



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Slippery Feet"

(How to Have Healthy Relationships Series)

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There are times in life when we compare ourselves to other people and wish our lives were like theirs. When this happens, it can be unhealthy. As we continue our series on How to Have Healthy Relationships, we look at the dangers of comparing ourselves with others.

When we compare ourselves to others, it can lead to a toxic, bitter, and negative life. We may even end up concluding that people are all against us and that God Himself is against us.

Perhaps, nowhere in the Bible is this clearer than in Psalm 73. Listen to this Psalm or read it on the screen and HEAR how the BITTERNESS and ENVY leak out from the writer of this Psalm.

Psa. 73:1 Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

Psa. 73:2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.

Psa. 73:3 For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Psa. 73:4 For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

Psa. 73:5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.

Psa. 73:6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.

Psa. 73:7 Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.

Psa. 73:8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

Psa. 73:9 They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.

Psa. 73:10 Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.

Psa. 73:11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

Psa. 73:12 Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

Why do many of us compare ourselves with others? We say to ourselves, "Gee, I wish I had that car," or that home or that job or those clothes or that boyfriend or, worse yet, that spouse. What is in us that causes us NOT to be content with what we have? Why do we say—"Wow, look at what they have," or "Look how they are. Wish I was smarter, prettier, and more gifted."

And why is it that we then demean others by saying, "Well, they

have pride around their necks, and they don't have as much trouble in their lives like the rest of us do! Harrumph!"

Maybe as we ease into this message we need to confess that we can get envious of others. We compare. Now after that confession maybe God can talk to us better.

My first observation on comparing is that we idealize ourselves and how other people live. First, the writer describes himself as being an incredibly good person. Did you hear the Psalmist? Let's go line by line. He starts off saying: "Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart." (Psalm 73:1)

The basis for the writer's discontent in life is that he sees himself as upright, good and pure in heart. But then in verse two he says: "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped." (Psalm 73:2)

He had slippery feet. What a great metaphor! When we compare ourselves to others we start having slippery feet and will soon fall. Why did he have slippery feet? Because he idealized himself as pure and good while he demonizes with great envy those who have seemingly have it better. Let's look at the next verses:

Psa. 73:3 For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Psalms 73:4 For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

Psa. 73:5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.

Right there – see how the Psalmist describes them as having perfect bodies—men with big muscles, small waists, broad shoulders, flat abs. (Yes, I know how hard it is to be compared with all the time. In my dreams!) Then after criticizing others for being so perfect, comes contempt.

Psa. 73:6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.

Psa. 73:7 Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.

Psa. 73:8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

Psa. 73:9 They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.

Psa. 73:10 Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.

Psa. 73:11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

So, now they are being criticized for not being faithful to God, but worse yet, in our minds we then make them evil.

Psa. 73:12 Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

Psa. 73:13 All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

Psa. 73:14 For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.

Okay, let's stop right there. Monku, monku, monku. Whine, whine, whine. Everybody has it good except me. The writer of this passage sees the material blessings of others, and he hates these people for them. He calls them wicked. He says their bodies are sound and sleek, and yet their eyes swell with fatness and they seem to have no pain. He calls them proud.

Whenever we compare we are always adding these words in our minds: "unlike me." They are wicked, unlike me. They are proud, unlike me. They have it so good and easy, unlike me. And what am I like? Well, I am the upright and the good and pure in heart. But, Lord, look at those people. They don't even like You, unlike me.

Isn't it like us to compare? We walk into someone's nice house or sit in someone's nice car, and we think, "Wish I had this. Wish I were rich like her. Wish I had a spouse like him. Wish I had an easy life like them. Lord, I am upright, and faithful and pure in heart yet, why is it they have no pain and I do?"

Comparing always idealizes or glorifies the lives of others, and yet, in our minds, we make ourselves better than they in terms of character, morality, and faith. Therefore, it really bugs us that they seem to be blessed more than we.

The fact is we don't know what other people really go through. We don't know what their life is really like. We compare their outside not knowing what their inside is like. We assume they have life easy, when really they have it pretty hard too, but we just don't know.

It is true that the people who seem to have the perfect marriage

may really have a lot of problems. It is true that the people who seem to have all these nice things in reality are often financially stretched and have debts, loans, and interest payments that are killing them. The ones who seem to have the perfect kids really don't. The ones who always seem happy really are not.

Last weekend our elders and staff had a retreat. One of our relational exercises was to describe our outer face and our inner face. Sometimes our outer face projects one look, but our inner face has another look that is more realistic.

If you were ever to say, "Gee, I wish I could be like Pastor Dan. He is always happy and upbeat. He never gets depressed. He is always optimistic." While that is true most of the time, it is NOT true all the time.

I once read how Deion Sanders, the famous football player, experienced depression AFTER the joy of winning the Super Bowl. He attained the highest goal of his football career, and found himself asking, "Now what?"

Last June, for the first time in my life, I went through a deep depression. We had just had the vote on whether to leave the denomination. The vote was an overwhelming yes. But the months or the year prior took a lot of preparation. I had many meetings both here and in California. I did a lot of phone call diplomacy talking to key leaders. It was so important for the future of our church.

When the vote went through, I was so happy but for some reason I had a huge letdown. And then came a feeling I had not had before—a long depression that lasted ten weeks. I knew I was in trouble when I couldn't think of one thing I had ever done for good. Not one. I was really in a dark hole.

I called for friends to go out with them, and it just turned out that most of them were busy or out of town.

One day, while I was having lunch with a highly accomplished community leader, I took a chance and out slipped a question out of my mouth: “Hey, um, have you ever gone through a depression?” I was so scared to have asked it because it was revealing a weakness in me.

