

“The Curse of Comparison”
Sermon Series on
Learning the Art of Contentment in a World of Consumption
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November 8, 2015
(Mt. 20:1-16)

Introduction.

When I enrolled as a freshman at the University of Georgia many years ago, I started out in the School of Art majoring in photography. That fall I signed up for my first art class – Painting and Drawing 101. I remember walking into the studio the first day of class, and there were 10 large rectangular tables laid out in the classroom. I chose a seat in the front next to a young woman I had known in high school.

This began my short career as an artist. Over the course of that semester I worked on a number of painting and drawing projects which were assigned to us, and it was an illuminating experience. Whenever I attempted to work on a project, occasionally I’d look at the work of my tablemate, who happened to be the second best artist in the class, and I would compare my artwork to hers. When I saw the quality of her work and compared it to mine, I would gradually adjust my body slightly in her direction so as to cover up my work and shield it from her so she couldn’t see it, and I’d keep working on my project.

Then I’d look across the aisle at the artwork of the student next to me. He just happened to be the best artist in the class. When I compared what I had done with what he was doing, I would then adjust my body in his direction too so as to cover up my work and shield it from both of them. Eventually, I was all hunched over my drawing hoping no one else could see it.

The comparison crushed my spirit, and I soon realized *they* were artists, and *I* wasn’t! The next semester I switched majors and schools, and I decided to study cinematography in the School of Journalism. I discovered I was better at making movies than I was painting landscapes and still life!

Teddy Roosevelt once said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” He was right, and the problem of comparison extends to every aspect of our lives. How we look, where we live, what we have, and our overall lot in life – they are all impacted by the curse of comparison. Each of us wrestles with the destructive effects of this spiritual disease.

Well, what’s the cure? How can we overcome the debilitating impact of comparing ourselves to others? This morning we’re going to take a closer look at the problem, and we’ll also study a passage of Scripture which I think will give each of us some insights into dealing with the problem and how to overcome it.

I. Comparison in the Vineyard.

The Bible is filled with examples of the way in which people battled the problem of comparing their lives to the people around them. In the Old Testament Cain compared his sacrifice to Abel’s. Esau compared the blessing he received to that of his brother Jacob. And the brothers of Joseph were so jealous of their father’s love for his favored son, and they sold him into slavery.

In the New Testament, even the disciples battled comparison. James and John asked Jesus to let them sit at His right and left when the Lord came into His kingdom, and the disciples argued with one another about who was going to be the greatest. Even after the resurrection, when Jesus

told Peter his fate and how he was going to die, the apostle looked at John who was standing nearby and asked Jesus, “What about him?” Peter wanted to compare his future to that of the other disciple.

But perhaps the best passage in Scripture that talks about the problem of comparison is Jesus’ parable about the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. While the passage speaks to a whole host of topics such as grace and the equal access people have to the kingdom of God, it nevertheless speaks to the problem of comparison, too. The Lord told this story toward the end of His ministry, and it was in the context of a question the disciples asked about what reward they might expect for giving up everything to follow Him. Jesus assured them that they would, indeed, be rewarded. But then He added this unexpected story that strikes at the heart of the damaging effects whenever we live by comparison.

A town comes to life with the rising of the sun,¹ and the owner of a vineyard heads to the marketplace in the town square to hire day laborers to assist in harvesting his crop. When the vines ripen, harvesting them becomes a matter of urgency and you need a lot of help. In the ancient world, the marketplace served as the town’s “temp agency,” so the owner of the vineyard headed there to hire some people to work for the day.

He offers to pay them a denarius for a full day’s work, and the men agree to that financial arrangement. A denarius was a small silver coin that was the standard pay in the first century for a day’s work for both a soldier and an unskilled laborer. The workers agree, and off to the vineyard they go. The sun is barely up when they begin their work, and the early hours pass with the cool temperatures of the morning. The workers feel invigorated, and they’re happy to have the work.

But then the story turns. At 9 o’clock, the owner leaves the vineyard and heads back to town, and he scours the marketplace to hire additional workers. But now the financial offer changes. Because a quarter of the workday has elapsed, the owner simply tells the latecomers, “Come work in my vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right” (vs. 14). This new crop of workers joins those who have already been working for three hours.

