



Thomas J. DeLong, a professor at Harvard Business School, has seen a disturbing trend among his students and colleagues. He calls it “comparison obsession.” He writes: “A former student of mine who graduated 10 years ago and has a terrific job at a Fortune 500 company still suffers from this comparison obsession. At least it seemed like a terrific job until she received her alumni newsletter and learned that a fellow alumnus, who was in the MBA program with her, had just been named VP at a Fortune 100 company. From that moment on, she could barely hold a conversation without bemoaning her lack of VP and Fortune 100 company status; on more than one occasion, she told others she felt like a failure. More so than ever before ... business executives, Wall Street analysts, lawyers, doctors and other professionals are obsessed with comparing their own achievements against those of others. Over the last five years, I’ve interviewed hundreds of HNAPs (high-need-for-achievement-professionals) about this phenomenon and discovered that comparing has reached almost epidemic proportions. This is bad for individuals and bad for companies—when you define success based on external rather than internal criteria, you diminish your satisfaction and commitment. It’s telling that in my 500 interviews of ‘high-need-to-achieve-professionals’ over the past three years, more than 400 of them questioned their own success and brought up the name of at least one other peer who they felt was more successful than they were. Many of these individuals are considered among the best and the brightest, yet they’re trapped by their comparing reflex.”

What Thomas DeLong calls “comparison obsession” has also been called jealousy or envy. It was William Shakespeare who first called it “the green-eyed monster.” Whatever we call it, we’ve all felt it. It might have been what you felt growing up towards a brother or sister who always seemed to get more attention than you. It might have been toward someone who was supposed to be your best friend, but deep down in your heart that friendship was tainted with resentment because she always got what you wanted—she got the guy you wanted; she received the award you deserved; she got into the school you were supposed to go to. We’ve all felt this. Comparison obsession and the envy it breeds is something we can even feel towards a brother or sister in Christ. Maybe it’s their ministry, or their spiritual gifts, or their godly marriage, or their kids who always seem perfectly behaved.

In his book, *Status Anxiety* Alain de Botton writes: “Given the vast inequalities we’re daily confronted with, the most notable

feature of envy may be that we manage not to envy everyone. We envy only those whom we feel ourselves to be like.” It’s true, isn’t it? I never envied Michael Jordan. I could never do what he did, but I did envy the pastor down the street with a bigger church and a better salary and a couple of bestselling books. The challenge with this kind of envy is it’s not a sinister or premeditated evil, but rather the kind that sprouts from good intentions and devotion to a noble cause.

It was precisely this problem of comparison obsession, spiritual competitiveness and envy that reared its ugly head early in the ministry of Jesus.

The Problem of Comparison Obsession

In the Gospel of John thus far we’ve seen Jesus first in Cana of Galilee and then in the area in and around Jerusalem. After cleansing the temple and performing many signs at the Passover festival, he and his disciples headed out into the Judean countryside, most likely on their way back to Galilee.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized (John 3:22).

This is the only place in any of the four gospels we’re told that Jesus baptized. The fact is, Jesus really wasn’t the one performing the baptisms. John 4:2 says, **“it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.”** Nevertheless, people were flocking to Jesus. But he wasn’t the only one baptizing, and he wasn’t the only one to draw a crowd. Until Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist had been extremely popular. He was a fine preacher. Multitudes went out to hear John preach. People came from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan (Matt. 3:5). This included Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors, soldiers, the rich and the poor. Even King Herod enjoyed John’s preaching, until John got personal and called him out for sleeping with his sister-in-law. Some even wondered if John was the Messiah. Others praised him as a reincarnation of either Elijah or one of the prophets.

The thing to realize here is that John’s ministry didn’t come to a complete halt when Jesus started out. Look at verses 23–24.

Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.)

Apparently, John continued to preach and baptize in a place called Aenon, which means “springs.” It sounds like John had

a primo spot to baptize people, but still his ministry was being eclipsed by Jesus, and the disciples of John weren't too happy about it. Look what happens next.

