

The Snare of Compare

The Snare of Compare

by Carolyn Mahaney

How do we respond when someone else gets what we want? We compare our situation to theirs. We measure our lot against theirs—especially if we think they have it better than we do.

Why can she eat whatever she wants and stay so skinny and I just look at a piece of chocolate and gain 5 pounds?

Why does she have that gorgeous face and I look so average?

Why can she barely study and make a 4.0, and I have to work so hard for a 2.5?

Why does she have such a beautiful voice and I can't even carry a tune?

Why can she decorate and sew and paint and do photography, and I can't even make a pillowcase?

Why does she get pregnant without trying and I am still infertile after all these years?

Why is she married at 20 and I am 35 with no man in sight?

Why does her husband lead their family and mine won't initiate anything spiritual?

Why does she have a big beautiful home for just the two of them when our family of seven is still crammed into this little townhouse

Ever had thoughts like these?

I knew I wasn't alone. Whenever we face things in our lives that we don't want but can't change, we are tempted to sinfully compare ourselves with others.

The apostle Peter was also tempted to compare. In our new series we'll consider what the Lord said to Him, and what He says to us.

What About John?

by Carolyn Mahaney

In John 21:18, Peter got some horrible news:

“Jesus said to [Peter]... ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.’ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

Jesus told Peter that he would eventually die by crucifixion. How did Peter respond?

“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him....When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’” (v. 20-21)

Peter “turned” away from the Lord and “saw” his fellow disciple, John.

He began to sinfully compare himself to John.

He began to measure his situation against John’s.

Maybe he thought something like...

Is John going to get a better deal than me? After all, he did get to sit next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and he seems to have an especially close relationship with the Lord.

Does this mean that the Lord is going to let John off with an easy death? Will he die peacefully in his sleep while I have to die a martyr’s death?

Peter couldn’t contain himself anymore. He blurted out, “Lord, what about this man?”

We’ll consider our Lord’s shocking answer when we continue our series.

A Loving Rebuke

by Carolyn Mahaney

“Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”” John 21:22

At first glance, Jesus’ question—“what is that to you?”—seems a little harsh.

He says to Peter, in effect: “What I have planned for John is none of your business. Stop comparing yourself to him and follow me.”

Jesus allowed Peter no room for self-pity. He gave Peter no time to indulge his thoughts or feelings. Instead, He rebuked him for comparing himself to John.

We might be tempted to think that this is a rather insensitive and poorly-timed response from our Lord. I mean, Peter had just learned he was going to die a martyr’s death—doesn’t he need a little sympathy, compassion, understanding?

After all, a little sympathy and understanding is what we want when we think others have it better than we do. We want others to feel as sorry for us as we feel for ourselves.

And yet, this rebuke was the most loving thing Jesus could have said to Peter.

For Peter to turn his attention away from the Savior and look at John was the worst thing he could do. For Peter to compare his situation side by side with John’s situation was the most detrimental action he could take.

Sinful comparison is a futile and destructive exercise. It robs us of joy. It destroys our peace. It plunges us into despair and self-pity. It distorts our view of a wise and loving God.

And Jesus loved Peter, so He protected Peter from the trap of sinful comparison. He wants to protect us as well.

Comparison Unmasked

by Nicole Whitacre

When we ask, “What about her?”, when we “turn” and compare our life unfavorably to another, we tend to cast ourselves in the role of “victim.”

Poor me! I have to deal with this person who dares to have it better than me, *right in front of me!* How can I help but compare? The disparity is impossible to ignore!

We like to talk about “our temptation to compare” because we’re likely to rake in some sympathy and understanding. And oh how we love sympathy and understanding!

But Scripture calls comparison out for what it is: the sin of envy.

Jonathan Edwards offers this definition:

“Envy [is] a spirit of dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others as compared with our own. The thing that the envious person is opposed to, and dislikes is the comparative superiority of the state of honour; or prosperity or happiness, that another may enjoy, over that which he possesses” (emphasis mine).

I’m generally happy for the happiness of others—just so long as it doesn’t exceed my own!

But if they get a bigger house (compared to me) or more attention (compared to me); if they have better health (compared to me) or more obedient children (compared to me); if they are prettier than me, more gifted than me, more fun than me—then a twinge of dislike, a feeling of opposition, a spirit of dissatisfaction begins to rise in my heart.

And that dislike and dissatisfaction are sure signs of envy.

