

One of the most familiar parables of Jesus is about a Pharisee and a tax collector who go into the temple to pray. The Pharisee is the religious man who does all the right looking things and in his prayer he reflects on how good he is. The tax collector stands in the back, won't even lift his eyes up and prays, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." But in the end Jesus said that it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who actually went home justified, right with God.

I bring this up because of something that Jesus said the pharisee did while he offered his prayer; something so common that we might even miss it. At some point the pharisee looked over and compared himself to the tax collector. Remember part of that Pharisee's prayer? "I thank you that I am not like this tax collector."

Tonight we are going to talk about our compulsive need to compare ourselves to others; what that need tells us about ourselves and why we can say that we are dead to sinful comparisons.

Secular psychologists have noted just how much time people spend comparing themselves. Their explanation is that we have a need to define ourselves in relation to some standard outside of us...and it just so happens that the easiest way to do this is to compare ourselves to others.

The Bible takes the explanation one step further. It explains why we want to define ourselves. Whether people are religious or not we all have the very religious idea that we ought to measure up to something. This is because God has given us a natural knowledge of him and a conscience that knows there is right and there is wrong. The problem is that sin has corrupted this natural knowledge. What remains, though, is a desire to see ourselves as good, or at least better than the next guy. Another way to put it: we have a natural desire to justify ourselves; to see ourselves as right in some sense. This is why we want to win arguments, win the praise of others, and win status in this world.

So we look around. Whether we're aware of it we are constantly looking around and making judgments about how we stack up to the next person. We watch our co-workers closely, measuring their work against ours. We listen to other parents of kids the same age as ours. People used to be somewhat limited in who they could compare themselves to. A Sunday drive may have revealed what the neighbors were up to but you couldn't see that your second cousin was grabbing lunch at a cute diner down in Florida. Now in 10 minutes you can scroll through Facebook or other social media and see what hundreds of people are up to.

And what do we have to show for all of our efforts to compare ourselves?

We may want to shrug it off as annoying habit or just an empty pursuit, but our constant need to compare ourselves to others reveals that, like the pharisee in Jesus' story, we still want to justify ourselves.

The same thing was happening among the Christians that Paul was writing to in the book of Galatians. They were hoping to justify and prove their goodness but going back to some of the Old Testament laws and especially circumcision for me. The lie of any attempt to justify yourself is that you will find freedom and peace through your own effort. But listen now to what Paul says about any attempt to be justified by the law and what the answer is.

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. 24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. 26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Did you catch how Paul described those who live by the law? He describes it as a prison; being locked up and under custody. What kind of prison is it? I would call it a maximum insecurity prison; maximum insecurity because when we depend on our own efforts we will live in constant insecurity. If you depend on comparing yourself to others to build your own self-image you will never be at peace. Even if you think you're the best you'll find yourself threatened by the success of others who might dethrone you from the top. But most of the time comparing ourselves to others only brings us down.

Have you ever gone online and after 10 minutes of scrolling on social media you found yourself feeling worse? Like you're the worst mom ever because you can hardly get a meal on the table while a high school classmate has her kids in 15 different activities and still manages to look great in the selfie she just posted? Or were you feeling pretty good about starting a rainy-day fund when you read an article telling you how much money should have saved at this point if you ever dream of retiring?

Living by comparison doesn't just threaten to rob a person of living life to the fullest, it is a threat to eternal life. For all our talk about how everything depends on Jesus, doesn't our constant need to compare ourselves reveal the sinking fear that it all depends on me?

Even secular psychologists recognize the negative effects of living in the prison of comparison. Here's the solution offered by one expert, "Ultimately, the greatest protection against falling into the comparison trap is to develop and maintain a stable sense of self. That means cultivating your identity."

So close but so far away! It's true that to be set free from comparisons is a matter of identity, but where do we get it? There is only one way out of this prison. There is no early release for good behavior or chance for parole. The only way out is death.

But death is exactly what the Bible says happens in our baptism. At our baptism we are so intimately connected to Jesus that his death to sins is also our death to sin and its insatiable desire for self-justification. We were buried with Christ and now we are also raised with him. And what is our new identity? Listen again: ²⁶ **You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,** ²⁷ **for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

Your new identity is son of God; heir of eternal life. How do you know? You were baptized into Christ. You are clothed with him. Your old sins of self-comparison are gone and now you look good, perfect to God in the righteousness of Jesus.

If insecurity is what marks the old way of life then it is security that marks Christians. We are dead to the unhelpful kind of comparisons. That doesn't mean we don't look around and notice differences or that differences don't exist. It's that we are set free to recognize differences and to be thankful for who God has made me.

That's why Paul can say, "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**" None of those differences matter when it comes to our status before God: his child, heir of heaven. And when you judge yourself based on that, you no longer have to play the comparison game.

Isn't it true that when you live constantly comparing your situation to others you often miss the great blessings and opportunities God has given to you? If you're staring at the good works that God has prepared for others you're likely going to miss that he has also prepared good works for you to do.

In fact, in Christ, we can reclaim the purpose of comparing ourselves. Instead of comparing ourselves to others so that we can prop ourselves up we can see others as examples for us to follow. Paul had no problem telling one group of Christians how generous another congregation was in their offerings. He had no problem saying that they should follow his example of faith. The good works of other Christians are no longer a threat. Instead we find in our baptism our new identity, a death from the imprisonment and insecurity of self-righteous comparisons and freedom to live as God's own people. Amen