

Compared
to her...

How to experience true contentment

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We've seen that we don't need to, and shouldn't, be comparing ourselves with others to measure our position or ranking on certain scales. And we've seen that the treatment for this compulsive comparison is treating Christ as our Creator and our Saviour—putting Him at the centre of our universe and finding our significance, satisfaction and security in relating rightly to Him.

But this raises some practical questions:

- Is it ever right to want to improve my image, circumstances, achievements or “goodness”, or should I be content exactly as I am?
- Are Christians allowed to be competitive at all, or does it always involve unhealthy comparison?
- Is there a place for pride in our accomplishments, or of the accomplishments of those we love, or will this always become an attitude of smug superiority?

This download will only start to answer these three questions, but they are questions well worth thinking through in more detail, and discussing further with friends.

1. What about CHANGE?

Does all this mean I shouldn't want to change in any way? To improve my appearance, move to a bigger home, get fitter, learn some new skills, pursue a better income, find a boyfriend, have more children, have more obedient children?

Is it a case of thinking: "God made me who I am; He's given me my situation, so I have to like it or lump it"? A sort of Christianised version of: "Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be"?

The answer is yes... and no!

Yes, the fruit of knowing that Christ is at the centre of the universe, and only He gives us true significance, satisfaction and security, should be contentment—a state of not needing to rail against our situation. We can and should be content in God's goodness and sovereignty. We are not merely resentfully resigned to the status quo, but instead know that our Lord is the only sure place in which to put our trust, whatever our circumstances.

That said, we also know that God doesn't actually want us to remain as we are. He is in the business of change—He longs to transform us. In what sense, and why?

It is not worldly, temporary improvements God is after; it is deep and lasting change—change that sees us become "conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8 v 29). God wants us to grow in our characters, and in our view of and use of the gifts He's given us, and He wants us to be motivated not by self-protection or self-promotion, but by a desire to display and glorify Christ. Motivation matters to God. So the change itself is not the important thing; the motivation for the change is.

I'm someone who struggles rather a lot with organisation and order, and countless times I've felt like a complete failure when I visit a friend's immaculate house or have been on the receiving

end of their impressive administrative capabilities. I often feel as if I am drowning in chaos, and that I am ineffective compared with others, and I want to change. I desperately want to change. But why?

I've come to realise that the motivation is often a desire for others to think better of me, to be impressed by me rather than looking down on me (not that I know that they do—I just tell myself that they do!). But God does not want me to change, even if it's outwardly for the better, if my motive is desire for a higher position on my man-made comparison measures. So I need to purify my heart and seek improvement that means becoming more like Christ, for His glory and not my own.

This means there are times when I need to knuckle down to those jobs I hate doing even when I'm exhausted, if that means I am better able to serve others out of love. But at other times, that striving can prove counter-productive to loving others, because it results in high stress. Then I need to accept the chaos and mess, focus on people and their needs, and not worry about what image I am projecting. I need to remember to keep God and His gospel at the centre of my motivations for order, and not myself in competition with others.

There's a traditional prayer which goes like this: "Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can; the serenity to accept the things I can't; and the wisdom to know the difference."

It's a good thing to ask for—but I think it's most useful if we make a couple of additions: "Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can (and should change); the serenity to accept the things I can't (or shouldn't be so bothered with); and the wisdom to know the difference."

I think this will mean different things to different people. Some may choose to have an image makeover, go on an adult

education course, join a Christian internet dating service, or do home renovation; and they may do those things out of a desire to be less self-conscious and more able to focus on others, or to be able to earn more income in the face of financial stress (or even to give more), or reach out to people with the gospel, or to be in a position to meet a potential spouse without having to leave their current church, or to make hospitality easier. Another woman may do exactly the same things out of a desire to feel more secure in her looks, or to sound more intelligent in company, or because she feels she'll never be satisfied without a husband, or because she "knows" truly successful women have a beautiful home. The decision and action may be the same; it's the *motivation* that matters.

2. What about COMPETITION?

Are Christians allowed to be competitive? What about those explosive games played on church weekends away? What about Christians involved in professional sport? What about school tennis, debating or tiddlywinks championships? Or submitting your CV to be a big company along with hundreds of others, all vying for a highly sought-after trainee position? Isn't the aim of all of these to come out "on top", to be the best compared to the opposition?

Competition can be good in many areas of life where it encourages excellence and efficiency rather than mediocrity or sloppiness. It provides goals to work towards. It helps employers in assessing who the best candidate is for the particular role. Competition can even foster unity; a striving against each other but towards the same goal, such as the team members who compete against one another in training so they can spur one another on to improve their game and increase the chances of the whole team winning.