A Local Problem

by Carolyn Mahaney

Once we realize we may have a problem with envy, we need to figure out where the problem is, exactly.

Chances are, we won't need to look very far. As Aristotle observed: "We envy those who are **near** us in time, place, age or reputation."

Envy isn't a world traveler. It busies itself with the locals.

So the Hollywood star with her perfect figure, gorgeous face, and fabulous wardrobe is probably not a threat. But when a new girl shows up at church and turns all the guy's heads, we may suddenly feel unattractive and discontent.

Women around the globe get married, have babies, and move into bigger houses every day, and we barely notice. But when our best friend gets married, has babies, and moves into a bigger house, we may find it hard to rejoice.

We may admire talented people, from afar. But if the girl in our class gets a better grade, or our coworker earns a promotion, or a mom we know does a better job with her kids, or if a friend gets more attention for her gifts and talents than we do, we may find a resentful feeling rising up in our hearts.

The closer a person is, the more we should beware of envy.

What An Envier Wants

by Nicole Whitacre

I remember a sad episode of envy in my life. Someone (close to me) got something I wanted. To be honest, I was content to live without it—until she got it. But when she did, I was consumed with self-pity and discontent.

It was not a pretty sight.

The real ugliness, though, lay below the surface. These words expose envy for the evil that it is:

“What an envier wants is not, first of all, what another has; what an envier wants is for another not to have it...The envier has empty hands and therefore wants to empty the hands of the envied. Envy, moreover, carries overtones of personal resentment; an envier resents not only somebody else’s blessing but also the one who has been blessed” (Cornelius Plantinga).

Remember the story of the two women who came to Solomon in a dispute over a baby? The one who stole the baby was content to let the true mother be bereaved, just as she was. What appalling behavior!

But in my envy, I was no better. I wanted to snatch someone’s blessing away, simply because I couldn’t have it. And even though I loved this person dearly, I resented her for being blessed.

It was hard to face, but seeing envy, in all its ugliness, was the first and necessary step toward killing it.

What Else An Envier Wants

by Carolyn Mahaney

“The thing that the envious person...dislikes, is, the comparative superiority of the state of honor, or prosperity or happiness, that another may enjoy, over that which he possesses.” Jonathan Edwards

I’ve envied all these things: the honor, the possessions, the happiness of others. But what I didn’t always see was the pride—the desire for superiority—that fueled my envy.

Why do I envy? Quite simply: I want to be superior. I want to be the best, to have the best, to look the best. I don’t like it when other people have it better than me.

It’s not wrong to desire certain blessings. It can even be very good. But the moment I turn and compare my blessings (or lack thereof) with others, it reveals the pride in my heart.

Pride is the fountain from which envy flows. “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:26, see also 1 Tim. 6:4, Phil 2:1ff).

We envy one another because we have become conceited. We do not consider others better than ourselves, but instead, we want to be better than others. We think we deserve as much, if not more, than they have (Phil. 2:1).

But the pride of envy isn't only against others—it “contends for supremacy” with God Himself (Charles Bridges, qtd. in *Humility*, p. 31).

In our envy, we grasp at God's sovereignty, object to His wisdom, and seek to obscure His glory. We fail to imitate our Savior, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6).

I knew it was wrong to compare, but it's worse than I thought! Thanks be to God that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20).

What An Envier Doubts

by Carolyn Mahaney

Why do we sinfully compare? Because we have “become conceited.” But there is another reason: we envy because we doubt God's goodness.

We decide that (fill in the blank) is good for us. We don't have it. Someone else does. Therefore (we conclude) God is good to them and not good to us.

We doubt His love. Oh, maybe not His love in general—we would never say “God is not loving”—but we doubt that He loves us, really.

This is unequivocally NOT TRUE! God HAS BEEN and ALWAYS WILL BE good to us.

"For the Lord is good." Ps. 100:5

"Yes, the Lord will give what is good." Ps. 85:12

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Rom. 8:28

"No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly." Ps. 84:11

The proof of His goodness is at the cross. The guarantee of his goodness is in the resurrection.

"He will do us good, real good, lasting good, only good, every good. He will make us good, and this is to do us good to the highest degree" insists Charles Spurgeon (HT: Julie Kauflin).

God's priority is to *make us good*—which is our *best good*.

So think about it: this "good" that we lack and that someone else has is not a sign God has forgotten us or doesn't care about us—just the opposite! It is an evidence of his goodness! It is an opportunity for us to learn to trust His ways, to understand His love more deeply, to grow in Christ-likeness.

