

“A really helpful book dealing with a struggle we are very prone to.”

Kathy Keller

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*Tatter*



Sophie de Witt

How to experience true contentment

“Accessible, jargon-free and dealing with a struggle that women are very prone to, this will be a really helpful book for encouraging women to find their way out of a comparison-driven life.”

**KATHY KELLER**, co-author of *The Meaning of Marriage*

“This book is simple but profound—and profoundly helpful. The common problem of comparison is exposed for what it is. In its place comes biblical truth, giving life and health and wholeness.”

**GRAHAM BEYNON**, author of *Mirror Mirror and Emotions*

“We all know we compare ourselves with others. Sophie exposes the reasons why through clear biblical analysis, and I could not wait to read about the treatment. It is a real page-turner—a book to read and then read again.”

**ANN BENTON**, author and conference speaker

“This moving and compassionate book analyses some of our deepest feelings from the point of view of God’s word. It is confronting in places, but it points us to true contentment. I warmly commend it.”

**CHRISTINE JENSEN**, President of the Australian Mothers’ Union

“We all need help to take our eyes off the gifts we do or don’t have, so we can turn our gaze to the Gift-giver Himself. This book is a helpful guide for that process—it’s compassionate, honest, and truthful.”

**CAROLYN MCCULLEY**, author of “Radical Womanhood” and conference speaker

“Sophie’s examples are often funny, sometimes sad and always to the point. She takes us to God’s word, showing how to turn our attention to Christ. A must-read for women of all ages.”

**BEULAH RETIEF**, Dean of Women at George Whitefield College in Cape Town, South Africa

“I started this book assuming that it was written for other women. Within a few pages, I had started to recognise myself from the symptoms Sophie described. Full of clear insights, biblical wisdom and gospel hope, this is a book that every Christian woman should read.”

**ELSPETH PITT**, women’s worker at St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London

“In an age where we so often become the source of our own pain, heartache and discouragement, this book is a must read in helping us to unleash ourselves from ourselves.”

**SARIE KING**, conference speaker and blogger

Sophie de Witt

COMPARED

To Her

How to experience true contentment

the goodbook  
COMPANY

Compared To Her *How to experience true contentment*

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# CONTENTS

	Introduction	7
1	What is CCS?	9
2	Symptoms	15
3	Triggers	21
4	Outlook	29
5	Cause	43
6	Treatment	57
7	Healthy living	71
8	The contented woman	89
	Appendix: What about...?	95
	Endnotes	105
	Useful books	107
	Thank you...	109

*To my precious daughter, Molly.  
May you find true contentment in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

# INTRODUCTION

I am a recovering CCS sufferer. I'm not completely rid of it, though since recognising the problem, I've started to get better. And I know that one day, I'll be free of it. My CCS—or, to give it its full name, Compulsive Comparison Syndrome—will be a thing of the past.

But since realising I was suffering from this syndrome, I've started talking to other women about it; and I've discovered that CCS is far more widespread than I had ever imagined. As I described my symptoms to others, they realized they were struggling with a perspective dominated by CCS, too.

In fact, although I don't know you at all, I'm fairly sure that you have CCS. That's not meant to sound rude! It's just that I've rarely met a woman who doesn't struggle with it.

And as we'll see, CCS promises us contentment, but it robs us of it. So I hope that, whoever you are, you'll find that as this book explains how to be free of this syndrome, you'll also discover how you can experience real, lasting contentment in your life: with who you are, what you're doing, and where you're heading.

We'll start by looking at our lives and spotting the symptoms and triggers of CCS. Then we'll move on to see what the Bible has to say about what causes it, and how it can be treated. And we'll end by thinking about how to live healthy and contented lives without CCS.

You've probably not heard of CCS before. But the chances are you'll recognise its effects in your life. Read on...

## WHAT IS CCS?

*“I put on an outfit I know I look good in, and I feel great—until I get to the party. Then I see someone who looks slimmer, or cooler, or classier; suddenly the woman looking back at me in the mirror looks fat, frumpy and dull. I just want to go home.”*

*“I’m a hard worker. I like knowing that I’m more conscientious than my co-workers. But I also find myself feeling resentful that they get away with doing so much less than me.”*

*“I’m 28, and single. I’m usually OK with it, until a friend gets engaged or I go to a wedding. Then I find myself thinking: ‘Why them? Why not me? What is wrong with me?’”*

*“My boyfriend loves me, I know that. But his ex-girlfriend, who dumped him, is much more attractive than me. I can’t help thinking: ‘If only I looked and dressed like her, then I’d really know that he really wants to be with me, and would pick me over her if he had the choice.’”*