Then the plot thickens even more. The owner disappears again, and once more he returns with additional laborers to augment the workforce, and he repeats this scenario of adding workers at 3 o’clock in the afternoon and even at 5:00 pm near quitting time. The last laborers hired will only work for a single hour before the workday ends.

At the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard instructs his foreman to pay the workers beginning with those who arrived last and concluding with the ones who were hired first. Imagine the scene. In front are those who worked a single hour. They hardly broke a sweat. Behind them are the men who worked three, six, and nine hours. Finally, at the very back of the line are the laborers who are exhausted from a 12-hour day in the hot sun.

The troubling incident occurs when the men are compensated. The guys who only worked an hour are given the same pay – a denarius – as the men who worked the whole day. No matter when they showed up and started working, each person is paid the same. The guys who worked the whole day are livid, and they complain to the owner of the vineyard and cry out, “This isn’t fair!”

But the owner of the vineyard responds, “Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? I’m not ripping you off. I paid you exactly what we agreed on when I hired you this morning, and I didn’t break our agreement. If I want to give the one I hired last the same as I pay you, don’t I have the right to do that? Perhaps the real problem is that you are envious because I am generous.”

As I reflect on Jesus' story, I realize that the wounded anger wasn't generated because the 12-hour workers received too little. The disturbance erupted because they thought the one-hour laborers were given too much. We are all prone to lose our balance in life, not because we have received less than we deserve but because someone else has received more than we think they deserve. The wounded voice of comparison complains, "Why them and not me?!"

II. The Antidote to the Curse of Comparison.

Many times we compare ourselves to our neighbors or to those we read about in the news. They seem to have so much more than we do. We envy them because they appear to be more beautiful, more wealthy, more successful, or happier than we are. But comparing our lives to those around us is always a dangerous thing to do, because we really don't know the full story when we only look on the surface of a person's life. The problem is we're comparing our behind-the-scenes life with someone else's highlight reel!

The antidote to the curse of comparison is learning the art of contentment. Contentment isn't innate. It doesn't come to us naturally. It's something we have to learn, and it comes through spiritual discipline. I think there are three keys to learning the art of contentment and breaking the curse of comparison, and I want to share them with you. **The first key is to develop the habit of a thankful heart.**

In Colossians 3, the apostle Paul writes, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:15-17).

Sometimes it's a challenge to give thanks, isn't it? But I believe that is our greatest call to faith – to give thanks to the Lord even when life is hard, even when we don't think it's fair. And out of great suffering has come some of the greatest expressions of gratitude. Anyone can thank God when things are going well for them. It takes a person of faith to look beyond the present circumstances and voice a word of gratitude, trusting that God has our best interest at heart and He is at work in our lives even in the midst of our struggles.

Martin Rinkert was a minister in the little town of Eilenburg in Germany in the 17th century. He was the son of a poor coppersmith, but somehow, he managed to get an education. Finally, in the year 1617, he was offered the post of Archdeacon in his hometown parish. However, just a year later, what has come to be known as the Thirty-Years-War broke out, and his own village was caught right in the middle.

Twenty years later, the massive plague that swept across Europe hit Eilenburg, and people died at the rate of fifty a day. The person called upon to bury most of them was Martin Rinkert. In all, over 8,000 people died in Eilenburg, including Martin's own wife. He finally retired about 11 years later, just one year after the conclusion of the war. His ministry spanned 32 years, and all but the first and the last ones were overwhelmed by the great conflict that engulfed his town.²

Tough circumstances in which to be thankful. But he managed. And he wrote these words to a famous hymn we sing at Thanksgiving, which we'll celebrate later in just a couple of weeks:

*Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices.*

*Who from our mothers' arms
Has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*

It takes a magnificent spirit to come through hardship and still express gratitude. Even when you're surrounded by great adversity, thanksgiving can deliver you. And it is a key if we ever want to break the curse of comparison.

The **second antidote** to comparison is to **stop thinking about your neighbor and maintain a focus on what's in your own bowl**. Let me explain what I mean. Here's a story for you to think about. In his book *Satisfied?* Jeff Manion writes about a father and his son on a warm summer evening.³ The dad calls to his son who is in the backyard. "How would you like some ice cream?" he asks. His son races into the house as the half-gallon carton is taken out of the freezer. Moosetracks! That heavenly blend of vanilla ice cream with swirls of dark fudge and miniature peanut butter cups. It's amazing, and it's the boy's favorite! A generous scoop is put in the bowl and placed in front of him. All is well and right with the world, and the son says with a smile on his face, "It doesn't get any better than this, dad!"