It is, because He is, *good!*

Out of Mercy

by Nicole Whitacre

Jackie wrote: "After reading your current series on envy, boy did this sentence jump out at me":

*"For he knew that it was **out of envy** that they had delivered him up" (Mt. 27:18, emphasis mine).*

Pilate knew why the Jewish leaders had brought Jesus to him. They weren't concerned about the stability of the Roman empire—they envied Jesus' popularity (ESV Study Bible).

Out of envy, they delivered up our Savior to be killed.

Out of envy, we crucify Him afresh (Heb. 6:6).

But...

Out of mercy, He has saved us.

Out of mercy, He has forgiven us.

Out of mercy, He has set us free.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7).

What About Her?

by Nicole Whitacre

Today we return to our story in John 21 to see how our Lord addressed Peter’s sinful comparison.

Immediately upon receiving the news of his future death, Peter turns to look at the other disciple, John, and asks: *“Lord, what about this man?”*

Jesus answers Peter’s question with a rhetorical question of his own: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

The obvious answer? *Nothing*. John’s future is none of Peter’s business.

CS Lewis may have had John 21 in mind in *The Horse and His Boy* when Aslan tells Shasta: “Child, I am telling you your own story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.”

Jesus doesn’t tell Peter what John’s story will be. He doesn’t say, “If it is my will that John die peacefully in exile on the Isle of Patmos, what is that to you?”

Instead, he suggests a far more dramatic possibility: “If it is my will that John live to see my return, that he escape death altogether, what is that to you?”

Basically: “if John’s life is as wonderful as you can possibly imagine, while yours is more difficult than you can comprehend, *even so, what is that to you?*”

And so our Savior would ask us: “If it is my will that another woman receive the blessings you long for and don’t have, and escape the suffering you are destined for but don’t want, even so, what is that to you? I’m telling you your own story, not hers.”

This, as it turns out, is the most loving question Jesus could ask.

Envy: Enemy of Tranquility

by Nicole Whitacre

Jesus' question—"what is that to you?"—is aimed to snap Peter out of his fixation with John's story. He wants to protect Peter, and you and me, from sinful envy.

Envy (like all sin) robs us of peace. Think about it: have you ever met an envious person who was content, at ease, and happy? Have you ever envied and been at peace at the same time? I doubt it.

When we envy, we question, we fret, we wonder, we worry, we obsess. We are anything but peaceful. Jonathan Edwards describes this miserable condition:

“[A]n envious disposition is...**most uncomfortable and uneasy** to its possessor....It is like a powerful eating cancer, preying on the vitals, offensive and full of corruption. And it is the most foolish kind of self-injury; for the envious make themselves trouble most needlessly, being uncomfortable only because of others' prosperity, when that prosperity does not injure themselves, or diminish their enjoyments or blessings. But they are not willing to enjoy what they have, because others are enjoying also (emphasis mine)”

Envy is sinful, foolish, and it makes us miserable. Left unchecked, it even takes a physical toll: *“A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot”* (Prov. 14:30).

Jesus wants us to have a tranquil heart that gives life and health. He made peace for us (Eph 2:14), and He wants us to experience peace!

His question—"what is that to you?" is the rebuke of a loving Father. He wants to rescue us from envy and lead us in the path of peace.

Envy: Enemy of Fruitfulness

by Carolyn Mahaney

Jesus had a job for Peter to do. He had good works prepared for him to walk in (Eph 2:10), which included a martyr's death. The Lord knew that if Peter envied John he would be distracted from what God had called him to do.

Envy not only robs us of peace; it hinders our fruitfulness.

If we try to peer onto other people's paths, comparing and envying others, we'll be sidetracked from the good works God wants us to walk in. We'll fail to bring glory to our Savior.

We can't envy and obey at the same time.

For example, if God has called to walk in good works as a single, but we are envying our friends who are married, we'll be distracted from the ways God has called us to glorify Him in our singleness.

Or, if God has assigned to us to be married to a man who is not exercising leadership in the home and we are sinfully comparing ourselves with friends whose husbands effectively lead them, then we will be diverted from our task of bringing glory to God in our marriage.

Or if God has called us to use our gifts and abilities in a specific arena and yet we refuse to do so because our gifts are not as great or glamorous as another's, we will fail to do God's will.