An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (verses 25–26).

We don't know the details of this conversation but there was much debate among the Jews in those days over the proper procedure for ceremonial washings. Somehow this spilled over into questions about baptism, which is kind of like a ceremonial washing. People began to wonder, which baptism is better—John's or Jesus'? John's disciples even came to him and asked him point blank, "Hey, you know that guy that was with you at the Jordan River, that guy you couldn't stop talking about? Well, he's baptizing too and now everyone is going to him." By the way, this was an exaggeration; not "everyone" was going to Jesus; John still had a few folks to baptize, but John's disciples were threatened. "Rabbi, the numbers aren't good. Our parking lot is empty. The offerings are down. What are we going to do?"

Imagine the disappointment of seeing a once thriving and exciting ministry diminished. It was hardest for his disciples, but it had to be hard for John as well. Here's a guy who'd spent many years of loneliness and self-denial out in the wilderness. For much of his life he'd known rejection and alienation. Then his ministry took off and it had to be exciting, if not a little bit intoxicating. He was human. But now the people are trickling away and it couldn't have been easy.

It never is, you know. It could be in ministry. It could be in business or sports or school. The fact is, no matter who we are, no matter how much success we have, eventually someone will come along who eclipses us. The most successful, competent or well-known person will need to sit in the back seat as someone else's star rises. This is never easy. Within all of us there's a regrettable pride which drives us to not just comparison and competition but jealousy and resentment.

Some of the most well respected people of the Bible have had to deal with this. When Paul was under house arrest in Philippi, some saw this as an opportunity to surpass him. He wrote about it in Philippians 1:15–17, *"It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains."*

There was rivalry and competition and jealousy and envy in the early church and it's still with us today. So how do we deal with

it? I'd like us to learn this morning from John the Baptist himself. John's response offers us a cure.

The Cure for Comparison Obsession

Recognize God's sovereignty

John's response begins in v. 27.

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven."

Let's call this recognizing God's sovereignty. That means we accept the fact that if someone else has gifts superior to mine, if someone else is having more success than me, it's because God has blessed them. Who am I to get in the way of that? That's the way we should view the success of others. They may have a better education than me, or a bigger house than me, or a fatter salary than me, but *"a person can only receive what is given them from heaven."*

By the way, that's also the way to evaluate your own success. We tend to negate the success of others and glorify our own. If someone else does well, it's because they got lucky or they're shallow or they had a "golden spoon" from the start. But if I'm successful, well, that's different. I worked for that. I deserved that. No one gave me anything. Oh really? Paul said in 1 Cor. 4:7, *"For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"*

Someone said, "Envy is resenting God's goodness to others and ignoring God's goodness to me." When we recognize and accept the fact that God is in control of our own success, that everything we have we've received as a gift of God's grace, and that God is in control of the success of others, then we'll be freed from the jealousy, envy and resentment that so often comes with another's success.

Know who you are

The second thing John teaches us about dealing with this problem is to know who you are. Look what John says in v. 28.

"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.'"

John knew what his role was. He knew he wasn't the Messiah; he was the one sent ahead of the Messiah to prepare the way for him. I think John knew that was an important role. He doesn't diminish his role. He doesn't say, "Oh, don't worry about me. It doesn't matter. I'm nothing anyway." Instead, John knows who he is and he knows who he isn't. The Bible says apart from Him we can **do** nothing, but that doesn't mean we **are** nothing. That doesn't mean we have nothing to do. In Rom. 12:3 Paul says, *"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..."* He doesn't say to **never** think about yourself. Instead he says don't think too highly of yourself. We're to think about ourselves; just do it with

