

A spirituality that works ... at renewal

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[0 : 00] Oh, well, that was a good lunch, wasn't it? Thank you for coming here to join us for lunch today. When I was six, I can remember distinctly comparing my Christmas stocking with that of my best friend and wondering why it was that Father Christmas was distinctly more generous to her than he was to me.

By the time I got to 12, it was the length of my school skirt, the tightness of my jeans and the absence of any breasts in comparison to the other friends in my class. By the time I was 22, I had gone on to the comparison of the stature of my first job and the absence of any boyfriend in comparison to most of my friends.

32, it was whether I was doing my job effectively and the absence of any husband in comparison to most of my friends. 42, it was all about my husband and the production, rearing, management, control and love of my children.

And then, of course, I got to 52, where we start comparing menopausal moments, memory loss, management of teenagers, ageing and dying parents, sagging bodies.

And there are some here today who are experienced enough to be able to tell me what I have to look forward to at 62 or even 72 if I make it. And I suspect I'm not alone in comparing myself with others, nor in secretly sometimes being thankful that I'm not quite like someone else.

[1 : 35] Now, while some of us can feel confident and at ease because when we compare ourselves, we come out rather well, others of us will draw the opposite conclusion that our experience of life means we think we're not quite as good or as clever or as beautiful or as omniscient compared to everybody else.

That even our Facebook, if we have one, is inadequate compared to everyone else. So we feel a sense of hopelessness and perhaps failure when we compare ourselves to others.

Why do we do it? Well, Jesus gives us a very clear answer to do please turn in those little green booklets on the table to page 58. These are one book extracted from the Bible called Luke.

And it's called Luke because it's written by a doctor, Luke, around 60 AD. And it's based on eyewitness accounts about Jesus Christ. Luke writes to tell us he wants to give us certainty.

And I hope that that will be true for us today. So it's the bit headed the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Let's hear it read. Page 58.

[2 : 53] To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Thank you very much. So first, Jesus shows that we compare ourselves to justify ourselves. He's telling a story, isn't he?

[4 : 05] It's a parable, and it's about two men who compare themselves. See first the Pharisee there in verse 10. The Pharisee is part of the religious establishment.

He goes up to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to pray. He's very upright, highly respected. Pharisees were renowned for their honesty, their generosity, and their law-keeping.

The sort of man you might say to your son or your nephew, I hope you grow up to be like him. And Jesus tells us what the Pharisee prays. Have a look at verse 11.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Can you hear the note of self-justification there? God barely gets a look in. You see how the prayer is all about himself.

[5 : 07] In fact, it's pretty much a prayer to himself. And to whom does he compare himself? I thank you that I'm not like other people, verse 11.

It's what inspired our talk title. He compares himself with everyone else. He does it to justify himself. Now, clearly, his religion had done him some good.

To say he didn't steal, when very likely he was a businessman, or that he didn't commit adultery, when very likely his city culture was just like ours, where adultery barely raises even one eyebrow, was impressive.

As for verse 12, well, have a look at that. Fasting and giving, top of the class. He is exactly the sort of person to whom Jesus addresses this parable in little number nine verse.

Confident of their own righteousness and looking down on everyone else. And the question is, is that you today? The Pharisee does it as a way of justifying himself.

[6 : 12] By comparing himself with others, he can justify his own decisions and choices and the way he has lived his life. Deborah of Dulwich walks into the vast anniversary service at Westminster Abbey, full of the great and the good of one sector of the Dulwich community.

She walks up to the front, to the seat reserved for her for all to see. She is a confident mother of five, four in different schools, one of which she chairs the PTA and another she chairs the Governors.

She's married to a prominent gynaecologist. She's relinquished her partnership in a city firm of lawyers, where even she found having it all was slightly beyond her. And she has donated large sums of money to one of her children's schools.

She volunteers at every level of Dulwich society and has a personal best, a PB in the park run, which is the envy of all women and known for her graciousness and kindness.

