To be 'in Jesus' is to leave behind an old you that lived in comparison and competition. It's to become a new person whose identity is in the perfect Son of God who lived, died and went to the gutter, and then rose to Heaven and brought your name with Him. It's to stop seeing yourself, other people and Jesus the way the world does; and to start seeing yourself, other people and Jesus the way God sets us free to.

*How does living in comparison creep into church life?*

‘Living in comparison’ only happens in connection with other people. If the world around us is a community of competitors, we see how the good news about Jesus sets us free from comparison most clearly in a different community - the church. The church is the family of God. It lives in contrast to the world. Instead of being a community of competitors, we are a community of co-operators.

Sometimes when people first come to our church, they have a sense that there’s something good, different, whole and healing about this group of people. Partly that’s them sensing God’s Holy Spirit amongst us. And partly it’s them experiencing how God’s Spirit helps us see each other differently than the world sees each other.

Our common identity in Jesus is what defines each one of us, and all of us together. And that leads to individuals and communities being set free from all sorts of types of comparison. Here’s Galatians 3:26-28...

*You are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

The gospel sets us free from comparisons that divide the world. Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female were the big social divisions of Paul’s day. Our world has others: The divide between rich and poor is getting bigger. Brexiteer or Remainer. ‘The nice houses’ and ‘the rough houses.’ Married life and single life. Old and young.

All of these divisions that cause us to isolate ourselves in protective self-focus get torn down by the *connection* that we are given in Jesus. It’s a connection that is just a given between us. That’s what the gospel gives us. The church is still the most socially diverse community on Earth. Look around our church, and you’ll see some evidence of that - although there’s always room for more!

And it happens because all the ways we compare our lives and then put each other at arm’s length get removed by a gospel that says, ‘None of these things are to define you - each of you who is in Jesus is family together. He’s

what you have in common; more than that, He's what defines each one of you. So the divisions come down.'

A little later in Galatians we read this stuff about how to live a Christian life led by the Holy Spirit, in 5:25-6:5. Here, Paul talks directly about not comparing ourselves to one another. He says, instead of thinking about comparison or competition, think about *growth*.

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other... If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.*

Living 'by the Spirit' - which is what happens when your life is 'in Jesus' - means every form of comparison where we look at others and grade ourselves against them is out. Feeling either superior to others or inferior to others are both forms of conceit. Because your focus is on yourself and how you're doing instead of God and His glory, and others and their benefit.

And the results of these two forms of self-focus aren't great, Paul says. Feeling superior leads to provoking others, and feeling inferior leads to envying others. So Paul reminds us about that great leveller that he walloped us with in Romans 3 earlier: 'If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.' Comparison with others is to have no place in the family of church.

Instead Paul talks about 'carrying your own load.' And he means something like focusing on how I can *grow* in life and faith rather than how I *compare* in these things. It's like changing your mindset from racing against competitors, to trying to beat your personal best *and encouraging others to beat theirs*.

Daniel and I did our first park run yesterday. It has the feel of an event where people aren't trying to beat each other so much as spur each other on. The race is always against last week's time or the personal best rather than 'that guy that's always faster than me.' One of the faster runners, whilst he was lapping us, looked over his shoulder to cheer young Dan and Callum and Lucy on. 'Well done guys - go for it!'

In the church, we have life and identity in Jesus in common. But we have different ages in life and in faith, different personalities, skills, experience, backgrounds and influences. We're not supposed to be keeping up or

overtaking each other. We're supposed to be cheering each other on to keep going and keep growing as children of God.

Paul gives us a really helpful picture of this new way of life in Christ and in the church in the passage we read earlier, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. (Have a look again at it.) Paul says life together in Jesus means we are all parts of one body - *His* body.

In vv.12-13, we read again about the *connection* we have in Jesus - Paul says we are 'one body' in Him, and reminds us about those social divides coming down. In vv.14-17 he challenges the inferiority complex, and in vv. 21-24 he challenges the superiority complex. And what he reminds us in those verses is that we are different parts of the body.

It's a great image, because it helps us again with this idea of *growth* rather than competition. If one part of the body is built up and becoming healthier, then that's to the benefit of the whole body. So as the one who tends to feel little and insignificant grows, it blesses them, and blesses us all. As the one who is confident in their gifts and position grows, it blesses them, and blesses us all. We Christians are *all* in Jesus, and *all* need to keep growing.

The other thing about being the body of Christ is that we learn that we *depend* on one another. 'If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?' I can't hear without you. You can't see without me. There's no point comparing ourselves with each other; we're different. But precisely because we're different, we meet each other's needs - and give different things to this whole body of Jesus called the church.

If you've been here for years and don't know how you fit, please hear this: we need you. Let's talk and pray together about how your life, faith and gifts are going to make this whole family grow in our life in Jesus.

If you've started coming here today for the first time today, please hear this: we need you. v.18 says that 'God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be.' I've no doubt God is arranging more people into this family, in the right time and in the right places. Not only to share in this life in Jesus together with us, but to help us *all* grow in it more and more now that you're here too.

So here's how the good news about Jesus sets people free from living in comparison: God's judgement on us all resets and levels us all at 0. But

God's grace to us in giving Jesus to die for our sin raises those who receive this grace to infinity. So there's nothing to compete over. Who we are, now and forever, is secure in Jesus. That changes the way we look at ourselves, each other and Jesus.

We live in connection as equally cherished children in the same family of God, instead of the isolation of self-focused superiority or inferiority. We live with the ambition to grow and see others grow, instead of trying to push ahead and pull others back. And we live in dependence, not only on the Saviour who sets us free, but on every one in this whole family of His. We need each other. When you find yourself begin to think or talk in comparison to others, catch yourself on and remind yourself of these things.

*How could you encourage someone else in the body of Christ about how they bless this family in a different way to you?*