sober judgment. In other words, properly evaluate yourself. Part of that means knowing and accepting your own spiritual gifts and abilities and using them for Him. We're a body and every member is needed; every member is significant. When we know who we are and that we have a significant role to play we'll be less likely to envy the role of others.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader is a film version of C. S. Lewis' book by the same name. In one scene, Lucy and Edmund have once again been summoned to Narnia. They climb aboard a royal ship with King Caspian. During their journey, Lucy encounters a book that promises to provide "an infallible spell to make you the beauty you've always wanted to be." Despite her vibrant faith in Aslan (who represents Christ), she's always struggled with a deep wound: she feels inferior to and jealous of her beautiful older sister Susan. Tempted by her desire to become more beautiful, Lucy speaks forth the spell. Suddenly, a mirror appears on the page directly across from the spell. As Lucy looks into the mirror, she realizes her face has been transformed into the face of her sister. She decides to tear out the page and hide it. Later, in a dream, Lucy pulls out the page of the mirror and recites the words at the top, "Make me she, whom I'd agree, holds more beauty over me." Suddenly, in the dream, the spell works to transform Lucy into her sister Susan. However, by becoming her sister, Lucy discovers she never existed. As Lucy stands before the mirror, horrified, Aslan appears.

"Lucy," says Aslan.

"Aslan," she replies.

"What have you done, child?"

"I don't know. That was awful."

"But you chose it, Lucy," he tells her.

"I didn't mean to choose all that," Lucy answers. "I just wanted to be beautiful like Susan. That's all."

Aslan tells her, "You wished yourself away, and with it much more. Your brothers and sister wouldn't know about Narnia without you, Lucy. You discovered it first—remember?"

"I'm so sorry," Lucy says sadly.

"You doubt your value," says Aslan. "Don't run from who you are."

That's what John teaches us. Don't doubt your value. Don't wish yourself away. You have a role to play.

Be joyful, not jealous

The third thing we learn from John is to be joyful, not jealous.

"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete" (verses 28–29).

It might help here to know a bit about a Jewish wedding. The "friend" of the groom was like the Best Man with an important role to play. He helped arrange the wedding and presided at the wedding feast. His most important job was to guard the wedding chamber after the bride entered. He'd only open the door in the dark when he heard the groom's voice and recognized it. When he heard that voice he'd let the groom into the chamber and then he went away rejoicing because his task was completed. What's John saying? He's saying, "It's not my wedding. I'm not the groom. I'm the friend of the groom and I've heard his voice and that brings me great joy!" How could John be jealous of the groom?

I've only been a best man in a wedding once and that was for my brother. When I stood there next to him at his wedding, I wasn't jealous, I was joyful. I love his wife, but I didn't want to marry her! That would have been very strange!

Obviously John is talking about Jesus. He's the groom. John isn't jealous of the groom; he's joyful for the groom. Even though John is talking about Jesus, I wonder if this says something to us about rejoicing in the successes of others, especially when their actions somehow honor Christ. I mentioned the apostle Paul earlier and how people were taking advantage of him being under arrest. He said they were preaching Christ out of selfish ambition. But then he says, **"But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice"** (Phil 1:18). See the joy?

Every now and then Rob Hall, our North Campus Pastor and I will travel together. Now when you travel with Rob you have to hang on for the ride. One of the things about Rob is he makes friends with everyone he encounters: flight attendants, waiters, taxi drivers, beggars! And God uses that. He makes new friends. He gets a lot of freebies. Sometimes he even gets a chance to share his faith. But I'm not like that. I'm an introvert. I like people, but I kind of like to stay to myself too. I like to get my work done on a plane, not socialize. Now I could be jealous of Rob and wish I were more like him, or I could rejoice that God is using Rob's extroversion and maybe he's using my introversion to get some work done. We have to know who we are and we have to be joyful and not jealous about the success of others, especially when it glorifies Christ.

It's all about Him

That leads to the fourth thing John teaches us about dealing with this obsession to compare, and that's to realize that ultimately it's all about Him. In v. 30 John says:

"He must become greater; I must become less."