Envy *always* eats up time and energy that should be spent on the good works God has prepared for us. When we envy others, we miss out on God's grace to bear fruit today.

Envy: Enemy of Relationships

by Nicole Whitacre

"For we ourselves were once...passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." Tit. 3:3

I wonder if part of Jesus' motive for rebuking Peter's sinful comparison was to preserve Peter's relationship with John.

Envy is a relationship destroyer. It squelches love and stifles kindness. We cannot cherish our friends and envy them at the same time.

“Love...does not envy” (1 Cor. 13:4). And as Jonathan Edwards put it, “Surely love to our neighbor does not dispose us to hate him for his prosperity or be unhappy at his good”

So, for the sake of our relationships, the Savior asks: “If it is my will that she _____ what is that to you?”

Genuine love rejoices with those who rejoice (Rom 12: 15). It is happy when someone else gets honored, gets a promotion, gets married, gets pregnant, gets any good gift from the hand of God.

So let us put away all envy and love one another.

Where Envy Abounded

by Nicole Whitacre

One humble woman told us how envy affected her relationships:

I have really been struggling with envying the pregnant women in my life. My husband & I are not trying to get pregnant right now, but I still struggle very much with wanting a child and not wanting others to have children. (That Cornelius quote was very convicting and true). I found myself mistreating many pregnant friends of mine at my church by not smiling in the hallway or engaging in usual conversations. I was so ugly in my actions but more ugly in my thoughts. I realized I was really wronging them by being so closed off. My jealousy and envy not only hurt my relationship with God, my husband, my friends but with the whole church body. I realized my sin really affects all others around me- in my case my church family. Praise be to God that where my sin was abounding, His grace abounded even stronger. He showed me my sin through other saints and I was able to repent and receive forgiveness from women I was intentionally ignoring.

Because God gives grace to the humble, I’m sure this woman has much grace coming her way! May we all be encouraged to follow her example and identify and repent from envy. Envy can hinder friendship, but humility—by the grace of God—can restore and strengthen relationships in the body of Christ.

Envy Recap

by Carolyn Mahaney

We began our series with the story of Peter's conversation with our Savior, after hearing that he was to be martyred:

“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved [John] following them...When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:20-22)

Jesus' rebuke, while it seems harsh, was really the most loving answer he could give to Peter, for sinful comparison is a destructive practice. The Bible calls it envy.

So far we've considered three questions:

WHO do we envy? (We envy those close to us.)

WHY do we envy? (We don't want others to have what we can't have. We want to be the best. We doubt God's goodness.)

WHAT are the consequences of envy? (It robs us of peace, fruitfulness, and relationships.)

Envy is serious. “Out of envy” Jesus was delivered up to die. But “out of mercy” he confronts our sinful comparison because he wants to help us overcome it.

We'll address this final question: “HOW do we overcome envy?” in the following posts.

Putting Away Envy

by Nicole Whitacre

Steph writes to say that this series on envy, “has awakened me to the way in which envy manifests itself in my life and the poor attitude I have toward others. My trouble now is that I am finding it very difficult to deal with these emotions and to know how to overcome them.”

The Bible tells us very simply to: *“Put away all...envy”* (1 Pet. 2:1). How do we do this?

1. **Confess** our envy to God and ask for his power and grace for change.
2. **Stop comparing** ourselves with others. Jesus’ question to Peter (“What is that to you?”) was intended to jolt him (and us) out of a preoccupation with others. It’s none of our business, so we must stop thinking about it! We must refuse to entertain thoughts that lead to envy.
3. **Meditate** on a verse that convicts you of envy and redirects your gaze to Christ. Connect one bit of Scripture to one bit of life.
4. **Pray** for God to bless the person you are tempted to envy. This strikes a blow against the envious desire to see blessing withheld from another.
5. **Remember** all the ways that God has blessed you. Start a list if you need to and refer to it when you are tempted to envy. You can’t give thanks to God and envy at the same time.

These are but a few ways to put away envy, but what if it won’t stay put?

More on that tomorrow...

When Envy Won’t Stay Put

by Carolyn Mahaney

You repent and resolve to put away envy, but the feelings only grow more intense. And so do the circumstances: five more of your friends get pregnant, or that one friend with the big house gets a bigger one!

Can anyone relate? I sure can.

At these times we can be tempted to discouragement and despair. We think, “This is not working. I might as well give up.” We may even become more entrenched in self-pity and envy than before.