And as she stands at the front of Westminster Abbey, she looks around and she compares herself with all the others behind her. That's what the Pharisee is like and that's what he's doing.

[7 : 27] So when I compare my hair, my home, my high point of my career, or my husband or partner's career, my holidays with yours, or my waistline, my wallet or my waxings, or my attempt to have it all with yours, or my children or grandchildren with yours, I do it to convince myself that I might, after all, have made the right decisions.

And of course that's before we start comparing ourselves on social media, where we compare not the real me, but a made-up me, with not the real you, but a made-up you.

Hashtag livingmybestlife on Instagram. I'm reliably informed. Does all of that. The problem, according to Jesus, is that the Pharisee was looking in the wrong place for his comparison.

It may be that you are someone at the other end of the spectrum and rather than comparing and seeing all the things you do have, you compare and see all the things that you or your family do not have.

But the issue is the same for us all. Jesus says we are looking in the wrong place for our comparison. And that's my second point. We're looking in the wrong place.

[8 : 43] Look with me at verse 10 again, if you would. Here's the second character who enters the temple with the Pharisee. He's a tax collector. And he's the one who looks in the right place for his comparison.

He doesn't compare himself with others. He compares himself, verse 13, with God. Now to get the full shock of what Jesus says here, don't think of a tax collector as you might of an employee of HMRC or the Inland Revenue, a quiet, grey-suited commuter.

To be a tax collector in the Roman Empire was to be a traitor to your people. Collecting large sums, not by self-assessment by the end of January, but by extortion, supported by the Empire, who permitted tax collectors to keep a percentage of whatever they took for themselves.

So the Jews cursed the ground on which a tax collector walked. He's a cross between a corrupt politician and a car salesman. It's why the Pharisee says in verse 11 to God, I thank you, I am not like that tax collector.

So have a glance down at verse 13. But the tax collector stood at a distance. The temple was a huge complex of buildings and courtyards, and unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector stands at a distance, presumably right on the edge.

[10 : 13] Verse 13 goes on, he would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast. A very non-PC thing for a man to do in that culture. A real sign of sorrow and remorse.

And then Jesus tells us his prayer. Have a look at it in verse 13. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. That's it.

The tax collector has begun to lose confidence in himself, and he finds it rather easier than the Pharisee to turn to God for mercy. He compares himself to God and knows he's in real trouble.

I wonder if we realise that we are in real trouble with God too. I said earlier that was my starting point, my turning point.

We don't know exactly what this guy had done. We're not told. Perhaps it was the extortion of his job or something he'd done to somebody. But when he thinks of what he's done and thought, he knows he's finished, unless God is merciful.

[11 : 18] No doubt there were worse tax collectors around than him, with whom he could have compared himself to make himself feel good, but he doesn't. He compares himself to God. And what is Jesus' verdict on these two men?

That's what we want to know, isn't it? Well, have a look at verse 14. Jesus speaking, Now that is an astonishing verdict, one that may raise questions around our tables.

I rather hope it does. Jesus' words are that the tax collector is the one who walks home in the right with God that day. He's justified.

Now to be justified by God is to be able to stand before God on the judgment day. So it's a term from the law courts, meaning vindicated in the right with God.

I wonder, just for a moment, if you can imagine what that would be like to stand before God on the judgment day justified.

[12 : 33] Since we ignore God most of the time whilst living in his world, how can we, or that tax collector, possibly be justified before God? The answer is wonderfully because of what the Lord Jesus Christ did when he died on the cross.

God sent his son Jesus Christ because you and I need to be forgiven. Just glance over to the bottom of page 59, would you? The little verse 31.

So page 59, little verse 31, where Jesus speaks of himself going on to Jerusalem. And then look at verse 32 and 33 and see what he says about himself.

So he says that he is going to be turned over to the Gentiles and they will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him.

And on the third day he will rise again. See, Jesus knew that he was going to be the sacrifice needed to pay the punishment for our sin.

