

Comparison Girl

Lessons *from* Jesus *on* Me-Free Living
in a Measure-Up World

SHANNON POPKIN



Comparison Girl: Lessons from Jesus on Me-Free Living in a Measure-Up World
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Introduction

The Makings of a Comparison Girl

I'VE HEARD THAT your earliest memory says something about what's important to you. Mine took place at church when I was about four years old. We were in the balcony area, and I had been allowed to sit all by myself one row ahead of my parents and off to the side. I remember feeling oh so grown-up as I held my hymnbook high and sang along proudly. But then came an interruption.

I was startled by a lady behind me who leaned down to help turn my hymnbook (which *she* apparently thought was upside down) right side up. As she placed it back in my hands, I scowled. The woman and her friends were looking down at me with sweet yet patronizing smiles, and I didn't like it. Not one bit.

I whipped myself forward with my head held high and flipped my hymnbook back the other way. This is how I *liked* holding my hymnbook, thank you very much. So there.

From my earliest years, I have loathed those moments when my shortcomings become painfully obvious. I despise being exposed or looked down upon. I prefer for the whole world to see me as a vision of sparkly perfection, as someone who has absolutely no flaws at all. Even when my deficiency is to be expected (like not being able to read at age four), my heart is bent on perfectionism, independence, and pride.

As you can imagine, this tendency has not led to great freedom and

joy. Instead it's led to a great fear of what people think and what they might say, a great drive to prove myself and measure up, and a great dread of being found lacking.

These fears, drives, and dreads are the makings of a Comparison Girl.

LESS THAN

Darla was one of my dearest friends in college. She and I had so much fun together, laughing wherever we went. But there was one category in which I felt vastly inferior to Darla: dating.

Darla had one boyfriend after another. If she tossed one guy back out to sea, not a week would go by before she was reeling in some new "catch." I, on the other hand, had far less dating experience. Once in a while I was asked on a date, and occasionally a short-lived relationship would blossom. But where Darla's dating calendar had only a few open spots, mine had only a few filled.

We never discussed this. I never said to Darla, "Why do more guys like you than me?" But I wondered. Was she prettier than me? Was she more fun to talk to? Was her personality more magnetic?

I didn't let these nagging questions wiggle their way to the surface much. I loved my friend, and I didn't want to be jealous of her, so I kept my comparing private. I *certainly* wouldn't have chosen for my dating inadequacies (especially in comparison to Darla) to be put on public display! But that's exactly what happened.

Darla and I were with a group of students at someone's apartment one day when somebody decided it would be fun to play a How Well Do You Know Your Date game. To play, several of the boyfriends in the group went into the kitchen to write down answers to a list of questions while their girlfriends stayed back in the living room. When the guys came out, if the girls' answers to the same questions matched what their boyfriends had said, they would earn points.

There weren't enough couples, so Darla and I agreed to play as roommates. She went into the kitchen and I stayed behind, grinning when little Darla filed out with the broad-shouldered boyfriends, each of them carrying a stack of answers on notecards.

I only remember one question from that game—the one that made my heart sink. The question was “How often do you go out on dates?” Here were my options:

- A. At least once a week
- B. Once every other week
- C. Once a month
- D. Less than once a month

How often did I go out on dates? Hardly ever! D was the obvious answer. But I wasn't about to disclose *that*—not in a room full of guys I'd *like* to date! I cringed at being known as “the girl who never gets asked out.”

I only had a few seconds to prepare my answer, and the rationalization that went zipping around in my brain went something like this: “Okay, in the past year I've dated one, two . . . three guys, I think. And each time, I had about . . . um . . . maybe four or five dates? That's fifteen dates. About. We'll round up to fifteen. So if you divide fifteen by twelve, that's more than one per month. On average. So it's safe to say that I go out on dates more than once a month . . .”

“B,” I answered confidently. “Every other week.”

Darla immediately looked puzzled. It was her turn to flip over the piece of paper in her hands and reveal her answer, but she didn't. She just stood there in that row of boyfriends, looking at me with a questioning gaze.

Suddenly, my heart filled with dread. Thinking only of the impression I would make on the others, I hadn't factored in the fact that Darla was not privy to my secret game of multiplication-rationalization. With the soft tone you might use to gently correct a lying child, she said, “Shan . . .” It was clear that our answers did not match. It was also clear that I was about to be pegged as “the girl who never gets asked out but pretends she does.” I was mortified.