Alex Chediak has some helpful insights in his article, *Christians and Competition*, in Boundless Webzine (<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001572.cfm>):

“Assigning merit-based grades and letting the best team or player win encourages excellence and helps individuals discern their strengths. Whether we redouble our efforts in an area of weakness, or re-channel them into an area of greater personal aptitude, the recognition of excellence leads to improvements in performance—and not just for the winning party.”

And this is what Stuart Weir says in *What the book says about sport*:

“Sport lives by comparison. Although many claim that they compete to find their own limits of performance, this can only be established by comparison with others’ performance. To be better than someone else is a basic thought in sport. We need competition in order to judge our own performance.

The literal meaning of ‘compete’ is to strive together ... Christian competition is about striving with all our might but within the rules and etiquette of the game. It is striving to maximise the gifts God has given us in a competitive environment. Will not the God who promised us ‘life ... to the full’ (John 10 v 10) rejoice when we compete and reach our full potential?” (page 69).

The challenge for Christians is to check our motives as we enter a competitive arena of any sort. Am I taking part in the competition to raise my position among my peers in order to boost my sense of significance, or am I taking part to grow and reach my full potential in that particular skill, in God’s strength, for His glory? Or in the case of “fun” competition (like playing a board game with the family), is my aim to help grow relationships and openness as we battle it out together, rather than aiming to impress people and gain their admiration?

It’s helpful to view others, especially other Christians, as running mates, rather than rivals. Christ, not me, is at the centre of all things; significance, satisfaction and security are found through being in right relationship with my Creator. Others are not the enemy, the obstacle, to my “success” in life. It is not a case of survival of the fittest. I do not need to beat them to be blessed.

If we’re parents, it’ll help our children if we teach and model

to them from an early age that their identity is secure in knowing they're made by God, and loved by Him in Christ Jesus, so they don't need to seek approval or significance by being better others. They are free to be competitive in certain contexts, if it is for the sake of doing their best, seeking to improve their skills and rejoicing in the abilities God has given them. But a competitive attitude must involve perseverance, endurance and grace rather than irritation, rudeness, anger, arrogance or despondency. Quite a challenge for adults as well as children, I know!

3. What about being PROUD?

“I’m so proud of you,” we might tell a friend who’s picked themselves up after a difficult experience, or made a good decision despite it making their life more difficult. “I’m so proud of you,” we tell our husband as they get a well-deserved promotion or complete their first DIY project! “I’m so proud of you,” we tell our children when their team has come first in the relay race at sports day, or when they’ve shone in their music performance at the school concert, or learned to share with one of their little friends.

Is that right? Is there a place for being proud of those we love, or even proud of our own performance?

Again, no, and yes, because the question is: what are we proud of? The superior position, the reflected glory that comes to us? Or the effort, or the outcome? To put it another way, does our pride result in us praising ourselves in some way, or praising God for enabling the effort and working the outcome?

In this sense, our pride in a loved one’s achievements should actually be a sense of gratitude to God for enabling their efforts, and enabling us to help, so that they are able to do the right thing, bounce back from failing, make a costly decision, and so on. It shouldn’t be them “winning” or being “one of the best” that determines our praise and pride, but their perseverance in some challenge, and humility as they achieve—or fail.

The same applies to Christian discipling. Graham Beynon (in *Mirror, Mirror*, pg 114—see “Useful books to read” on page 93 of *Compared to her*) points us to an example of Paul’s “pride” in his ministry among the Thessalonian church: “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2 v 19-20).

“Paul says he will ‘glory’ in these people— that is what has been achieved in them. They are his crown! He’s not embarrassed about what he’s achieved, is he? But Paul has previously thanked God for how these people became Christians and have grown as Christians (see 1 Thessalonians 1 v 2-3; 2 v 13). Why? Because God is the one at work in them through Paul.

So how should Paul feel about all he has achieved? Could I suggest ‘humble dignity’? Paul can have a great feeling of dignity, even pride, at what he has done, but it is humble because it was only because of God working through him.”

There’s nothing wrong with having and sharing a sense of blessing, privilege or wonder at a friend or family member’s development, or the Christian growth of someone you have been praying for and encouraging. What is wrong is to root our pride in ourselves, or someone we know, doing better than others, so that they or we get glory and praise.

The success of someone we love (including ourselves!) is a trigger for CCS-based pride. It’s also an opportunity for God-praising, grateful pride. As I said in the Treatment chapter of the book, we need to make each Compulsive Comparison trigger-event a fresh opportunity to go back to the Lord and wrestle through our hopes and dreams, our identity and worth, with Him; an opportunity once again to put Christ at the very centre and to experience His peace.



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