

**HOW DO
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The practice of comparing yourself to others is usually a very bad thing to do and should be avoided. Sometimes the act of making comparisons is outright sinful. On the other hand, I have learned that if done properly, comparisons can be spiritually helpful and bring much deeper joy to one's heart. One thing is indisputable: There is something about human nature that makes us prone to draw comparisons between ourselves and other people. This article is written to provide correction to those who make comparisons in a sinful manner, and to encourage everyone to make comparisons which are beneficial and pleasing to God. I believe this issue is so important that we dare not miss the mark. Unfortunately, many Christians do miss the mark, sometimes to a destructive extreme.

Let's start with the wrong way to make comparisons. The Bible has much to say about this and since the Bible is our authority we must heed what it says. The first act of comparison we see in the Bible led to the first murder! Yes, we are talking about Cain and Abel as found in Genesis 4. God approved Abel's sacrifice but he did not approve of Cain's. But look carefully at the text. God did not judge Cain for not measuring up to Abel. The comparison God made was Cain's sacrifice in view of what God required. Although we can't be absolutely sure what the requirement was in Genesis 4, Cain knew what it was and did not follow it (vv. 6-7). It was Cain who made the comparison between himself and Abel. God did not say, "Cain, why can't you be like your brother?" (parents be warned). When Cain compared himself to Abel he should have been humbled and he should have learned from Abel's positive example. But folks, sin is an ugly thing and it is very powerful. It twists our thinking so completely that the process of making comparisons can easily lead to resentment, jealousy and hatred. In Cain's case it led to murder. Perhaps this is a good time to remember Jesus' words that if we hate our brother we are already guilty of murder (Matthew 5:21-22b).

One of my favorite Jesus stories is recorded in Luke 18:9-14. This is the story of the Pharisee who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector." The Pharisee did what we are all prone to do: He gave himself a higher score than the man to whom he was comparing himself.

This is a habit to avoid at all costs!

When it comes to righteousness, the standard for us is not the failures of other people. The only standard is God's perfect righteousness. When I compare myself to that then I have only one recourse; to cry out to the Lord: "Oh God, have mercy on me a sinner." God hates it, hates it, hates it when we compare ourselves to others in order to convince ourselves that we are good. Such comparisons do little more than numb us to the sin in our own lives.

I have found this to be the single greatest barrier I encounter in marriage counseling.

The husband gives himself a pass on his own sinful, selfish and unloving attitudes and actions because he is busy comparing himself to his wife. He has no trouble convincing himself that his wife's flaws are far worse than his own. In his twisted thinking (such is the influence of sin) this somehow means that the real fault is with his wife. Of course, he can't see that his own sins might even exceed hers - he's too busy blame shifting and seeking to justify himself.

The wife is just as skilled at this delusional game as her husband is. Somehow her own selfishness, bitterness and carnality manage to pale in comparison to his sins and so she conveniently ignores her own sin. Both the husband and the wife are using the wrong standard. They have chosen to compare themselves to a sinful and imperfect person and they do this very selectively, with the deck stacked in their own favor. What they should be doing is comparing themselves to a perfectly holy God. Unless they are delusional to the point of being irrational, a comparison of themselves to God will leave them humble, broken, teachable and maybe the marriage can even be healed.

"Well, I'm not perfect but at least I didn't cheat on my spouse." "There are people who have done a lot worse things than I have done." "At least I never killed anyone." Folks, these kinds of sentiments and statements usually help the one speaking them to feel better about him/herself, but such statements HAVE NO STANDING WITH GOD. You know what? Unlike Hitler, I have not murdered millions of people. I've not robbed banks, hit women or lied under oath. If success is measured by other people's sins, I guess I can find someone worse than me. BUT THAT'S NOT THE STANDARD; GOD IS THE STANDARD. The truth of the matter is that I have sinned thousands of times and every one of my thousands of sins is an affront to a holy God. I am the worst of sinners (I Timothy 1:15).

Perhaps you remember a particular way in which I have illustrated this in the past. If I compare myself to Hitler, the distance between us might be significant. The gap between us is not measured in inches, feet or yards, but in miles. I am miles closer to God than Hitler ever dreamed of being. How much closer? I would say, in all humility (☺), I am at least three miles closer to God than Hitler, maybe even four! That sure makes me feel good about myself; I guess any sin in my life is pretty insignificant ... Now, the four miles by which I surpass Hitler in righteousness are seen in a different light when I recognize that the distance between God and me is 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles. What then is the real issue here? It is not the relatively small distance between Adolph Hitler and Jay Lucas; it is the insurmountable distance by which I fall short of God (Romans 3:23). **It is the vast distance by which I fall short of God's righteousness that I should keep in mind when I consider other people.** The Pharisee of Luke 18:9-14 had it absolutely wrong. The tax collector in that same story had it right. To whom have you compared yourself recently? Did you look for flaws, sins and shortcomings in the other person so that you could feel justified in your own life? God hates, hates, hates this kind of thinking.

Please consider what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:1-5. What Jesus was ultimately driving at here has to do with our attitude. Technically speaking, it is possible that in reality my brother does have a more serious flaw in his life than I have in mine (the speck vs. the

plank). But that's not the point. What Jesus is saying is that I should be so humble that when I see the plank in my brother's eye and then consider my life, that his plank takes on the appearance of a speck while in my mind my speck takes on the appearance of a plank. I can then speak to my brother about his speck and help him remove it in a way which helps him and honors God.

"But Jay, what if in reality your brother's speck really is a plank, and your plank really is a speck? That doesn't seem fair." Folks, let God and God alone be the one to make those judgments. I don't trust my limited knowledge and my sinful pride enough to take God's job to make it my own. That's a slippery slope that can only be avoided by resisting it altogether.

Let me speak about one other way comparisons can be helpful and lead to great contentment. One of the best lessons I have ever learned is one which I hope my children will take to heart. When we compare ourselves to those who have more than we do, we start down the path of covetousness, jealousy and self-pity. It is far better to compare ourselves to those who have less than we do. This helps us to be thankful, be content and to be satisfied. (Obviously I don't mean this as a put down against those who have less. If anything, it should make us more generous).

Many years ago, when my son, Jonathan, was about seven years old, he accompanied me on a trip to Flagstaff, Arizona. While there we took a short trip north onto the Navajo Reservation. I had been there just over a year earlier on a missions project and enjoyed renewing fellowship with some Navajo brethren. While I was talking to some adults Jon started playing in the dirt with a couple of young Navajo children. Like typical kids, they were having a blast playing with two or three small matchbox cars that probably cost a total of two dollars. Knowing the conditions of true poverty and the condition of many Navajo family units on the Reservation, I knew how little those children had materially, and how difficult their family situations were. As I looked at my own son I was reminded of how materially blessed we are.

<p style="text-align: center;">If I compare myself to those who have more, I covet. If I compare myself to those who have less, I am thankful for what I have and I find greater joy in giving. I choose joy.</p>

So you see, some comparisons have spiritual value but many do not. Choose wisely.