Comparisons and the Cross of Christ
1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Let me begin by asking you some questions. How much does others' opinion of you matter to you? Or how often do you find yourself comparing yourself to others? And how much does *how* you compare to others affect how you feel about yourself?

We're looking at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And in the rest of the letter, Paul is going to tackle some of the specific issues these Christians face. But before he gets there, he wants to finish something he started back in chapter 1, and that's the way they compare themselves, and their leaders, to each other and to the cultural norms of their day.

And I suspect that how you compare to others, or what others think of you, matters more to you than you wish was the case, or maybe even than you'd like to admit. Which is why today's passage has a thing or two to teach us.

We're going to look at the problem of comparing; the solution to comparing; and the One beyond comparing.

The Problem of Comparing
Look at v6, 'I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers… that none of you may be puffed up in favour of one against another.'

So these Christians in Corinth have fallen into the trap of playing the comparison game. And they do that with Paul and Apollos, their leaders: who's the more dynamic, who fits our culturally pre-determined ideas of what wisdom, or effectiveness looks like. But they're also doing it between each other. And Paul tells us why: they're comparing one against another so they can gain favour. So they can look good and feel good about themselves, in comparison to *those people over there*.

But there's a danger in playing the comparing game, isn't there? Think that in comparison to others you're doing pretty well, and you become what Paul calls them: 'puffed up'. *Distended with air*. Compare yourself favourably to others, and you end up with an over-inflated view of yourself. In fact, Paul uses the same word twice more in v18 and 19 when he says some of them are 'arrogant' - puffed up. Proud.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis has a chapter called, *The Great Sin,* which is pride. And Lewis writes: 'Now what you want to get clear is that Pride is essentially competitive—it's competitive by its very nature… Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being *richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others*. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the *comparison* that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.' So pride comes from comparing yourself and knowing you're the winner.

But playing the comparing game also turns life into a courtroom. Look at v3, where Paul says, 'With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you *or by any human court*.' So in their

comparing Paul to Apollos, and vice versa, it's as if these Corinthians have put him on trial and are coming to a verdict about him.

But that's a telling reason why we get caught up in the comparing game. Life's like a continual trial, isn't it? Because we're trying to secure a verdict on ourselves. What does that person think of me? How do I compare to that person? Am I doing better than them or worse? If I do this or that what will he or she think or me?

I mean, think about your career progress, or as someone was told only this week, your professional identity; or think about your dieting, or your exercise regime, or how you look at yourself in the mirror, or your research output. How much of that is comparing yourself to others, wanting to feel good about yourself, hoping you can secure a favourable verdict on yourself? It's as if we're always living for a verdict.

And the other major religions tell you exactly that: Islam, Buddhism, even legalistic churches, tell you: you've got to be good enough, you've got to live right, to achieve the verdict. But not just religion. Our secular culture says the same, often with even less grace: you've got to say the right things, hold the right views, support the right causes, vote the right way, to have the verdict of *person we approve of* passed on you. And if you don't, we'll cancel you!

But because we're looking for a verdict on us, comparing ourselves to others doesn't just result in pride, it can also leave you feeling crushed - when you know that in comparison to others you're not good enough, or thin enough, or published enough. But even being crushed is a result of pride, isn't it? Because we want to be better than others, we think we should be better than others, and it's not fair that I'm not better than others.

So whether we're puffed up with pride, or crushed by it, something's not right with our hearts, is it? Other people's compliments and criticisms matter much more to us than we wish was the case, don't they? We go away elated if someone says something nice and destroyed if they don't. Because we're living for a verdict, and we're depending on others' opinion, or how we compare to them, to get it.

Proverbs 14:30 says, 'A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.' And envy is all about comparing - and it's like a cancer. But a tranquil heart, a heart that's not constantly comparing, is life giving. So how can you get there?

The Solution to Comparing

Now, by any cultural standards, Paul did not exactly have a life to be envied, did he? Think about stuff that matters in the comparing game: annual income; size of house; social standing; likes on social media, Paul did not compare well. But far from being crushed by that, he lived an incredibly fruitful and productive life and just kept going. So how did he escape the comparing game?