*“I look at photos of myself from decades ago and feel so despondent. I used to be so much slimmer, with smooth*

*skin and no grey hair. Mind you, at the time I thought I was blobby and had frizzy hair...*

*"It's always such an encouragement when I pick the kids up from a party and someone says how they were the best-behaved there. I'm proud of the way we brought them up; and I'm pleased that other people notice."*

*"We don't spend much money—we're good at budgeting and finding deals. We know people who spend their money on all kinds of things they don't really need. I'm glad we don't splash the cash like they do."*

*"Other women seem so caught up in keeping up with what others are doing. I don't let myself get pulled into all that. I'm proud that I'm just me."*

One place it happens to me is in a shopping centre. When another woman around the same age as me passes by, I give them a quick up-and-down scan. It's just a two-second appraisal. And as I look at them, I see that they're doing the same thing with me—a quick sideways glance.

What are we doing? We're comparing ourselves with each other. How does my figure match up with hers? Does she look more or less stylish/cool/effortless than me? Do I look as good as her without having spent the money she clearly has? On all these measuring scales, do I win, compared to her? Or lose?

Maybe for you it's not other women in shops. But you'll still do that glance of comparison. It might happen in someone else's house. Or in the bar. Or on the beach. Or at the office or lecture hall. Or even at church, if you go. We spend our lives making these sorts of comparisons: measuring ourselves against others.

That's the sort of comparing that this book is about. And it's a compulsive kind of comparison; we keep on doing it. It's what I've labelled Compulsive Comparison Syndrome.

### **Why do we do it?**

Pause for a moment before reading on, and just ask yourself:

*When I compare myself with someone else, why do I do it?*

*What am I hoping to get out of it?*

Maybe you had one of these answers, or something like it:

- *I don't know; I just do it (it's an unthinking compulsion).*
- *Because I want to know how I'm doing in life. Am I doing as well as I could be, or is there more I need to get or do?*
- *I want to make sure that I'm "normal".*
- *I need to make sure that I'm not missing out on something that others are enjoying.*
- *It makes me feel better when I realise I'm doing something better than someone else.*
- *Because my parents told me throughout my childhood to be a little bit more like my sister/other people's children.*

Underneath each of those answers to the question "Why compare?" is one of three motivations:

- *I want to know I'm worthwhile (I want to know I'm significant).*
- *I want to know that my life is as good as it could be (I want to be satisfied).*
- *I want to know that I've got what I need in life (I want to feel secure).*

Of course, sometimes it's a mixture of all three. Essentially, what I'm after is to make sure I've got as much, or more, of something than others, so that I can feel significant about who I am, satisfied about what I'm doing and secure about where I'm heading. CCS is a compulsive measuring of myself against the standards of others, desiring a higher position.

### **Who do we do it with?**

Who was the last person you looked at and thought:

*"I wish I had her..."?*

How about:

*"I'm so glad I'm not like her when it comes to..."*

I'll compare myself with anyone. Strangers in a shopping centre, as I've said. Airbrushed models in a magazine. The owners of the houses on home improvement shows.

But most often, since they're most similar to me and I see their lives in detail most often, it's my friends, my family, the people I see most days. After all, when I compare my face to Angelina Jolie's, I've got several ready-made excuses: her skincare budget is probably more than our annual income; and, of course, she's probably been airbrushed. In my mind, she's in a different world to me. When I compare my children's behaviour to the kids of my friend who lives down the street, however, I don't have the same excuses. She's part of my world, and so that comparison has more of an effect on me.

But we can also compare ourselves with people who don't exist. Ever caught yourself comparing who you are now with who you were twenty years ago, or comparing yourself

with who you dreamed you'd become, or with other people's expectations of you?

It seems to me that most of us are comparing ourselves with others all the time, in all kinds of ways. That's the problem with a compulsion; it happens unconsciously, without us even really noticing it's happening.

But we do notice the feelings the comparisons produce—the symptoms of CCS.



# SYMPTOMS



The way we spot the existence of CCS in us is via the signs—the feelings—it produces.

Think of a measure you use to compare. It could be looks... or career... or partner... or DIY... or pet care (it could be anything!). When you compare yourself with someone and they come off better than you, how do you *feel*? And when you compare yourself with someone and come off better than them, what *feelings* does that produce?

When we compare ourselves with others, we'll either “lose” or “win”. If we lose, we'll find ourselves doing a “looking-up comparison”. We might think: “Her children are so much better behaved than mine” or: “She's so much more confident than me” or: “I wish I had her house”.

