

“Follow Me”

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John 21:15-25, (Galatians 6:1-5)

I've read that we

frequently compare ourselves favorably with someone else. We all think of someone whom we consider to be less mature, less competent, or less able than we are. That person is a great comfort to us because he or she enables us to keep our self-image intact by saying, “Well, at least I'm not like so-and-so.” The only problem with determining our self-worth by comparing ourselves with others is that we are using the wrong measuring stick.

Here's an image I came across:

Imagine a competition to jump across the [Pacific Ocean]. [Crazy, I know!] The first competitor, a [large]70-year old [man], manages three feet. His rival, a 20-year old [track and field] champion, manages 25 feet; he is vastly superior to his fellow competitor. But this difference pales into insignificance compared with the [thousands of kilometres] they would need to jump to get all the way across! God's 'goodness standard' is Jesus Christ. Compared with him the very best of us fails [terribly].

In the conversation we read today from the book of John, we see Jesus challenging Peter to focus on him rather than compare himself with others.

It's a famous story. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and three times Peter basically says, “Of course!” Jesus was giving Peter a chance to renew his relationship with him that had been broken when Peter denied Jesus three times, during Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Three times Jesus says “Feed my sheep.” Peter would later become a great leader who would “feed” many people the word of Christ. After their dialogue, Jesus shares a prophecy of how Peter would later glorify God at the end of his life. Jesus then says, “Follow me.”

I'd like to focus on what happens next in their conversation. In verse 20 it says, Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” The “disciple whom Jesus loved” is shown to have been John, the writer of the book of John. In verse 24 he writes, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them...” John may have used this phrase rather than his name as a humble way to refer to himself. (Even he needed the love of God as shown through Jesus).

So, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them, and we read, “When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come (again), what is that to you? Follow me!’” In a sense, Jesus is saying “Don't worry about him. You follow me!” This dialogue is important for all of us. How often do we compare ourselves with others rather than looking directly to Jesus Christ? In some ways, Peter had likely been looking to John, rather than to Jesus. It may have started at the last supper after Jesus says that one of the disciples would betray him. Instead of asking Jesus directly, Peter asks John to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. (Jn13:24) Peter was looking at John to get his information since John had a closer relationship, but Jesus now says to Peter, “Follow me.” Jesus' message could be, “Pay attention to our relationship and don't let others get in-between.” Each of us needs to pay attention to our own relationship with Christ and not let people we admire take our attention away.

We often have times when we look at other people and compare ourselves with them, rather than having Jesus as our standard. The apostle Paul encourages us to be imitators of God and Christ. Instead, we admire human heroes and try to be like them. That could be one way we compare ourselves to others, looking up to people we like.

Another way we often compare ourselves is in the opposite way, looking down on those we don't like. We are sometimes like the Pharisee (the Jewish leader) who looked down on the tax collector. It's hard for us to not look down on certain kinds of people. If we hear that a man is the president of a company, we'll be tempted to treat him with more respect than say, a woman who works as a cashier at a supermarket. It's hard to give the same respect to someone working as a dishwasher in a restaurant as compared to a highly educated professor in a university. Or, what about different cultures? We may feel more comfortable living in a community where most people are Japanese rather than a neighbourhood of mixed cultures, where we may fear foreign gangs. Or, what about certain people? I have to work hard to not look down on certain leaders when I'm angry about wars happening in the Ukraine, or Gaza. Or, when I'm angry about what I see happening in American politics. Have you ever thought, "How can they be so stupid!"

Someday, we'll stand before God at a time of judgement, and we may think we were better than those others who were doing so much wrong. Yet, like with Jesus and Peter, God may say something like, "Don't worry about those others. What about you? With all that I gave you, in your circumstances, how do you think you did?" Each of our own experiences are totally different than those of others. Yet we compare ourselves as if we are all exactly the same.

Paul writes in Galatians (ch6),

"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads."

When we see another person who does something wrong, or makes a mistake, a spirit of gentleness and humility is important for us if we want to help that person. We are to care for each other, respect each other, and see others as equals rather than lower than us. Taking pride in doing a good job is healthy, but pride can also become unhealthy when we begin comparing ourselves with others. Author C.S. Lewis says he considers Pride to be the greatest sin. It can lead to all the other lesser sins. Pride is an "anti-God state of mind."

Lewis writes,

"Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over, the more pride one [has], the more one [dislikes] pride in others. In fact, if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, "How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or [bargue] in, or [look down on] me, or show off?" The point is that each person's pride is in competition with everyone else's pride. ...

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. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest....

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all.

A humble attitude is the appropriate attitude to take when we pray, but it's also an appropriate attitude to take when we are in conflict. It's easy to jump to a conclusion like, "I'm not the one at fault. She's the one who started it!" Or, "If he hadn't said such mean things, we wouldn't have had any problem!" A humble attitude is one where we remember that Jesus could be saying to us, "What is that to you? Follow me! Don't concern yourself about the other person. Think about your part in the

problem!” I believe that if we learned to look to our own problems and admit them, a lot of conflicts would be solved. In a spirit of humility we have the potential to grow in positive relationships, with Jesus as our standard. What about you? Is God calling you to take a step of faith? We need to take care that we not get caught up with comparing ourselves to others, and instead look to Jesus as our standard, and seek to imitate him, the one who took our sins to the cross, died, and rose again. Let’s pray.

O Lord, you know exactly what we need. Forgive us for times we’ve looked only to others for guidance rather than to you. May we grow in our relationship with you, that we may gain wisdom, humility, and gentleness in all our other relationships, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.