Because he understood two things. Firstly, he understood that it's God's opinion that really matters.

Look again at v3: 'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.' So, Paul says, 'it really doesn't matter to me what you or anyone else thinks of me.' Now, that's exactly how our culture says you should respond isn't it? If you've got issues with self-image, or if you just want to be *you,* and others disapprove: It doesn't matter what anyone else says.

Don't let anyone else tell you how you should feel about yourself. Be true to yourself. And if others do disapprove, say to yourself, 'I can live with that disapproval.'

But that's like saying, 'I make my own standards, I am the standard.' So whereas in the past, God, or religion, or the community, was the standard maker, now we've taken that upon ourselves as individuals. But if you think about it, that too smacks of pride.

So when Paul says, 'your opinion of me doesn't really matter to me', is he just as puffed-up as these Corinthians? And the answer is, yes, if it wasn't for what he says next. Verse 3, 'It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. *In fact, I do not even judge myself*.'

In other words, I don't really care what you think of me, but neither do I care what I think of me. So Paul's not trapped either by a self-loathing or a wrong self-loving. He doesn't just know the freedom of not being caught up in *others'* opinions of him, and them applying their standard to him, he also knows a freedom from the self-absorption that says, 'I'm the standard.' He's neither subject to the emotional swings that come with the flattery or criticism of others, but neither is he puffed up by his own opinion of himself.

Verse 4: 'For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.' His conscience is clear, but he knows that doesn't prove much. And when he says 'I am not thereby acquitted' he uses the word he uses elsewhere in his letters for being *justified*, being declared righteous - having a 'not guilty' verdict passed on him.

So he's saying, 'look, you guys in Corinth are caught up with trying to get that verdict of good, acceptable, superior person, by comparing yourselves to each other and to the cultural norms, the the court of human opinion there in Corinth. But you'll never get it that way.'

Instead, he says in v4, 'It is the Lord who judges me.' Paul knows, as he says in v1, that he and Apollos are 'servants of Christ'. So it's what his master, it's what Christ thinks of him that matters. Because what God thinks of you, receiving what Paul calls in v5 'the commendation of God' is ultimately the only verdict that counts, isn't it. And in all our comparing, in all our looking for the verdict from others, that's what we're really looking for: the *ultimate* verdict, to be told by God, in the highest court in the land, 'you're good, you're acceptable to me, I love you.' And if you could have that, think how it would set you free from the need to compare yourself to others.

Now, during a court case there comes the moment when the jury goes out to weigh the evidence and decide the verdict. Guilty or not guilty. And the defendant waits nervously for that verdict to be delivered.

What if God had already delivered his verdict on you? What if you don't have to wait? Secularism and other religions say, you've got to wait, you've got to prove yourself and become the right kind of person to secure the verdict. But Christianity says, because of Jesus, you already have God's verdict on you, because he stood in the dock for you, and at the cross he's already born your punishment for failing to prove yourself. And because of him, God already justifies you. He already says over you, 'I love you, I accept you, you are my beloved son or daughter and I am pleased with you.' And that can free you from your need of others to approve of you, or that crushing feeling when they don't.

But there is also the verdict to come. Verse 5, ‘Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.’ So, as he sees them playing this comparing game, Paul’s saying,‘you’re acting way too soon’. Only God can assess the motives of a person’s heart. Only God can see in the dark. So why lie in bed worrying about how you compare? Or in passing judgment on them. Only God knows what people are really like. It’s only God’s opinion that ultimately counts.

But the second reason Paul can escape the comparing game is that he understands that it’s grace that really makes us.

Now, these Corinthians think they look good in comparison to others. But, Paul says, v7, ‘For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?’

Imagine a multi-millionaire, who boasts about how successful he’s been, how his millions, his private jet, his super-yacht and his beach side residence prove his business acumen; that he’s a better business man than any of his competitors. What would you think of that boasting if it turned out his wealth was actually an inheritance, a gift from an elderly, reclusive aunt who took pity on him because he was doing so badly? It would stick in a pin in his over-inflated balloon, wouldn’t it.