The others waited in silence, looking back and forth between Darla and me as our eyes remained locked. I could tell by her pleading expression that she wanted me to change my answer, but that would be even more mortifying! To publicly label myself “the girl who never gets asked

out but pretends—then confesses” was just too embarrassing. I couldn’t do it.

After delaying as long as she could, Darla raised her truth-revealing card.

“D. Less than once a month.”

It was a sickening moment for me. An entire group of my peers had witnessed my obvious attempt at inflating my dating history, then watched it shrivel back down to its actual size.

For many, many years, I never spoke of that event. Not even with Darla. It wasn’t until I was recounting college stories for my daughter (who attends the same university I did) that I was able to finally share—and laugh about—my dating life exposé experience. My daughter giggled, wide-eyed, and said, “Oh, Mom, that’s so *awful!*”

I agree. It was!

DESPISED INADEQUACY

Has there ever been some truth about yourself that you tried to keep hidden? Do you have any memories from decades past that are frozen in shame, too difficult to tell another soul? Have you ever stretched the truth like a rubber band to make yourself look better only to have it snap back in your face?

There is something in us that despises our own inadequacy. We loathe being thought of as “less than.” We long to be accepted and admired. Not overlooked or excluded. We want to measure up! And so we fall into the habit of glancing sideways to measure ourselves against others.

Have you seen those laser tape measures that flash a little red beam, then give instantaneous measurements? When I was a teen and young adult, my mind was like a laser tape measure that never shut off. Wherever I went, I was taking measurements and wondering how I compared. I was consumed with thoughts like:

What does he think of me?

How do I look right now?

Am I as pretty as she is?

Did that sound dumb?

I didn't talk openly about my insecurities. I'm sure many of my peers thought I was confident and strong, but in the privacy of my heart, I was constantly measuring myself against others. I craved knowing what people thought. How *they* measured me. How I ranked in comparison with others.

When someone gave me a compliment, I treated it like pure gold. I would carefully tuck each one into little file cabinets in my mind, returning to my files often to assure myself that I wasn't completely lacking.

I also intuitively learned to use comparison to douse my insecurity with pride. I would purposely look for a girl who *didn't* measure up to me in some way. Maybe she wasn't as smart or well-liked. Or she wasn't quite as pretty. I would console myself, thinking, *At least I'm better than her*. I told myself I was practicing gratitude, but really I was fostering pride.

THE MOST

One day when I was a young teacher, my principal pulled me aside and said, "Shannon, I want you to know, out of all the teachers in the building, we've received the most parent requests for *you*. Keep up the good work!" My heart just about exploded with pride.

I was requested! I was *more* requested than the others! I modestly kept this information to myself, but in the months to come, whenever I made a mistake or someone challenged my work, I would comfort myself with the memory of my principal's compliment. I would recall his exact words and use them to push away my rising self-doubt. Then months turned into years.

I'm ashamed to think about how many times I reviewed those words. Years later, when those parents were as likely to remember which parking space they chose on the first day of school as they were to remember which teacher they requested for their child, I was still dragging around the tattered memory of this expired compliment, like Linus with his security blanket. *You were the most requested that year*, I would tell myself. *The most!*

It's embarrassing to share that with you. It kind of turns my stomach.

And it's even harder to admit that comparison still plagues me today. I still sometimes worry more about what people think than what God thinks. And I still intuitively want to douse my insecurity with nice things people have said to me. As soon as this book comes out, I'm sure I'll be tempted to obsess over its reviews and Amazon rankings.

Social media doesn't help me with this, by the way. I have such compassion for today's kids who grow up with live data that they can use to measure themselves against others. They don't have to wonder what people think; Instagram and Snapchat offer proof.

I have compassion for us grown-ups too. We've moved beyond comparing ourselves with other girls sitting in our classroom at school. Now we have social media to blow back the curtains on a million women at once, allowing us to gather tangible evidence on how we rank. Who takes more and better vacations than we do. Who spends more time on crafts and outings with their kids. Whose house is tidier and more updated than ours. Whose high schooler poses for selfies with Mom while mine requires a football field's length between us at social events.

Comparison, I've learned, is like a drug. The more we do it, the more we want to. It becomes a compulsion to check how we're measuring up. With our phones always at hand, it's nearly impossible for us to make it through even one afternoon without checking on our tallied clicks, likes, and comments.