And this highly accomplished, successful leader said to me, “You mean when you don’t feel like getting out of bed?”

I was stunned. He knew! He knew what it was like to be depressed. He shared how he once was depressed and how it was hard when you have to be upbeat for everyone who works for you and you have to keep on working. But in reality you want to just lie there and let the world pass you by.

I asked him, “How long does it last?” He said for him it took two to three months. Ugh!

Weeks later I had the courage to ask another highly successful business and community leader the same question—Have you ever felt depressed? And that person also stunned me by saying, “Yes. And it’s hard because you have to be upbeat for so many people.” That person also said it took some months for him to get over it. It was hard for him to get out of bed, and everything looked so bleak.

I was in trouble. Weeks later I called a retired pastor named Sam Webb and his encouragement really helped me. He even sent me money to take Pam out for dinner. I was so touched by his kindness and thoughtfulness.

For me, my depression happened while I was on vacation last June, July, and part of August, so many of you didn’t know. But I am okay now. Really!

But if I may go off on a little tangent, you need to hear (and this is backed up by other friends who have been depressed not for months but for years) that depression can be good in several ways. Yes, depression can be good! How?

- It slows you down when you have lived too fast.
- It is your body telling you that something is wrong and you need to listen to that and rest.
- It reminds you how to help others who are depressed and empathize with them.
- It causes you to reexamine your beliefs about life that may not be true.
- It clarifies some of the Satanic lies you have unknowingly held on to like you have to please everyone, or everyone will always like you, or that you are dumb, ugly, or will never amount to anything.
- Depression can make you cling to God. It brings you down to essentials. It makes you reorganize your priorities.
- And depression helps you find out who your real friends are who will listen and not just talk and give advice.

Part of comparing our lives with others is clinging to myths about life—that if we are good, we will always be blessed materially. If we are good, we will always be happy. If we are good, we will never suffer. Those are all lies.

Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation. He said, “Pick your cross and follow Me.” For the followers of Jesus, hard times are part of the deal, not the exception. But when we listen to the lie, then the hard times become the exception.

Let’s not compare ourselves to those who always SEEM happy. They may be really struggling with something but we just can’t see it. You never know. One of my best friends has breast cancer but you would never know it. So let’s give people some slack. Let’s chill out in the comparing game.

One of the bad things about comparing is that we think people are much higher than we, so we become envious of them. And when we are envious, we want to tear them down to bring them to our level. You can hear that in the voice of the writer of Psalm 73: “They think they are hot stuff Lord, so tear them down.”

Sometimes we expect people to be perfect, without making a single mistake, and so if they exhibit just one flaw, we want to tear them down.

When NBC news anchor Brian Williams recently made a mistake regarding things he remembered, we want to take him down. Though you and I know we have all had faulty memories. Recently, I had a memory lapse and put myself on a plane flight that I wasn’t on! Jetlag! Maybe Brian Williams purposely lied. But then, haven’t we all lied too at some point?

When Seahawks coach Pete Carroll, made what most people saw as a questionable play call on the one-yard line in the Super Bowl last week, everyone piled on him for being stupid. But it took Super Bowl winner New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick to say: “I think the criticism they’ve gotten for the game is totally out of line and by a lot of people who I don’t think are anywhere near even qualified to be commenting on it.” [Patriots’ Bill Belichick actually defends Pete Carroll’s Super Bowl Play Call” by Charles Curtis for NJ Media, Feb. 4, 2015] He’s talking about the average Joes and sportscasters who’ve never coached.

You know what came to mind when I read that? Film critics! They have never directed a film, acted in a film, carried a camera, written a screenplay or edited a film – all of which is really hard and yet they think they are experts on what is good filmmaking! They compare themselves with filmmakers and say, “Well, if I made that film, it would be a lot better!”

So how do we put a stop to this tearing down, this comparison with others? The answer is also in Psalm 73. In verse 21, our Bible writer comes to his senses at the very end.

Psa. 73:21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,

Psa. 73:22 I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward You [God].

Psa. 73:23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold my right hand.

Psa. 73:24 You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will receive me with honor.

Psa. 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than You.

Psa. 73:26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Psa. 73:27 Indeed, those who are far from You will perish; You put an end to those who are false to You.

Psa. 73:28 But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all Your works.

In the end, the Psalmist’s attitude turns. What’s the lesson? We can only end the bitter and poisonous habit of comparing ourselves with

others when we really grab hold of the fact that God exists and that He loves us unconditionally just as we are. And if people are really mean or unfair to us, we need to know that God will settle things with them in the end. It’s not our business to take them down.

Don’t worry about them. Indeed, as the Psalmist says, God will put an end to them if He has to. He is the judge and jury, not you.

Christ says, “I love you as you are. Don’t listen to the voices that say you are not smart enough or rich enough or pretty enough or accomplished enough. Follow Me and you will know your destiny. It may not look like other people’s, but it will be enough. Follow Me and you will find contentment.”

The basis of a contented life is this: God has given us what really matters—forgiveness of sins through His Son Jesus Christ so that we can spend eternity with Him in heaven. God saved us. He died for us. He suffered for us. He adopted us. He chose us because we are of great worth. He has made each of us His work of art. Shouldn’t that be enough? Can we say like the Psalmist that God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever?

When we compare ourselves with others, we will have slippery feet and we will fall and lead bitter lives. Today is a call not to fall. Don’t look at others but let’s focus our eyes on the one whom the Psalmist says: “*But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, to tell of all your works.*” (Psa. 73:28)

Amen? Amen.