

Comparing

by Rev Allister Lane

18th November 2018

1 Samuel 2:1-8

Mark 12: 38 - 44

Last Sunday my sermon was titled 'Giving'

And I recalled the story of the boy who one evening heard his parents arguing about money. He heard them say they just didn't have enough money to pay the rent that week. The boy reflected: "At that moment I knew exactly what I had to do. I went and got my piggybank, and buried it where they wouldn't get their hands on it!"

Last Sunday we heard this same passage from Mark's Gospel – about religious people and a poor widow.

Hearing it again today, I want to draw out some other lessons for us. Firstly, let me recap what we observed last week about this passage.

Jesus isn't happy.
What's he not happy about?

It's the way the religious folk are behaving.

Jesus compares these ostentatious givers with someone else.
The poor widow he sees giving two small coins as her act of worship.

Some have suggested that Jesus makes the comparison to teach that giving is to be sacrificial.

We are to act like the widow, giving all that we have – even if we are "stonier than a biblical execution"

But, listening carefully Jesus does not explicitly teach this.
And (as we concluded last week) more likely is that Jesus compares her giving to the rich people as an act of genuine worship – she gives out of love for God and neighbour.

Jesus compares those who want to receive with those who want to give.

The problem Jesus recognises with the rich people is that they give only to receive the admiration of others.

By comparison, the giving of the widow shows that we are all able to make genuine gifts expressing our love for God.

God knows our motivations for giving. Whatever our situation, God recognises generosity as worthy praise in response to what God has already given us

There's something else for consideration in this Gospel passage.
That is that Jesus choosing to teach by comparing people.
It's an interesting approach Jesus takes.

How is it that we understand and experience comparing ourselves with others?

We compare ourselves with others all the time ...don't we?

This is a very normal aspect of human nature. But it can be very destructive.

We compare ourselves with others about our jobs, where we live, what car we drive, academic achievements, sporting accomplishments, the behaviour of our kids ...whether we are busier than others.

There is an idea you might have heard of called 'The Courtroom of the Mind'. The Courtroom of the Mind describes the internal comparisons we make all the time with others. Typically, I compare my weaknesses with another's strengths. This means that everyone judges themselves harshly. We overlook what we actually have, and focus on different things others have – usually obsessing with comparisons of what others have that we don't.

As a teenager, my over-achieving friend 'Karl' took his own life. To those around him, he was intelligent, athletic and doing extremely well early on in a professional career. But Karl could only see his deficiencies in comparison to others. In the Courtroom of the Mind there is only one judge – ourselves. And we can be the harshest judge we ever encounter.

Perhaps you know too well what this comparing with others is like.

The Courtroom of the Mind is particularly intense during teenage years, but sometimes we continue to judge ourselves all our lives.

"Comparison is the thief of joy" said US President Theodore Roosevelt.

How do we then accept this comparison Jesus makes in his teaching? This comparison he makes as his way of teaching?

Well, remember who it was Jesus saw as needing most change in their lives?
Those who assumed they were great.
Those who thought they were sorted – before God and others.

He challenges them by way of comparison – with perhaps the most unlikely figures in society.
Jesus overturns assumptions by comparing phoney-baloney behaviour with genuine human behaviour – with knowledge of self, others and God.

Today, our problem is the opposite I think:
we quickly compare ourselves with others.
We are so desperate for validation.

Jesus compares in order to challenge arrogance and generate appropriate humility.
Today we compare ourselves, and it most likely causes in us anxiety.

What can we say about comparison then?

It's really easy for us to take a moral lesson, jump to applying a rule for our own life.
But please don't take from this sermon a message that you just have to *try harder*.
Try harder not to judge yourself,
try harder not to be anxious,
try harder to be content.

Not only is that ironic, more seriously, it falls short of the Gospel...the glorious promise with have in Christ.

So, we look at the big picture, in light of the whole Gospel.

In comparison to the holy majesty of God, who are *we*?
Our proper relationship to God is creaturely humility.
That has always been the case for all humans, and will always be the case.

We are not able to impress God by who we are or what we do.
A lot of religions assume this is the meaning of life. Our purpose is to try harder to earn
favour
or holiness
or spiritual perfection.

But Christianity is realistic about our capacities before God.
There is nothing we can do to make God love us more (or less for that matter).

This of course is the good news for humanity.

What we need is given to us.

Jesus says “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Why?

Children are aware of their vulnerability and their dependency.
When we recognise this we know who we are – not in comparison with others, but in comparison with God.

Isn't this exactly what we see with Jesus?

Listen to the words of Philippians:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus gave of himself. He “emptied himself”.
He did not compare himself to others, claiming superiority on the basis of his impeccable divine credentials.

Jesus displays no desperation for validation.
Rather, obedience to the mutual will of the Father.

Jesus became a slave, humbling himself to die for the sake of others.

He gave us what we need.

He loves recklessly.

What about us...?

Hear the start of the Philippians passage again:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Opening ourselves to follow Jesus allows us to recognise who we really are.
Comparing ourselves to God humbles us (in an appropriate way), and because of the love and life Jesus gives us, we know we can be vulnerable and dependent before God.

I know, this runs so counter to much of our instincts.

Which is why we must hear again and again the promises of what God gives us.
It is why we practice together (in our worship) how to live in grateful response to all that God gives – actualising our love for God and neighbour.

We need reminding of who we really are – in comparison with God.

Friends, know who you are – recipients of God's love.
Know you are loved – already and always.

Can you let go of the desperate attempts to feel loved and validated by others?
For you are a child of God.
You have been given all you really need.

Knowing that, you can give as Jesus gives.
Knowing that you are a child of God, you can love recklessly!