Comparison isn't something we keep compartmentalized either. It seeps into every part of our lives and follows us into every stage. We compare from the time we're young moms until the time we're grandmas, from the time we're new employees until we're retirees, from the time we're new brides until we're fiftieth-anniversary celebrators. We simply can't stop doing this thing that robs us of our joy, drains our sense of significance, and holds us back. We can't stop playing the "comparison game."

BUT IS IT A GAME?

It's ironic that we call comparison a game, because I'm pretty sure Satan thinks of comparison as a war strategy that he uses against

us. Here's what makes me say that. Comparison has two outcomes. Sometimes we compare and consider ourselves superior, which leads to:

- pride
- self-focus
- obsessive goal-setting
- perfectionism
- judgmental criticism
- inflated arrogance
- obsession with performance

Other times we compare and consider ourselves inferior, which leads to:

- humiliation
- self-consciousness
- obsessive fears
- resignation
- insecurity
- worthlessness
- shame
- self-loathing
- jealousy

I don't want to be characterized by any of these, and I'm guessing you feel the same. These are the ugly vices we'd like to be free of. They hold us captive, often for decades, which is exactly what Satan wants. Measure-up comparison isn't a game; it's an attack. And if we're ever going to escape, we've got to recognize our misconceptions and the enemy prompting us to believe them.

The next time you hear a voice saying, "Look at that woman. She's so much thinner than you," please note that this is never Jesus speaking, always your enemy. And when you hear a voice saying, "Look at her. She obviously doesn't know what's in style," remember that this is never Jesus speaking, always your enemy.

KING JESUS

Perhaps you've heard the famous quote attributed to President Theodore Roosevelt, "Comparison is the thief of joy." And if you're like me, you expect Scripture to back that up. But it doesn't. In fact, I often hear Jesus inviting us to compare. Do you find that hard to believe?

When Jesus came, walking in sandals on dusty roads and sharing our meals, stories, and pain, he encountered Comparison Girls who were plagued with just as much jealousy, arrogance, condescension, and shame as we are. Yet Jesus didn't teach them to renounce all comparison. Instead, many of his lessons included comparisons to make his point. Think of the stories Jesus told of the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the wise and foolish builders.

Jesus also compared people in real life. Like when a widow donated two practically worthless copper coins, and Jesus said she gave more than the others. Or when Martha was complaining that her sister wasn't helping in the kitchen, and Jesus said Mary had chosen what was better. Jesus used comparison words and comparison stories all the time, teaching a new upside-down way of seeing things.

In the world, there is a particular way that things stack up. There's a system in place, which works like this. If you want to be somebody in the eyes of the world, you have to outdo somebody else. If you want to be honored, you have to get ahead. If you want to be important, you have to prove that you have more and are more. In short, you have to measure up. And from the way we all scramble to try to do so, it seems obvious we've gotten the memo. Yet here's what we forget.

This measure-up world and its ruler, Satan, are the two great enemies of God. It is out of hostility toward God that these enemies entice me to live by the world's rules and play its games. And then there's one more enemy: me. Because as the world and the devil call out, "Come play the comparison game," here's my reality: I want to play! I want to be jealous. I want to push ahead. I want to pout when somebody else gets ahead. Yet when I cave in to my sinful desire to measure up, I participate in a world system led by an evil ruler who wants to destroy me.

One day very soon, Jesus will return to set up his kingdom, and on that day the tables will turn. Everything in the world will be realigned

under King Jesus. Many who are overlooked, undervalued, or considered “lasts” in this life will be the great ones in the life to come.

Jesus invites you and me to live now the way we’ll wish we had then—rejecting our measure-up cravings and pursuing the rewards of his kingdom instead of the fading rewards of the world. To be sure, we won’t get total relief from the comparison battle until the day Satan is banished and all is made new. But today, when I choose to live by Jesus’s kingdom values, it’s like stepping away from the world’s measure-up smog to breathe in the clean air of the kingdom.

RED-LETTER COMPARISONS

Okay, but how do I make the switch? How do I deny my inner Comparison Girl and leave my measure-up ways behind? How do I turn to follow Jesus instead? Here’s how: I learn to listen to the voice of Jesus. I listen long enough and intently enough that I begin to know what Jesus sounds like. So much so that when I hear some message like, “You’re worthless” or start to think, “You’re better than her,” I know enough to say, “Uh . . . that’s not something Jesus would say.” The more I listen to Jesus, the more I think about what I’m thinking. Rather than blindly entertaining sinful, me-focused ideas, I start to recognize the enemy’s hiss in my own thoughts.

