

Have you ever suffered from compara-virus? This deadly sickness seems to worm its way into every heart and causes people to become bitter, jealous, envious, and even hate-filled.

Siblings do this – they question the fairness of their parents, wondering why their brother got to use a jack-knife at the age of 8 when they had to wait until they were 10. As an inheritance is given out, families break apart when one receives a larger portion of the estate than the others do.

Social media has made compara-virus even worse. People curate their lives so that their posts always show the best, most beautiful, and most successful aspects of their lives. Comments and positive reactions drive social media use.

Others try to figure out how they can become successful in their vocation by comparing to others – how can I be like that mom/dad; husband/wife; co-worker/boss; etc... Businesses look at the success of another organization and compare, trying to replicate a model in order to achieve the same success. Not all comparisons are wrong. However, we need to be aware that there are common temptations that ensnare us, steal our joy, and hinder a life of joy and fruitfulness.

The temptations to compare can move us away from healthy learning to sinful reactions. From the first brothers, Cain and Abel, to the disciples, to our day, compara-virus infects every heart. Now there is nothing wrong with comparing for learning, growing, understanding, but there are unique dangers that come with comparisons.

What is that to you?

Now the scene changes. Peter has been publicly restored to his apostolic ministry. Jesus has told him that he will suffer and die, going where he did not plan to go. Jesus tells Peter that he will die just as his Saviour did – on a cross; but he will die an old man.

Now imagine for a moment that you knew for the rest of your life that you knew you would live a long time and would die a horrendous death of a criminal. For all of your life, you would walk with this knowledge. What would that do to you?

For Peter, it causes him to look around and start wondering about others. “What about this man?” he asks, pointing to John. There is a sickness so deep within us that we find strange comforts in comparing ourselves to others. Peter has denied Jesus three times. He has just been publicly restored to ministry by a threefold confession. He hears from Jesus that his end will be a long ways off and he will die on a cross. And what does he do?

He wants to compare his end to others.

There are unique temptations that come with sinful comparisons. We can look at other people and compare, and with that comparison comes temptations. Why is my life so hard and they have it so easy? There can be a wondering if God is fair, and why life is so unjust. The Psalmist asked this question in Ps. 73: "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?"

In our afflictions, in our trials, the temptation can come to be bitter. "Why does my life have to be so hard and they get off so easy?" We can become resentful to anyone who does better than we do. We can be tempted to wish harm to another person: "I wish they could have a taste of what I'm experiencing!" Or we can be tempted to self-loathing, despising ourselves, and even hating our own life.

As the disciples hear the exchange between Peter and Jesus, they begin to speculate and think that John will not die.

The sins that accompany comparisons are many. We can question God's goodness; we can become resentful at anyone who does better than we do; and we can despair our lives to the point where we would rather die than see the gift of life that Jesus has given to each one of us.

This temptation to sinfully compare imagines that everyone should be treated exactly the same all the time in every way. But none of us want to be treated exactly like others – we have our differences of personality, differences in strengths and weaknesses, and differences in trials and temptations. We want to be treated fairly but also uniquely. So what's the cure to this deadly compara-virus that can kill our souls?

You Follow Me!

What is the cure when we find that we are comparing ourselves to others? Jesus says it is to follow him. And this is good news! It is good news to follow Jesus because as we follow him we are freed from the temptations of comparison and our identity and worth is rooted in Jesus alone.

The reason Jesus' call to follow him is good news is that Jesus does not compare us to other people, but sees us uniquely as we are. Because each one of us is tempted based off our personalities, our weaknesses and strengths, and our circumstances, Jesus' path for discipleship is unique for each one of us. As Peter and the other disciples look at John and suspect that he will live until Jesus returns, the focus is taken off of John's situation. Jesus redirects Peter's eyes back to Peter's relationship with the Lord.

We all have many aspects of following Jesus that are similar – we are to turn away from sin, we are all to trust in Christ; we all have received the same commands from the Lord; we all have similar tasks we are called to do.

