

THE KINGDOM WAY
LUKE 18:9-14

gocompare.com is all about insurance. It is a website that is set up deliberately to compare quotes from different insurance companies so that you can find the best quote, the cheapest quote, the one that suits you best. It deliberately sets out to compare both prices and the kind of service that is provided. There are other kinds of ads that do the same: I saw one the other day that was produced by Asda that started off by telling me how many prices were reduced at Tesco, then ended up by comparing these Tesco prices with the (claimed) far higher number of things that were reduced at Asda. It is all about comparing one with another.

Sometimes we do that with other people. We judge ourselves by what we see in other people. That can have 2 results: first of all, we judge ourselves by people who we think are better than ourselves and so we end up feeling down, or sad, because we are not as good as Joe Bloggs; secondly, we can end up feeling quite superior because we see ourselves as better than Joe Bloggs and we become quite proud of the fact. Neither of these is a good result! Churches are blighted by the fact that people say 'I can't do that job because I can't do it as well as ... did it' and so won't take on any kind of responsibility, comparing themselves unfavourably in their own eyes, with those who have gone before them. Churches are also blighted by pride, when some look down on others as inferior Christians, second class Christians. Neither of these is a good result.

Jesus told a parable about two men, one of whom compared himself with other people and the other who had different idea. It began with a Pharisee: "*the Pharisee...*" (18:11f) It was all about himself and how much better he was than the other person in the Temple. He boasted about all his achievements, about all the qualities of his life, all the religious things he did in his life. He was better than other people; he did more than other people did; he was simply top-notch and he knew it! The Pharisee turned prayer into a contest which, by his standards he won hands down. The problem was: he was comparing himself to the wrong standard; he was comparing himself to other people and the result was pride and self-congratulation!

It is always dangerous and difficult to compare ourselves to other people. "There is no more deadly disease than pride." (John Calvin) When we compare ourselves to other people, we can always find someone to whom we compare favourably and then think that we are better than they are. Our experience of God is better, our knowledge of the Bible is better, we are simply better people, with the result that we become puffed up by that comparison and proud of the achievements we've made that other people haven't. Pride then becomes a huge barrier in our relationships with other people and our relationship with God; pride gets in the way of love and service to others; pride gets in the way of faith and trust in God.

The other man in the story was a tax-collector. He came to pray with a quite different attitude: "*The tax-collector...*" (18:13) His whole body-language tells you what he thinks of himself and his relationship with God. He comes with a humble heart; he knows that he has nothing to boast about in the presence of God; he knows all too well that he has a whole pile of faults and failings, that he is a flawed human being, and that all he can do is ask that God have mercy and forgive him. He was not comparing himself to Pharisee, he was comparing himself to what he knew of God, what he knew God was like, what God expected of him and he knew that he had fallen short; he had nothing to boast about because his faults and failings were all too obvious; he simply prayed that God forgive him.

There is an astonishing ending to the story: *"I tell you..." (18:14)* This goes against all the accepted thinking; the tax-collector is vindicated, and justified; the tax-collector is the one who goes home blessed by God. Jesus turns everything upside down; He tells the world that the person whom God blesses is the person who is humble, who humbles himself. The point of the parable is in its opening words: *"To some..." (18:9)* Don't do it! That's whole point of story: 'don't be confident of your own righteousness, don't be self-righteous, self-confident, don't compare yourself with other people and think yourself better. Instead, be humble before God; trust God to be merciful and to forgive the faults and failings of your life.'

There is a whole number of ways in which this touches our lives:

- **Our relationships with other people:** do we look around and think 'I'm better than all these people'? We may never put that into words, but as soon as we think it, we create a barrier; we have already put ourselves above others and that will get in the way of real Christian loving relationships with other people, whether in Church or elsewhere. All of our relationships should be touched by a humble spirit.
- **Christian Leadership:** we are about to ordain seven new elders today so we will be thinking about the leadership of the congregation later: in what spirit do Christian leaders lead? As people proud of themselves, they have reached an exalted place in the hierarchy of the kingdom? If we lead in that spirit, we will fail as Christian leaders; Jesus calls leaders to lead in a different spirit, to serve others with humble hearts; the images of Christian leadership are a basin and a towel as Jesus washed the feet of His disciples; or a cross as He gave His life.
- **Faith:** pride and faith don't go hand in hand. Pride says 'look at me and what I have achieved'; faith says 'I rely only and entirely on God'. Paul in Philippians 3 wrote down a list of all his achievements and the things he had been proud of – his ancestry, his religion, his zeal, his faultless life and the other things he could have added and he was at one time proud of all of these things. But now he writes: *"I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ."* (Phil 3:8) Faith in Jesus was more important to Paul, but knew that faith in Christ Jesus could never live in a heart that was full of pride.

Compare yourself with other people if you like, but it is the wrong way to go. The Kingdom way is different; the kingdom way is to compare ourselves with what God wants, what God expects. The answer will always be *"God have..." (18:13)* We will never be perfect; we will always fall short; we will always have to ask for mercy and forgiveness. But - and this is the glory of the gospel, this is grace, this is Jesus' way – as we do that, God blesses us. Humble hearts are open to believe, open to receive grace from God, open to be filled with His love and peace, open to be filled with His Spirit. We need to be humble in our relationships with others, in the way that we think, in the way we speak, others may just know better; we need to be humble in our leadership, imitating Jesus Christ; we need to be humble in faith, trusting God, looking for grace and forgiveness. Jesus said *"Everyone..." (18:14)*