Jesus said that his sheep follow him for they know his voice (John 10:4), and thankfully his voice is recorded on the pages of our Bibles. As we lean in to listen, we’ll repeatedly hear Jesus talking about his kingdom. He was always using pithy, upside-down statements to describe how his kingdom stands in contrast to the world. I think he wanted these statements to stick in people’s minds and help reshape the way they looked at themselves, others, and the world. I think he wants the same for Comparison Girls today. That’s why I arranged this study around what I call the “red-letter comparisons” of Jesus.

I first encountered the red-letter comparisons of Jesus back when I spent my days wiping little noses and bottoms and folding miniature pairs of jeans—and comparing myself with women whose daily agendas seemed far more important and worthy. In my validation-craving

frustration, I remember paging through my Bible looking for the red-letter verses, which I knew marked the very words of Jesus. I longed to hear directly from my Lord and gain his perspective on my life rather than being taunted by the less-than messages of my enemy. This exercise did not disappoint.

As I sat in my toy-strewn living room, wearing no makeup and a spit-up-stained sweatshirt, the red-letter comparisons of Jesus came alive. Here's what I heard Jesus saying.

The greatest among us is she who serves.

She who exalts herself will be humbled, and she who humbles herself will be exalted.

She who is first will be last. She who is last will be first.

I was intrigued. It settled my heart to know that greatness wasn't tied to a paycheck or title. If it was true that I could become one of the "kingdom greats" simply by stooping down to serve, my living room provided ample opportunity.

I pulled out a notebook and began listing out Jesus's upside-down teachings. As I studied, I noticed that Jesus wasn't just dropping in his red-letter comparisons randomly; he was purposefully weaving them into stories and conversations with people who—like me—were comparing.

Jesus was responding in real time to real people who were:

- Comparing their sin with others' sin
- Comparing their wealth and possessions
- Comparing their appearances
- Comparing their work for God
- Comparing their status

As I listened in on these interactions between Jesus and comparison-prone people from centuries past, it was like finding myself in the Bible. I saw myself in the disciples who craved recognition. I saw myself in the Pharisees, wearing flashy clothes to be seen. I saw myself in the tax collector who felt ashamed because of his sin. And I saw myself in the man who didn't want to give away his money and become average. In each

instance, there was much for me to learn from Jesus about his upside-down kingdom.

Although my kids have outgrown those miniature jeans I used to fold, the teachings of Jesus have continued to steady me. Today, my living room is tidy, and titles and paychecks are the norm, but I'm still prone to Comparison Girl measuring. More than ever, I need to guard myself from my invasive enemy by listening to the voice of my shepherd.

Returning regularly to the red-letter comparisons of Jesus is like having that hymnbook in my four-year-old hands put right. I can't say that it's a comfortable or easy exercise; it's often quite humbling. But reorienting myself to Jesus's perspective is what settles my heart and restores my confidence and joy.

LIVING ME-FREE

If you struggle with measure-up comparison as I do, I invite you to join me for a six-week study of Jesus's red-letter comparisons and the stories and conversations they are tucked into. I suggest keeping a red pen handy so you can mark your book and your Bible when you come across the red-letter comparisons of Jesus. You'll be surprised at how many times they appear, and you'll be amazed at the way these statements—with red-ink intensity—can realign your thinking and help you see yourself and others from a kingdom perspective.

As we study together, you'll notice one key theme. The measure-up comparison that traps me is entirely me-focused. When I enter a room of people, I might be glancing around at others, but my focus always boomerangs back to me. I project and posture. I shrink and avoid. No matter what direction I turn, I'm thinking about me and obsessing over how I measure up—which is utterly exhausting. But if I enter a room full of people with the *me-free* mindset of Jesus, I'm able to simply focus on the other people in the room. Of course I'll still notice the ways I'm different, but my differences don't add to or detract from my value; they offer me unique ways to serve. Lifting up God and others with what I have and who I am gives me a place to belong—which isn't exhausting; it's exhilarating.

This me-free living is what guards against me-first comparison. When I put someone else ahead of me, I naturally stop trying to get ahead of her. And when I lift her up, I simultaneously stop looking down on her. And when I bend down to serve her, I forget to measure myself against her.