However, though there are many similarities, Jesus' plan for discipleship is unique for each individual and church. There is no "one size fits all" program of discipleship. Jesus' plan for you will work through your own individual strengths and weaknesses. The person who struggles with boasting will face different tests and trials than the person who struggles with worry and fear. Jesus has your discipleship plan tailor-made for you!

What could be more loving than Jesus treating you as YOU! Because your discipleship is unique, Paul could say to the Philippians, "Work out your OWN salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

But Jesus' individual plan for your discipleship does not mean that it is disconnected from other Christians. As we follow Jesus, what we find is that we are moving in step and discover others moving closer to Jesus. I often think of how Jesus' call to us is like a mother duck calling her ducklings back together. As they are all scattered about, as she calls them they begin to scurry back, each one from their own individual place and falling in line behind their mama. In the same way, our discipleship is a call from our unique circumstances to align ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

So while Jesus' plan for each of us is unique, he calls us as a community of believers. And he tells us to follow him. But what is strange about Jesus' words is that he is about to leave! We know that he will not be staying around forever – he had already told his disciples in John 16 that he would be leaving them and would send his Spirit. So how is it that Peter is to continue to follow Jesus?

There is more than the literal "walk behind me" sense of following. There are two other ways that Jesus calls us to follow him. The first is that the call to follow Jesus means that we are to follow his Word. All that he has given his disciples to do and obey he has told them. Through his instructions, through his teachings, through his conversations, we have the words of Jesus faithfully recorded for us.

Therefore, to follow Jesus is to know his Word, to follow his Word, and to obey his Word. Jesus had prayed for his disciples that they would abide in the truth and be sanctified in the truth because the Word is truth. To have your mind filled with the things of God gives you the knowledge to know Jesus and to follow him.

The second way to follow Jesus is to imitate him. Part of the discipleship process is not merely the conveyance of knowledge, but the demonstration of the practice. Jesus had his disciples follow him, watching him, hearing him, learning from him. He instructed, corrected, even rebuked them.

Imitation is absolutely necessary for growing as a disciple of Jesus. Like an apprentice learning a trade, a disciple watches Jesus. How does he handle a sick

woman? What does he say to a brash and arrogant Pharisee? What does Jesus do when confronted by an irate person who is hurt? The shepherding ways of Jesus are quite remarkable, and if we were to watch him, study him, listen to him, and learn from him, we would take his teachings and apply them to our lives.

Following Jesus means that we learn sensitivity to others. It makes us more other-oriented. While Jesus' plan for us is individualized, the fruit of following him is communal.

We need this word today. If there was a time where we would be tempted to sinfully compare ourselves to others, it may be now. We can learn from others, but if we sinfully compare ourselves to keep up with what others are doing, we will only exasperate ourselves.

Similarly, as a church, we face a moment where we must follow Jesus based on our unique circumstances. Resisting the comparisons to see who is doing things better can be helpful to a point, but it may lead us to neglect the unique circumstances that Jesus has placed us in.

In my church study, I have kept a prayer of A.W. Tozer printed out. Tozer was a very gifted preacher and had a strong sense of fellowship with Christ. Tozer prayed these words, and I pray that we can make them ours as well:

"Dear Lord, I refuse henceforth to compete with any of Thy servants. They have congregations larger than mine. So be it. I rejoice in their success. They have greater gifts. Very well. That is not in their power nor in mine. I am humbly grateful for their greater gifts and my smaller ones. I only pray that I may use to Thy glory such modest gifts as I possess. I will not compare myself with any, nor try to build up my self-esteem by noting where I may excel one or another in Thy holy work. I herewith make a blanket disavowal of all intrinsic worth. I am but an unprofitable servant. I gladly go to the foot of the cross and own myself the least of Thy people. If I err in my self judgment and actually underestimate myself I do not want to know it. I purpose to pray for others and to rejoice in their prosperity as if it were my own. And indeed it is my own if it is Thine own, for what is Thine is mine, and while one plants and another waters it is Thou alone that giveth the increase." (Tozer, *The Price of Neglect*).