If we win, then we'll do a “looking-down comparison”. “My kids have better manners than hers”; “I'm glad I'm not as graceless as she is”; “I'd never let my house get into that state”. And looking-up comparisons and looking-down comparisons each produce a different set of symptoms...

## **Looking up**

How do you feel when you compare and come off worse? Let me tell you the symptoms it produces in me; perhaps you'll recognise some of them in yourself:

Inadequacy, despair, self-pity

It may be a fleeting sense—or a profound, overwhelming feeling. You're not the person you could be, should be, or want to be. You're just not good enough. And you never will be. There's no point in trying. What makes you feel like that?

Envy

It's not fair. They've got what you want—so you want what they've got. And you dislike them a little for having it. Deep down, you'd rather that neither of you had it than that they had it and you didn't. How come they get to have what you need to be significant, or satisfied, or secure?

Anxiety, insecurity

You're not doing as well as others. And so you don't have what you need to cope with life. How can you possibly cope with what tomorrow throws at you? Your pulse races and you feel the tears well up whenever you think about the future. If only you were as confident, or wealthy, or energetic, or loved-up as that friend or co-worker, there'd be no need to worry. But you're not.

Guilt

You've let others down. You're not the daughter, or wife, or mother you should be. Your family, friends or co-workers need you to be as good as the person you're comparing yourself

with—but you’re not. You’re failing those you love. So perhaps they won’t keep loving you now...

### Bitterness, grumbling

We can get bitter with other people, and grumble about all sorts of things. But in the Bible, bitterness and grumbling tend to be directed at God, and that’s how I’m using these two words in this book. So bitterness is thinking: “Why did God give me this life, when He has given so much more to others?” “Why did He hold back what I need to be happy, or useful, or secure?” And bitterness tends to lead to grumbling to Him: “God, if You knew what You were doing, You’d have made me more like that other woman. If You really loved me, You wouldn’t have given me this unfair deal in life.”

Or it leads to us ignoring God altogether—because if there were a God, He wouldn’t have made you like this, and given you this life. If there is a good God, He’d have made you more like that other person.

These feelings are all symptoms of looking-up comparison. None of them are ways we would like to feel. If you’re seeing yourself in many of those, it can be quite upsetting. But you’re not alone, although it can seem that way because we all tend to hide our looking-up symptoms from each other. And be encouraged that there is a chapter later in this book headed “Treatment”!

### **Looking down**

But isn’t the treatment for looking-up symptoms simply to get ourselves a life which means that, when we compare ourselves to others, we come off better?

Not really... Here are the symptoms of looking-down comparisons:

### Pride, arrogance

You're just so much better than that other woman. You'd just never let your hair/house/husband look like that. Deep down, you're relieved you don't suffer from their awkwardness, their dress sense, their lack of self-discipline. Well done you, for getting yourself the life you have. On your own merits, you've done so much better.

When we see this kind of self-sufficient self-congratulation in others, we usually call it "arrogance". When I see it in myself, I like to call it "self-confidence"! The Bible usually labels it "pride".

### Superiority

Pride in yourself leads to a sense of superiority over others. After all, you've got what she hasn't, so you are, in a sense, better than her, aren't you? You meet standards that she simply doesn't. You're glad you're not like her.

Again, when I see this in myself, I call it "discernment". In others, I label it as what it is: judgmentalism.

### Inverted superiority

You're glad you're not as arrogant as her, and don't look down on others in the way that she does. You're relieved your family isn't as flashy or stuck-up or prejudiced as theirs. You feel superior that you don't feel so superior as them!

## Entitlement

Since you're better than others, you deserve better than others. When it comes to God, He ought to give you good things in this life. After all, you deserve it—you're a decent person, or you do good things each day, or you stick to religious rules. And you know you're doing well at this, because others don't do it as well as you.

## Insecurity and anxiety

You're doing better than her... but how about the next person you compare yourself with? What if they're doing better than you?

Or what if you lose the possession or circumstance or quality that allows you to compare well to others? It only takes illness, or injury, or bereavement, or a financial crash and you'll lose everything that makes you you. And any of those things could happen tomorrow. Of course you're anxious, deep down!

## **Looking up and down**

The insecure feeling that goes with looking-down comparisons is an indication of the reality that, for almost all of us, we experience both looking-up and looking-down symptoms all the time. We're a constant mixture of despair, envy, and bitterness; and pride, superiority, and entitlement. Here's how it works:

*“My house can feel either like a dingy pokey cottage or a luxurious mansion, depending on who I've just visited. If I've just been in a large, immaculate home, I come home and think: ‘What a dump’. At other times, I come home and think how well we've done to have*

*our house. It's the same house but it can feel completely different on different days!"*

*"I help lead a youth group. I feel so envious of the other, cooler leaders—the teenagers like them so much more than me. So to try to get over my envy, I look down on the teenagers for being so shallow and appearance-focused."*

Each day, we look up and we look down, and feel anxious and self-sufficient, guilty and proud, despairing and smug. What we don't feel, at least not for any length of time, is the sense of significance, satisfaction or security that we're searching for as we compare ourselves with others.

