

Have Mercy

Luke 18:9-14 NIV

You have probably heard the story:

A young, successful couple moved in to a new home. One morning, the couple sat at their kitchen table to eat a delicious breakfast. The wife looked out the window, and to her surprise, she saw her neighbor hanging dirty laundry on the clothesline.

“That laundry isn’t clean, it’s still dirty!” she said to her husband. “Someone needs to teach her a thing or two when it comes to washing her clothes!”

A few days later, the couple sat down at their kitchen table for another meal. The wife saw the neighbor hanging clothes on the clothesline. But this time something was different.

“Wow, look!” the surprised wife said to her husband, “Her clothes are clean! Someone must have taught her how to wash her clothes!” Without raising his head from his plate, the husband kindly responded, “Actually, honey, I got up early this morning and washed the window.”

The moral of the story is: If you pay too much attention to the dirty laundry of your neighbor, you may forget to wash your own windows. Jesus said the same thing but in this way, *“Take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Luke 6:42 NIV)*. Wash your windows first and you will be able to see more clearly what’s really happening on the other side of the fence.

The parable we just read expands on this same subject. Luke begins this section by describing the setting where Jesus told this parable. I like to imagine it was a room full of people. The Bible says that most of them had grown confident in their own goodness. Most of them look at others’ laundry and saw how dirty it looked; and then, **looking down** on everyone else and without paying attention to their personal windows, they became very proud of their apparent cleanliness.

In this parable, Jesus describes the process of how we become self-righteous people. It is important we understand the process so that we can break this unhealthy cycle. Perhaps the main thing we do that leads to this position of haughtiness is **comparing ourselves to others**. In the parable, you will see that the prayer of the Pharisee is all about comparing himself to other people. *“Thank you God because I am not like those people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers, traitors, uncaring...”* (v. 11).

Friends, we have to recognize that comparing ourselves to others is an ever-alluring yet emotionally and spiritually dangerous trap. Comparing ourselves to others is a very precarious practice. It could be a source of motivation and growth, but most of the time it leads us either to over-estimate or denigrate our persona.

On one hand and more often than not, upward comparison breeds feelings of envy, low self-confidence, dejection, depression, and the like. This kind of comparison is a joy-killer.

On the other hand, downward comparison results in looking down on others, making us blind to our true self. It leads us to overestimation in both our secular and spiritual life. Downward comparison may produce a temporary sense of self-worth, but it does so at the expense of compassion, connection, and collaboration.

Look at the Pharisee and see the degree of detachment and indifference that he is expressing in his prayer. “Thank you God I am *not like those people*...” The detachment of the Pharisee is not only from “those people” but even from God.

I love how the *Amplified Version* translates the story, because it helps us see that even though the Pharisee is using the name of God, he is not praying to God. He is praying to himself, about himself, and for himself. Hear the following verse in the tone of the Amplified Version.

“The Pharisee stood [ostentatiously] and began praying to himself [in a self-righteous way, saying]: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like the rest of men—swindlers, unjust (dishonest), adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’” **Luke 18:11 AMP**

Usually, the ultimate effect of comparison is degradation of either ourselves or others; and that’s very dangerous. Comparing ourselves to others is not only dangerous; it’s proof of ignorance and foolishness.

Arguing against comparison, the apostle Paul wrote, *“In measuring themselves against each other and comparing themselves with each other, they are simply stupid”* (**2 Corinthians 10:12 CJB**). We need to be careful of not falling prey to this practice that is not only unfair, but it is very destructive.

We should not compare ourselves to anybody other than Jesus Christ. Doing otherwise will either kill your joy or your ability to be compassionate.

Jesus contrasted the attitude of the Pharisee with the humble approach of the tax collector. The first thing I want you to notice is that the prayer of the tax collector is not a boastful comparison, but a shy (eyes staring to the ground), unpretentious (from the distance), heartfelt (fists pounding the chest) plea, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”* (v. 13).

Here are a few of the many positive outcomes of not giving into comparison. When you don’t compare yourself to others, (1) you get in a better position to actually see yourself for who you truly are; (2) instead of excusing yourself by comparison with other, looking down on them, you have the boldness to acknowledge your shortcomings and ask for mercy; which (3) leads you to be better prepared to freely show grace to others and yourself.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that “Jesus didn’t come for folks who have it all together, but for folks who are willing to admit they are falling apart (Matthew 9:13). Hopefully, that can

also give us some grace with a church (and a world) full of messed-up people. And with ourselves.”¹

Downward comparison is all about getting ahead of others, but our faith calls us to get ahead of ourselves, not others.

It is easy to look at others and find faults. We have a great ability to see the junk others carry around. But our faith is calling us to do just the opposite. Jesus calls us to recognize the gold in others rather than their junk. If you pay attention to the gospels, you will see that Jesus invites us to pay more attention to the good in others than their stains.

In their book, *The Red Letter Revolution*, Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo write, “Jesus was continually scolding and sharpening his disciples. He was calling out their lack of faith and their judgmentalism. And he was pulling out the best in others, applauding the faith of folks like the centurion, the Syrophenecian woman, Samaritans, and tax collectors. Jesus does exactly the opposite of what most of us do. Most of us find the best in ourselves and the worst in others. Jesus invites us to find the worst in ourselves and look for the best in others.”²

I think that’s exactly one of the meanings of this parable: give priority to finding the worst in ourselves and looking for the best in others, and not the other way around.

Let me tell you what happened to me as I reviewed the notes of this message. I was reading through, making corrections, additions, and so forth. I got to the end of my notes and prayerfully gasped, “Thank you God that I am not like this Pharisee.” Immediately the Holy Spirit told me, “you just became one.”

Hear the bad news, we all have the tendency to compare ourselves with others, find fault in them. This inclination may cause us to forget that the dirt we see on the other side of the fence is because we have not washed our own windows. Our concern for the speck in our brother’s eye may lead us to forget we have a plank in ours.

But, hear the good news. You can resist and overcome this inclination with the help of the Holy Spirit. We can do it with humility, honest self-examination, and heartfelt confession. The more we approach our relationship with God and others this way, the more we are going to be able to relate and bear with one another in love and compassion. The more we are going to be able to boldly say, “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” The more we are going to have mercy toward others.

¹ Claiborne, Shane; Campolo, Tony (2012-10-09). *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (pp. 62-63). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

In this Lenten season, give up comparison. Stop comparing yourself to others. We do it consciously and unconsciously. Give up self-righteousness. Instead practice self-examination. When you do it you are going to be able to receive God's mercy and give of God's mercy.

Have mercy!!! Not only a prayer, but a command.