Me-free comparison looks at someone else and says, “What do I uniquely have to offer this person?” Or, “In what way has God gifted her to help me grow?” When I celebrate my own differentness and refuse to be threatened by the differentness I see in somebody else, it turns the tables on my entire life. When I’m not tethered to measure-up fear or get-ahead pride, I can embrace relationships, share my gifts, and enjoy God in ways that were never before possible. I can live me-free! Which means living

- free from self-doubt;
- free from jealousy and envy;
- free from the sting of not measuring up;
- free from self-centeredness and self-focus;
- free from endless striving to outdo others or get ahead;
- free to be the unique individual God designed me to be;
- free to encourage and cheer others on; and
- free to pour myself out and serve with joy.

Of course, all this is exactly what Satan *doesn't* want. He knows that participating in a community of people who are all serving each other and glorifying God is what protects us from bondage—while comparison keeps us stumbling back into it. So Satan will keep tempting us into me-first comparison. And Jesus will keep inviting us to live me-free. Do you long for the freedoms on that list the way I do? I’m so excited to experience me-free living with you as we study Jesus’s red-letter comparisons and learn to do life like he did.

ABOUT THE STUDY

I hope you’ll consider doing this study with a friend or in a group. If you’d like to have me be part of your group time with additional

teaching on the topic of comparison, please check out my *Comparison Girl* teaching videos (sold separately).

I've divided the chapters into lessons—some chapters have more lessons than others—each beginning with a correlating Bible passage. Please don't skip these Bible readings; I wouldn't want you to miss out on hearing from Jesus directly. Though I've read these stories dozens of times, Jesus's upside-down perspective becomes a little sharper each time I reread. I'm eager for you to experience this as well.

You'll notice that each lesson concludes with a meditation that encapsulates the lesson's truth, plus some application and Bible study questions to make your study personal. I hope you'll use a notebook or the companion journal we've put together for you to record your responses and action plans. You can find the journal and other printable resources, including a leader's discussion guide, at ComparisonGirl.com.

Friend, let's put a stop to these comparison attacks that our enemy has been using against us for far too long. Instead of measuring ourselves against each other, let's exalt God and serve one another. Instead of being plagued by measure-up, get-ahead comparison, let's pour our lives out and be free.

Grab your journal and record some "Comparison Girl starting point" thoughts:

- ≈ Which of the motivators below are you most driven by?
 - A desire to prove yourself and measure up
 - A fear of what people think and what they'll say
 - A dread of being found lacking

- ≈ Which of my stories can you best relate to, and why?
 - The flipped hymnbook: wanting to be seen as someone with no flaws
 - The dating life exposé: the temptation to inflate the truth about yourself
 - The teacher request: dousing your insecurities with pride

- ≈ Think back over your past season of life. How has comparing yourself with others robbed you of your joy, drained your sense of significance, or held you back?

- ≈ Which of these would you most like to be free of?
 - Self-doubt
 - Jealousy and envy
 - Self-focus and the sting of not measuring up
 - Endless striving to outdo or get ahead

- ≈ Do you struggle more with feelings of inferiority or superiority? What would those who love you say? Perhaps you could ask someone, if you wish.

- ≈ What do you think God wants to transform most about the way you see yourself and others through this study?

Chapter One

From Measuring Up to Pouring Out

MY FRIEND ALISON had the horrific experience of watching her house go up in flames while she and her family watched from the front lawn. As they crossed the dark street—barefoot and pajama clad—to put some distance between themselves and the fire, a man pulled his car over to the side of the road. “Is that your house?” he asked.

Later, they learned he was the serial arsonist who had *set* the fire.

Apparently this isn’t as unusual as it might sound. Criminologists have found that it’s common for serial arsonists to return to the blaze they’ve just set and gaze upon the scene with a sense of power and importance.¹

This, I believe, is how Satan looks at us as the destructive flames of comparison lick at our lives.

He’s content to remain in the shadows, gazing with gratification as we pull away from each other in jealousy or pride. But in this chapter, I’d like to pull back the shadowy curtain and shine a spotlight on the enemy who’s been setting his fires and driving us apart for far too long with his green-eyed wisdom.

Let’s collapse these comparison walls between us and come together in me-free humility—lifting high our king Jesus and giving each other a place to belong.