[13 : 35] Jesus was without any sin himself, so his crucifixion was not deserved, entirely undeserved. He dies so that those who do compare themselves with God, like the tax collector, and cry for mercy, can be completely forgiven.

How amazing is that? The tax collector knew the death of Jesus was necessary for him because the punishment for his sin would be taken by Jesus' death.

Now this is something that I really struggled to understand, so I'd like to illustrate it for you in the way that really helped me understand it.

So let me take this hand to represent us and the ceiling above us to represent where God is. And what the Bible is saying is that we live in God's world and enjoy it, but we live in it ignoring God.

The Bible calls that sin. So I'm going to represent sin with this book. And it acts as a barrier between us and God.

[14 : 42] And God cannot look on sin. He is perfect. So we cannot live in a relationship with him. But because God loves us so much, this hand represents Jesus, and he sends Jesus to die in our place on the cross.

And on the cross, our sin is taken by Jesus Christ, leaving us free to come back into a relationship with God.

That's what Jesus is saying here. Leaving Jesus on the cross, taking the full force of God's justifiable anger for our sin. And then he rises from the dead and ascends to be with his Father in heaven.

That's why Jesus says in verse 14, I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

The tax collector knows which way to look. He knows he needs mercy from God. And so do we all. We compare ourselves to justify ourselves, but we're looking in the wrong place for our comparison.

[15 : 51] One Saturday afternoon at my boarding school, I was playing rounders in my dormitory with five others.

It was all completely not allowed. We were looking to each other, and we had convinced ourselves that it was perfectly fine, really. I hit the ball, all the fielders missed the ball, and it went straight through the window, which was a fixed pane of glass.

Silence as we waited for sounds from the corridor. Relief. No teacher came. We thought we were OK. But we were looking, ladies, all in the wrong place, because underneath the window outside, unseen, walked our headmistress with her dog.

At just the moment, the glass began to shatter. Now, whilst we compared ourselves with each other, we could justify what we did, but we were looking in the wrong place.

As soon as we looked in the right place, at the headmistress below, outside, we were extremely clear on our need for mercy. May I ask you whether you have considered your own need of God's mercy?

[17 : 14] Someone may be thinking, but who is Jesus to be able to say with such authority that someone is or is not right before God? Either it's inappropriate for Jesus to say this, or it's completely appropriate, because he is God in the flesh, who alone can say such things.

Perhaps you're someone today who is convinced that Jesus is God. But if you're not, then consider, would you, perhaps later today, what else Luke describes Jesus as doing.

So we read of a man whose authority is so great that he can look at somebody who's blind and enable them to see, whose authority is so great that he can enable somebody who has never heard to be able to hear, somebody who can't speak to speak.

His authority is so great that he could stand in a boat and speak a few words to a storm and calm it. He could overcome evil. He could overcome death, raising the dead to life.

Indeed, he was raised from death to life himself. What do we make of that? What do you make of a man who could do all that?

[18 : 33] It supports his claim that he is God come to earth to forgive our sins. So the high-achieving Pharisee, according to Jesus in verse 14, would one day be humbled because he compares himself only with people and fails to look at God.

It's ironic for a religious man who no doubt regarded himself as spiritual. And all the time, whilst he compared himself to others, he should have looked the other way, to God.

He'd have stopped justifying himself in his own eyes and thinking how well he'd done. And instead, he would have cried out to God for mercy too, as the tax collector did.

And the tax collector discovered wonderfully that God is merciful. So like the insignificant woman who walked into Westminster Abbey at the same time as Deborah of Dulwich, this woman also had five children, but they were by five different men.

She had considerable wealth from dishonest property deals. She was despised by all around her. But as she cowers at the back of Westminster Abbey, she looks down, weeping, and says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[19 : 47] Jesus says, I tell you, this woman, rather than the other, went home justified before God. So why do we compare ourselves?