Now change the scenario slightly. The father calls *two* sons in from the backyard and takes out two bowls from the cupboard. The dad spoons out a generous scoop of ice cream for his older son, but in the younger boy's bowl he places *two* large scoops. What happens? Suddenly, the harmony of the universe is disrupted. A cosmic injustice has been committed. Comparing the two bowls, the older son cries, "That's not fair!"

Do you understand that the issue had nothing to do with what was in the older son's bowl? It's what his brother had in his bowl that started a war. The problem wasn't that the older brother was given too *little* but that he felt his younger brother was given *too much*.

In his famous chapter on pride in his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis points out that the problem with comparison is tied to our pride. Pride is competitive, and that is at the heart of it all. He writes: "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about."

In other words, we're only proud of being *more* successful, *more* intelligent or *more* good-looking than the next person. And when we come across someone who is more successful, intelligent or good-looking than we are, we lose all pleasure in what we had. That's because we really had no pleasure in it. We were simply proud of it. That's what comparison tends to do to us.

Blogger Anjelah Johnson writes, "Imagine running a race but constantly looking at the lanes to your left and your right. That's going to slow you down, and distract you from your goal. Keep your eye on the prize. Really, the only person you're competing against is yourself. So, go as fast as you want, or as slow as you want, and take as many water breaks as you want. Just keep your head up and focused on your own lane so you don't miss out on the gifts God places in your path."⁴

Focusing on our own lane and on your own bowl and developing a heart of gratitude are keys to breaking the curse of comparison. When we give our attention to the wonderful things in our

lives and all the ways God has blessed us regardless of what is going on with our neighbor, that's the next step in learning the art of contentment in a world of consumption.

The **final antidote** I would suggest is that **if you're going to compare, change the perspective from which you look**. We tend to look up the line on the continuum of wealth and possessions rather than down it. We take note of what people who are more wealthy have rather than noticing how much we've been given in comparison to people who are less well-off. If we starting looking down the line rather than up it, this will have an amazing impact on our perspective. Anyone who has been on a mission trip to the DR or to Haiti know exactly what I'm talking about. It always blows me away whenever I meet people who live in poverty and yet have the joy of Christ in their hearts in a way that humbles me.

At O'Hare Airport in Chicago there was an art exhibit some time ago which featured families from around the world sitting in front of their homes surrounded by their possessions. The pictures were a part of a project envisioned by photojournalist Peter Menzel who wanted to capture the lifestyles of average families around the world. His book *Material World* leads the reader on a photographic journey into the lives and possessions of families from thirty different countries.

It's a fascinating experience to thumb through Menzel's book. Some items you see in the pictures are objects of daily use. Others are keepsakes that hold sentimental value for one reason or another. But other belongings are neither cherished nor used. They're just stuff.

One of the most convicting outcomes of viewing the pictures in Menzel's book is when you realize just how much we have here in this country, and how little other people around the world possess. And it makes you wonder if we really need all we have. When we compare, we tend to look up the line at those who have more than we do rather down the line at those who have less. Perhaps a change in perspective is in order.

Conclusion.

There are times when comparison can be the motivation for improvement, and even help us to decide to change majors. But more often than not comparing what we have and our lots in life to the people around us can have a destructive effect. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Remember this quote the next time you're tempted to compare your life to someone else. Cultivate a heart of thankfulness, and focus on your own bowl of ice cream. And if you compare at all, think about how blessed you are in comparison to others. These are some of the ways to learn the art of contentment in a world of consumption. Amen.

¹ This section of the sermon is adapted from Jeff Manion's book *Satisfied?*, pp. 64f.

² The source for this story is Bret Blair.

³ Jeff Manion, *Satisfied?*, p. 68ff.

⁴ Anjelah Johnson, http://anjelah.com/post_express/comparison-is-the-thief-of-joy-theodore-roosevelt/#sthash.kpFoOsVr.dpuf.