Lesson 1: The Lines or the Spout

Read James 3:13–18 and John 10:1–11

IN SIXTH GRADE, I was a giggly, imaginative, carefree girl with glasses and freckles. My best friend, Kathy, and I amused ourselves by passing tiny notes—tucked into my pencil sharpener—which contained lots of code words in case we ever got caught. We had lots of sleepovers, giggling into the night over the silly fill-in-the-blank stories we made up.

Then everything changed at sixth grade camp. Kath was in a different cabin, and I was with some girls who wore makeup and cute clothes and talked about boys. I was pretty sure the boys were talking about them too. Especially Kim—the girl with long blond hair, thick eyelashes, and the cutest dimples when she smiled.

As we unpacked, Kim told her friends that she preferred showering at night, and they all agreed. Apparently, it was far better to shower at night. But I hadn't planned to shower at all. This was *camp!* Since I hadn't packed a towel or shampoo, I began silently fretting about what Kim and her friends would think by day three about the girl who didn't shower morning *or* evening.

When the girls came back from the showers, I watched with interest as Kim rolled her damp hair into pink sponge rollers. Then in the morning I almost gasped. Kim's long blond hair had been transformed into big, beautiful curls that now bounced along on her shoulders as she moved. I was intrigued, to say the least. I was also filled with hopeful glee, for though it was glaringly obvious that I did not measure up to Kim and her friends, she had just disclosed her secret to enviable beauty. *Sponge rollers!*

I endured three showerless, out-of-place days at camp, wishing I could just find Kath and go back to passing notes and giggling in sleeping bags. Yet somehow, I knew those days were over. I returned home with a new determination to grow up and reinvent myself. First order of business? Sponge rollers.

My mom was kind enough to get me some, and that night I showered

and rolled up my damp, shortish brown hair in the pink rollers—just as Kim had done. The next morning I pulled the rollers out and ran to the mirror. This time I *did* gasp—but not because my reflection revealed anything enviable or beautiful. I looked as if I had been electrocuted!

Sixth grade camp was a turning point. My life went from light-hearted to awkward. From carefree to insecure. From happy-go-lucky to sick-to-your-stomach inadequate. Literally overnight, my eyes fluttered open. I saw something which had been previously hidden. A dimension I had been oblivious to. A whole new world was opening up. The world of comparison.

COMPARISON LINES

Go back in time and take a mental snapshot of yourself in middle school. In your hand is a glass measuring cup filled with your gifts, aptitudes, and talents. Your personality is mixed in, along with your family background and experiences. Your cup is overflowing with potential . . . and that potential is exactly what Satan wants to steal, kill, and destroy. He wants to steal your very life from you.

Satan does not fight fair. He doesn't wait until a girl is old enough to process her experiences objectively. Before she even has a chance to figure out who she is, he entices her to measure what's in her cup against somebody else's. In fact, I think Satan organizes his armies to attack just as a girl—blinking in bewilderment—first notices that there even *are* lines on the side of her measuring cup.

I don't have proof of this, of course. But when I watch an eleven- or twelve-year-old girl go from passing silly notes, hugging her friends, and including everyone in her games to suddenly becoming ensnared in sexting, cutting, and mean-girl tactics, I can almost see the demons prowling. And how do they attack her? What is their tactic? They point to the lines on her measuring cup and entice her to compare.

Think back to your middle school self. Were there times you didn't feel you measured up? Maybe your volleyball serve was weak or your clothes weren't stylish. Maybe a boy broke up with you and bragged about it. As you measured and found yourself lacking, what happened?

Did you develop new insecurities or self-consciousness? Did you become more me-focused? Think also of the times you compared and came out on top. Maybe your grades were higher or your legs were thinner. Maybe the boys paid more attention to you. As you measured yourself against others and found yourself to be “better than,” what happened? Did you gain a sense of self-importance or arrogance? Did you become more me-focused?

Satan didn’t care whether you were the girl comparing up or comparing down. Both inferiority and superiority lead to me-focused bondage which can last decades. All Satan has to do is keep wickedly pointing to the lines and tempting us all to compare.