Notice how John says this is an operational imperative. He **must** become greater and I **must** become less. It's like it can be no other way. When the great missionary William Carey was dying he turned to a friend and said, "When I'm gone, don't talk about

William Carey; talk about William Carey's Savior." Ultimately, all of us have to realize that life is really **not** about us; it's about Him. Life doesn't revolve around me, it revolves around Him.

In the rest of the chapter the apostle John picks up on the statement by John the Baptist and says a few more things about this One who **must** become greater.

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them (verses 31–36).

Jesus must become greater for several reasons. First, he must become greater because of his origin. He came from above. He didn't come **from** the earth; he came **to** the earth from above. Second, Jesus must become greater because of his words. His words are also from above. Since Jesus was sent from God, he testifies to what he's seen and heard. His words are God's words spoken in the fullness of the Spirit. Third, he must become greater because of his resources. Since the Father loves the Son, he's placed all things in his hands. All things—most importantly, the authority to grant eternal life. If you believe in him, you have eternal life—right now. When you die, you'll get to experience that life in its fullness, but for now you experience it within. **"He who has the Son has the life."** If you really believe, you have his life in you right now, but if you don't believe, you won't see life.

John says if you don't believe you're under God's wrath. We've learned in this chapter of the love of God. John told us back in verse 16, **"For God so loved the world..."** Here he adds, **"The Father loves the Son..."** How do we hold the love of God together with the wrath of God? Aren't they contradictory? Not at all. God's wrath is rooted in the fact that God is good and loving and that he hates anything that distorts or damages those whom he loves. If God doesn't hate and isn't wrathful at murder, child abuse, sex trafficking, and willful rebellion against his righteous laws, he's neither good nor loving. If God isn't determined to root out from this world, in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to destroy others, he's neither loving nor good. God's love and God's wrath are both supremely seen on the cross. We see God's love because he sent his only Son to die for our sins. We see God's wrath because our

sins required the death of his Son. God's wrath and God's love go hand in hand.

Ultimately, the cure to comparison obsession is to become obsessed with Jesus. When our life becomes less about me and more about him, we won't worry nearly as much about the success of others or about being surpassed. But let me give you a few practical things that you can do in your life to help you with this.

First, pray for the very people you might be tempted to compare yourself with. It's almost impossible to harbor resentment towards someone you're genuinely praying for. And while you're praying, thank God for who he's made you to be.

Second, avoid talking about them in negative ways. If you talk about them, talk well of them. A very fine writer named Joseph Epstein commented on our need to discuss stories about prominent people who have failed: "How delightful to those of us living out our modest lives, to witness, if only through the media, such ego-filled balloons getting popped. When we see someone mightier than we divested of his dignity, stripped of his pretensions, humiliated in public, we feel comforted by having retained our own dignity, pretensions, good name. Perhaps after all, we conclude, it is just as well that we're not so rich, powerful, beautiful, talented. Relishing in others humiliations is good for our ego, even when we know deep down that if our local newspaper knew everything about us, we might be on the cover too." Avoid that.

Third, beware of externalism. I find it interesting this whole thing got started with a debate over an external religious issue like ceremonial washings and baptism. So often it is these kinds of issues that become the focal point of comparisons, especially among Christians. So often good things such as spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, tithing and even bible study can be points of comparison by which we seek to compete with others. Even our own church can become a source of unhealthy pride—my church is this big or my church does it this way or my pastor has written this many books. Let me tell you, whatever causes you to boast in anything except for Christ and his cross is just wrong.

Finally, root your identity not in what you do but in who you are in Christ. We read, **"The Father loves the Son..."** When you become a Christian you're placed in Christ, so that he loves you with the same love he loves his Son. When that love really sinks into our hearts, it changes everything. It changes how we think about ourselves and our own sense of worth. The habit of comparing ourselves with others melts away because we know who we are. The cure to comparison obsession is to become obsessed with Jesus and his love.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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