And Paul’s saying, ‘you guys think highly of yourselves, because you think you’re better than others, but everything you have is God’s gracious gift to you.' And think for a minute about what works for success in someone’s life, maybe your own life: the time and place and family you’re born into. Your genetic make-up, your IQ, your health, the breaks in life that come your way. What control, what input over those key things that determine how well we do in comparison to others, do any of us have? Very little. They’re all given to us. They’re all gifts of grace.

So why would anyone boast? Paul says. Especially, when the greatest gift of all, the ultimate verdict on your life, that you’re justified in Christ, that God loves you, is also a gift of his grace.

And when you understand, deep in your heart, not just in your head, that all of life is a gift, it doesn’t make you proud, it makes you humble. It makes you grateful. It helps you realise, like Paul, that you’re a steward, not an owner, of all that God’s given you.

Plus, it means you won’t need to compare. You see, if everything we have is given by God, why should I be jealous of what Mr X over there has? Or proud of what I have that he doesn’t? If God has given it to him, why be jealous? And if God hasn’t given it to him, why be proud?

Ok, but if God’s verdict and God’s grace are the solutions, Paul ends with something just as personal.

The One Beyond Comparing

Look at v8, ‘Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign.’

So the Corinthians think they sit like royalty, in the VIP boxes in the amphitheatre - giving the thumbs up or down to leaders like Paul and Apollos, applauding or booing depending on how well

they they think they fit into the cultural expectations of wealthy, prosperous Corinth. How dynamic or clever or wise they seem.

And Paul says, in comparison, we apostles are like conquered prisoners of war in the triumphal procession of some Roman general, brought to the amphitheatre to be thrown to the beasts. Verse 9, 'For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world.' These Corinthians think Christianity is life in the VIP box, living your best life now, and Paul is saying, no, real Christianity is down here, on the stage of life and death.

The Corinthians think they're filled and rich and reigning. And in v10-13 Paul says we apostles are hungry, poor, and naked. Corinth was an honour-shame culture. And these Corinthian Christians want honour, and Paul says the way of the cross may just be one of shame - it may just be the antithesis of everything your surrounding culture says rocks.

Because the upside down power of the cross that Paul's been driving home so far, may just result in an upside down kind of life. Verse 10: 'We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute.' And v13, 'We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.' The Corinthians want to be someones in the eyes of the world, and Paul is saying, no, to the world we are like something they've stepped in.

And yet, there's not a hint of bitterness, or self-pity, or self-righteousness in what he's saying, is there? In fact, it's the opposite. Verse 12-13: 'When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.' The world may curse us and slander us, it may even hate us, but we respond with blessing and grace and keep on keeping on, Paul says.

What can give you that kind of gravitas, that kind of moral weight, that kind of grace that loves your enemies?

Well, look at v15-17: 'I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ.'

Paul wants them to imitate him, rather than their pagan friends and neighbours, because he wants them, like him, to have the gospel shape their entire lives. And in v20 Paul says, that 'the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.' Not in worldly wisdom, in status or show, but in the power of the cross: the upside down power of Christ crucified and risen. Because it's at the cross, in his death and resurrection that Christ, the One beyond all comparison, was humiliated but then lifted up to the place of highest honour.

And Paul, and these Corinthians, and you and I, can bless when reviled because at the cross, Jesus did. We can endure when persecuted, because Jesus endured. We can entreat, we can respond with grace when slandered, because Jesus was full of grace. We can accept being treated as scum, as the unacceptable of western culture, because Jesus' own culture cast him out. And he went through it all to win for us the ultimate verdict that none of us deserve: you are God's beloved child. He endured shame to rescue you from shame: the shame of our sin. He endured mocking to rescue you from the mocking of death. He bore the accusations so that when the accuser stands against you, his

accusations fall to the ground, powerless. Through the power of the cross Christ pours his grace upon you.

And when we know that, deep down, then what others think about us will matter far less; we'll be emotionally much more stable, and instead of fighting fire with fire, like Paul we can bless and give grace and endure, because we'll be imitating Paul, who was imitating Jesus. And we'll worship - the One beyond all comparing.