PAUL’S PERSPECTIVE

Do you doubt that Satan has anything to do with your comparison struggles? Paul didn’t. In 2 Corinthians 10–11, when Paul was responding to some critics in the church who were picking him apart and trying to make him feel inferior, he began his response by talking about spiritual warfare (2 Cor. 10:4). So Paul discerns what is behind these comparison attacks. He looks beyond these opponents who are holding their measuring cups next to his and pointing at the lines, and he recognizes the work of the enemy. “When they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding,” Paul said (2 Cor. 10:12). Paul’s opponents didn’t get that there was a spiritual war and they were part of it, but Paul did, and he was ready to respond accordingly.

I have to be honest. I love this truth that flows from Paul’s pen, but he was a grown man trained in theology and logic. What about a middle schooler? I hope it makes you angry to think of Satan lobbing comparison attacks at your naïve, middle school self. But I hope it makes you even *more* angry to think of him keeping you in bondage decades later, using the same tired strategy.

It’s time to follow Paul’s lead and acknowledge that measure-up comparison is not a game; it’s a strategy of war used by Satan, who has been our adversary since childhood.

WHAT SATAN WANTS

The Bible doesn't give much backstory for Satan and his demons. In the same way that I tell my kids detailed stories about their dad and not old boyfriends, the Bible tells the story of Jesus and his church, not the petty rival who keeps trying to steal the bride.

The bits we do have of Satan's story are blurred into poems and prophecies, but here's what we can gather. Satan once had rank and position in heaven, but in his discontent he wanted his throne lifted higher. He loathed being less than God, so he set out to lift himself up, saying, "I will be like the Most High."² See that comparison word, "like"?

Satan's undoing began with comparison. He measured himself against God, which, for a created being, was audacious. Satan's pride wasn't tolerated by God, and he fell from heaven like a streak of lightning (Luke 10:18). When he landed on earth, it was not with new meekness. Satan is a liar and the truth has no place in him, so he lives out the delusion that he is somehow God's rival. Still today, he roams the earth with dogged resolve to challenge God's preeminence. And how does Satan attack God? By hurting and destroying us. He sees us as pawns to prove his blasphemous point.

Many times, we're foolishly oblivious to this cosmic battle playing out in the heavenly realms. We stumble into comparison, thinking only of our own selfish agendas, and Satan is fine with that. From day one with Eve, Satan has been suggesting that we cut God out of the story and slide up onto the throne of our lives without him (Gen. 3:5). Our enemy is content to stay out of sight, whispering his measure-up messages, then grinning wickedly as we begin to march around like mini imperialists, wanting to be more and have more. Our house is not big enough. Our waist is not small enough. Our promotion is not high enough. Satan also enjoys it when we pout and cower like *affronted* mini imperialists until no house is big enough. No waist size is small enough. No promotion is high enough. Little by little, we start to resemble Satan, back when he was insisting on a higher throne—and Satan counts this as a win. He wants us to ignore God and fold into ourselves, since this causes our destruction. But Jesus came to show us another way.

AN UPSIDE-DOWN CUP

If Jesus had a measuring cup, it would be full to the brim and overflowing. In fact, it would be impossible to find a cup that could contain all his worth and still fit inside the universe. In heaven, with unveiled glory, the supreme value of God's Son is uncontested. His worth is simply beyond compare. But on earth, Jesus didn't concern himself with proving this.

Jesus's arrival was not punctuated with royal fanfare. The night he was born, his mother laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7). His dad was a simple carpenter with no wealth or status. Even Jesus's physical body was average and unimpressive. Isaiah 53:2 says, "There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him" (NLT).

Jesus spent plenty of time among "the least of these," healing their sickness and disease. And he invested in those who had wealth and power too. Jesus shared meals and conversations with people who were deeply sinful and devoutly religious. He shared his life with twelve ordinary disciples, demonstrating foot-washing humility. Jesus modeled his upside-down kingdom by lowering himself, not exalting himself. Jesus came, "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

Only a human being could give his life to atone fully for the sins of humanity. That's the whole reason Jesus became a man. And only a completely righteous substitute could be pierced for *our* transgressions and crushed for *our* iniquities and thereby cancel the record of our sin (Isa. 53:5; Col. 2:14). Only God's Son had the power to rise from the dead in triumph over Satan and his armies, putting them to "open shame" (Col. 2:15). Only Jesus could serve us in this way, and that's exactly what he did.

Jesus took his measuring cup and unequivocally focused on the spout. Philippians 2:7 says Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." Isaiah 53:12 says that Jesus "poured out his soul to death." From his moment of birth until his moment of death, Jesus had complete disregard for the lines on his measuring cup. He turned his measuring cup upside down.