But it helps to remember that this is a battle. The enemy (our sin of envy) won’t give up after just one jab. We may need to settle in for a long-term fight.

I remember a time I was struggling with envy: I prayed for God's blessing on this person every morning for many months. My feelings didn't change overnight, but over time, God transformed my heart to one of love for this person.

So let me encourage you—don't give up in your battle against envy! Each time you pray, each time you meditate on God's Word, each time you reflect on God's goodness, you are weakening envy. Even though you might not see results at first, God will give you victory, if you persevere and do not give up.

"For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." Galatians 6:8-9

You Follow Me!

by Carolyn Mahaney

After Jesus told Peter to stop comparing himself to John, he told Peter what he must do:

"Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" (John 21:22)

In order for Peter to face his future martyr's death--which he didn't want, but couldn't do anything about--he needed to hear these words from his Lord: *You follow me!*

In fact, this was *all* Peter needed to hear. It was enough.

He did not need to hear or do anything else. These three little words were sufficient to enable him to face the agonizing death assigned to him by God: *You follow me!*

Our Lord gives us the same command. For every unwanted experience or withheld blessing, the Lord would say to us: *You follow me!*

And just as these words were enough for Peter, so they are enough for us.

They are all we need to hear and obey in order to glorify God in every difficult experience God assigns us.

You follow me!

Again and Again

by Carolyn Mahaney

“You Follow Me!” John 21:22

These words are all we need to hear. But we need to hear them again and again.

Peter needed to hear them again. We see in John 21 that v. 22 was the second time our Lord said this to Peter. He had just told him the same thing a moment before: “Follow me” he commanded, in verse 19. But already, Peter needed to hear these words again.

So Jesus said it a second time, only more emphatically: *“You follow me!”*

Aren't we just like Peter? We need to hear God's words to us again and again.

And like Peter, sometimes we need to hear them again, *right after* we've heard them!

Because of the envy in our hearts that can lead us away from God, we need to hear these words over and over again.

This is why we must daily pursue the spiritual disciplines. They are a means of grace whereby we hear the Lord say to us again: *You follow me!*

This is why we need to regularly gather for corporate worship and the preaching of God's Word—because this is where we hear the Lord say to us again: *You follow me!*

This is why we must continually pursue biblical fellowship with other believers—so they can remind us again of our Lord's words: *You follow me!*

So let us put away all envy and follow hard after Christ.

What Peter Did

by Carolyn Mahaney

So what should we do about the things we don't like but can't do anything about?

We *must not* sinfully compare, but instead we *must* follow the Lord.

We *must not* look at others, but we *must* fix our eyes on Christ.

That's what Peter did.

And he did it for thirty years—all the while knowing that “follow me” meant following Christ to a martyr's death.

Though Scripture does not record the date of Peter's death, there is strong tradition that Peter suffered martyrdom at the hands of Emperor Nero around AD65.

If that is true, it means he lived three decades with this prediction of martyrdom hanging over him.

But Peter did not allow this to distract him from following his Lord. He knew “the worst” would happen—yet he did not wallow in self-pity or lash out in anger.

We know from later accounts in Scripture that Peter served the Lord for all of those thirty years, bearing fruit for the glory of God.

And that's what we can do.

Because of God's kindness that leads us to repentance, because of His Spirit at work within us to conform us to the image of Christ, because of His preserving grace which enables us to persevere--we can put away envy and follow Peter's example as he followed Christ.

“That You May Also Rejoice”

by Carolyn Mahaney

Peter humbled himself under the Savior's rebuke--“What is that to you?”--and heeded the Savior's call--“You follow me!”

And in 1 Peter 4, he encouraged his fellow believers to do the same:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed....Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

So when that test or trial comes and we are tempted to envy—“don't be surprised!” Peter says, “It's not as if something strange were happening to you!”

But instead (and talk about “strange” in the eyes of the world!): “Rejoice!”

Peter's take on suffering? All joy. Joy now, because we have the privilege to share in Christ's sufferings. And even more joy later, when Christ's glory is revealed.

An eternal perspective enabled Peter to put away comparison and envy and follow Christ with joy. He wasn't living any longer for the glory or the comfort of this world—his joy was in Christ, now and forever.

So let's learn from Peter's example. Let us stop comparing ourselves to others, but entrust our souls to our faithful Creator and follow Him into joy unimaginable!*

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