

Look left, look right, look around you – No win in comparison

(note: considerable source material from Andy Stanley - Comparison trap series)

This series is called “Look left, look right, look around you”. If we do this well and in a way that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus this can be life giving, but there can be a trap that I don't want us to fall into - the trap is comparison. Comparison can be life-sapping and as useless as chasing after the wind, there is no win in comparison.

Let me give you an example, when I left Uni I got a job that started with a two year grad development programme. About 20 of us joined at the same time, although we had varied backgrounds we joined on the same day, the same programme, the same job, same terms and conditions, same holidays, same starting location and the same pay. Then six months in we had performance reviews, we were revalued by the business and pay reviews came out, they were not the same. This created questions, annoyance, envy, drive to do better - not pretty. I couldn't really nor did I want to ask anyone else what they got, because unless it was exactly the same either one of us would be annoyed.

What did that create in me? Drive, justification, highly-tuned expectation management, wanting more.

When I started working for the Vineyard a couple of years ago and David first reviewed me, he did comment on my highly evidenced impassioned justification of my achievement and performance - and he is someone with self-assurance as a strength, so you can see this had an effect on me.

That is quite an obvious example, but comparing ourselves with others is easy to do, almost all the time, living our lives comparing ourselves, jobs, salary, churches, ministries and basing decisions on comparison. Why do we do this, we do this because it is human nature to find a way to see if I was OK. Looking around, Am I OK? I'm OK, am I OK? I'm not OK.

The thing is that within the Am I OK? we all want a bigger Er to add to the adjectives of our lives ; richer, slimmer, cooler, swag-er, talented-er, fast-er, clever-er, tall-er, Just want more er, if I have more er than you, then I feel better about me. I like you and everything but I just want to go away from coffee, lunch, our meeting go home and say "they are good, good, but I am er". I am whatever they are plus some er.

Just think though how this escalates as you get into relationships, get married, have kids (did you know their child did this, they have achieved this and that, they sleep for 12 hours a night straight through), and then there is even more scope as you watch TV, twitFace, with work colleagues, it goes on.

We need to pay attention to ourselves and conversations we have with ourselves - it is easy and cultural to live in the land of er. It is important to realise that and do something about it.

There are other sides of this: there's the people who we really do have more er than. They are a little heavi-er, little slow-er, their son's a little shorter, little poor-er they are a little geeki-er. Then we have another problem; we feel superior-er and we know we shouldn't feel like that either and so we look to the left and people are better, we look to the right people aren't as good, and you are somewhere in the middle. Either way you look it is not great - I don't need to say how bad a habit it is, how there is no win.

Then there is a further sub-category. We are not happy with er at all, we want -est. don't want to be richer I want to be richest, smartest, happiest, healthiest, re-tweetedest. I want to be in a category all by myself. Constantly measuring people around me saying 'am I OK, am I -est? Is that healthy?

You may be well be on the other side of this: It's not her fault that they are er than me or they better than me, it is not their fault it is just that you hate you and you've gone beyond not liking others and not liking yourself. Look in the mirror and you hate you, you just don't like you.

The reason is that your comparison goes like this, that you will never befill in the blank.... as them you just know you will never measure up, you will never be that happy, you may never have that amount of money, you may never look like that, live like that, drive like that, kids never be like that.

What do you do?

If nothing else, do not forget this, one simple idea from all the things I have described:

There is no win in comparison. There is no win in comparison. There is no finish line, no final sense of satisfaction.

What do we do about it? How do we motivate ourselves, our children, our spouse, to improve, to work hard? We have to do our best. How do we do that and not slip into the comparison trap where there is no win and we are constantly frustrated?

The bible helps with this:

The book of Ecclesiastes is great for this. If you are not a Bible person, Jesus person or a God person find a bible and read the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is safe, there are no miracles, and it's before Jesus so it's a great place to start if you are a sceptic and it's packed full of wisdom.

The book of Ecclesiastes is not attributed to a single author, but is a book of the teachings of the kings. The wise men and rulers of the age. One of huge most prominent and renowned for his wisdom was Solomon.

Solomon, famed for being the wisest man in the world, created one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was the wealthiest person in his lifetime. Kings and Queens came and sat at his feet and asked for wisdom. Solomon and the wise rulers looked at the world, they are students of behaviour, and address this issue of our tendency to compare ourselves to other people.

Ecclesiastes chapter 4:4,

And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another.

That's ALL toil and ALL achievement. The thing that drives people is envy-based competition. The thing that drives people is that they are looking over their left shoulder, over their right shoulder and trying to figure out what everyone else is doing, what is -er, what is -est. This can be summarised as:

I looked around and everybody is determining if they are ok - based on what everybody else is doing. If that is the summary, then what is the conclusion from the wise teachings? Let's read on,

"This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

That can feel a little depressing, so what do we do? Are you saying we shouldn't do our best, we shouldn't try, just fold our hands and sit back. That is a valid question and a potential response, but we are dealing with wise words here, the next verse (5) is,

'Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.'

The idea in this little verse is that if eventually, you do nothing, you self-destruct you hurt yourself. Actually it also indicates that we can be ambitious, we can be the best with what we have, be the best we can be, but not through envy and comparison, and as we read on we find out a different way of living, one with hope.

Verse 6, *"Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind."*

The Hebrew imaginary is very rich. It is better to have one hand open, the implication is that God can put in it or take out of it whatever God chooses. It is better to have one hand open and to only have what one can hold than to have two fists clenched hanging onto everything you can get.

One hand expresses a limited amount, two handfuls more than can easily be handled.

It is better to have one hand open with tranquillity and to learn to be content with what one hand can hold than to have two fists clenched around everything you can get. Because if you live like this there will never be peace, there will never be tranquillity, it is

chasing after the wind. Because after you have tightened your fingers around everything you can get there is always something you can't get and there is never peace and never tranquillity.

If you just let that thought settle in on you. Just let than one thought settle in on you as you reach that little more. As you ignore your family chasing another deal or opportunity, start to compare your daughter to so and so's daughter, as you try and motivate your son because you heard what someone else's son is doing, as you start to bring up that issue with your wife again as you realise it is your issue not her issue and a much better result is you pause and say woah, woah ... I'm doing this. There is no peace there, there is no tranquillity there, better one handful.

There is no win in comparison, because comparison drives this (two clenched fists).

What if we learn to live like (visual - one hand) this and catch ourselves doing this (two hands) with ourselves, with our jobs, our sport, with our families, catch ourselves before we have two handfuls and we realise we only have two hands? What if we learnt to live like this with God (one hand)?

Bottom line: all of us are using something or someone as a mirror, all of us are looking somewhere to determine how we are doing really. And the bottom line and the thing we are trying to determine (you may already have an answer to this): what or whom are we going to use as our reference point to tell me I am OK?

What or whom am I going to use as a reference point to assure me I am OK or to tell me that I am doing alright? Now that is where we need to align with God.

Comparison is problematic stuff, but the teaching says God is present, he cares, he can help.

When we look to God we don't need to compare (two fists), he teaches us to share (one open hand). We don't envy and hold on, we can be open with peace and tranquillity.

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16 August 2015