TIPPING MY CUP

When Jesus invites us to follow him and live under his rule, it's not with promises that he will finally fulfill our measure-up dreams. Jesus wants us to be great—but according to *his* kingdom's value system, not the world's. **Satan points to the lines; King Jesus points to the spout.**

Satan's rule has a definite expiration date, but Jesus's rule will be eternal. We have to decide which ruler we will emulate: The evil one who is still trying to lift his throne higher and will one day be thrown to “the bottomless pit” (Rev. 9:1)? Or the righteous one who, in the most extravagant display of humility the world has ever known, went willingly to the cross and has been highly exalted and given “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9)?

In Jesus's kingdom, the great ones are those who serve. Whoever humbles herself will be exalted, and whoever exalts herself will be humbled (Matt. 23:12). We're invited today to live the way we'll wish we had when the upside-down kingdom is fully instated—to bring glory to God and serve others like Jesus did, to focus on the spout. But “someday greatness” isn't our only reward. There's another, more immediate benefit. If we want to shut down comparison's lies and live-by-the-lines temptation, all we have to do is turn our attention to the spout.

When I tip my measuring cup, the lines become beautifully irrelevant. When I walk into a room asking, “Who can I serve here? What needs can I meet? What do I have to offer? Where can I pour myself out?” I have a completely different outlook than when I measure myself against everyone I see. Instead of being preoccupied with what I look like, how I just sounded, or what everyone is thinking, by pouring myself out I *free* myself from measure-up comparison. I am more confident, less self-conscious. I'm more joyful, less troubled. I'm more content, less driven by perfectionism. Living by the spout is the way to be “me-free”!

THE LINES OR THE SPOUT?

Take inventory of your life and the way you relate to others. Are you more focused on the lines or the spout? Put an X by each characteristic that describes you:

Living by the Me-Focused Lines

- ___ I am privately jealous of others' successes.
- ___ I am frustrated and sometimes humiliated by my own personal limitations or mistakes.
- ___ I have excessive ambition to prove myself or get ahead.
- ___ I'm a perfectionist at work, with fitness, in parenting, etc.
- ___ I'm often disgusted with others who aren't living as I think they should.
- ___ I feel worthless because I don't measure up.
- ___ I am self-conscious and obsess over what others think.
- ___ I tally up my accomplishments and readily display them on social media.
- ___ I isolate myself and pull away because I'm insecure or intimidated.
- ___ It's hard for me to be authentic and vulnerable, so I lack true community.

Living by the Others-Focused Spout

- ___ I stay quiet about my successes and am careful to be approachable.
- ___ I don't worry much about the approval or disapproval of others.
- ___ I am comfortable with my limits and just do what I can.
- ___ I use my gifts and strengths to lift other people up.
- ___ I am happy to serve humbly behind the scenes or in front—whatever is most helpful.
- ___ I don't seek recognition; those who serve alongside me know this.
- ___ I have a teachable spirit when differences arise.
- ___ I am careful to put the interests of others ahead of my own.
- ___ I enjoy unity and harmony in relationships.
- ___ I experience community with a diverse group of people.

Do you, like I do, find far more descriptions of yourself on that first list—and less on the second—than you'd like? If so, could it be that we've been deceived? Friend, let's leave behind this dark measure-up world. Let's escape to the kingdom where people live humbly by the spout, not the lines. Let's follow our Jesus and be finally free.

- ≈ Which “Living by the Lines” characteristics are most convicting or troubling to you? Make a list of what has been stolen, killed, or destroyed in your life as you’ve measured yourself against others.

- ≈ In your Bible (or using printed verses), read Isaiah’s prophecy of the coming Christ in Isaiah 53 and, with a downward arrow (↓), mark all the ways that Jesus ultimately emptied or humbled himself. Write a prayer, using some of your favorite phrases from Isaiah 53, thanking Jesus for pouring himself out with such beautiful humility.

- ≈ Read Philippians 2:3–11 and list the ways Jesus emptied himself and became a servant. Write down one way God is asking you to “empty” yourself. How might this free you from superior or inferior comparison?

For Meditation: Mark 10:45

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

When I tip my measuring cup and pour myself out to others, the lines become irrelevant. *Lord, help me to find freedom from comparison by humbling myself as you did.*