CCS promises much, which is why I glance at the woman walking towards me. But it delivers nothing, or worse than nothing. As the Bible puts it:

*When [people] measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding [or "wisdom"].*

*(2 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 12, ESV translation)*

CCS leaves me walking away from that woman I glanced at in the shopping centre feeling arrogance, or superiority, or envy and despair. And I didn't want to experience any of those emotions!

Sound familiar?

# 3 TRIGGERS

I have a friend who is allergic to peanuts. Eating one won't kill her; but it will make her go red, sweat profusely, and swell up in her face and throat.

Of course, most of the time she is absolutely fine. If she steers clear of nuts, these rather embarrassing symptoms aren't triggered. But put a nut in her mouth, and it sets it all off.

It's the same with CCS. Some days, we're fine, but on others something triggers a whole group of those symptoms. So what are the triggers of CCS? They come in five general categories:

- *Image*
- *Circumstances*
- *Achievements*
- *Goodness*
- *Christian-ness*

## **Image**

*“Sometimes I look in the mirror and really hate the way I look; but actually my worst trigger for self-loathing is not the mirror but looking at other women around me who*

*are ageing better, staying trimmer, and always looking bright-and-breezy! I feel my friends must look at me and feel sorry for me because of how old and haggard I look these days. It's not a nice feeling."*

Have you ever felt envious of someone else's looks, or despaired of your own? Have you ever been relieved and a little proud of how you haven't let yourself go like someone else, or noticed that you've kept up with this year's fashions better than someone else? That's probably caused by image-triggered CCS.

And in the western world, this trigger is everywhere. A large part of the advertising industry is deliberately aiming to make us suffer from looking-up comparison, so that we'll buy their product, the one which (really will) give us the look they tell us we need to have if we're to feel significant, enjoy satisfaction, know security. CCS is triggered constantly by magazines, TV and adverts, as well as the other women we see each day. We either don't have "the look", and so we chase it; or we do have it, and then start fighting a losing battle with the ageing process.

It works the other way, too. We might be, or seek to become, people who don't "do" image: people who aren't as hung up on their looks, who don't spend as much on hair cuts, beauty products or designer labels as those around them. There's a slight sense of superiority that we haven't been taken in by the advertising industry in the way others have. And that sense of superiority indicates that image hasn't stopped triggering our CCS: it's just triggered a looking-down comparison, instead of a looking-up one.

## **Circumstances**

As with the beauty industry, the whole aim of lifestyle media and advertising is to point you to some dream scenario—where you live, what you drive, where you holiday, who you're married to/going out with—and leave you dissatisfied with your life as you compare it to this perfect ideal. Then, of course, you'll need to dip into your bank account to buy the life that CCS has just promised you.

But of course, it's not just the adverts that do this to us. We all know what it is to envy those higher up the privilege scale. If only we had her house... her health... her husband.

And it's just as easy for circumstances to trigger looking-down comparisons in us. Have you ever felt pleased that you've avoided someone else's mistakes? Or thought, deep down, that you've done something to deserve your husband or your house? And have you ever found that those feelings produce a brittle insecurity—so you sometimes lie awake at night worrying about losing a circumstance you rely on to give you your security, or satisfaction?

At this point, it's worth saying that there's a difference between struggling with difficult circumstances and hoping and praying that they'll change, and having circumstance-triggered CCS. I certainly don't want to trivialise a really hard time you're going through, or sound as if I'm condemning your desire to make things better. So, what is CCS, and what isn't?

Authentic CCS: CCS is all about ranking ourselves against others, either below them (looking up to) or above (looking down on) them. Authentic looking-up CCS means you'd feel better if everyone else (or the person you're comparing yourself

with) were in the same boat as you. And authentic looking-down CCS means you'd feel considerably worse if everyone else were doing as well as you.

Not CCS: Sometimes, we go through a circumstance which we hate, and wouldn't wish on anyone. In other words, our feelings are triggered by the circumstance itself, and not by comparing our circumstance with other people's. That's not CCS.

## **Achievements**

If image is based on what we're like, and circumstances on what we have, another trigger is what we can do, or have done. Our workplace successes; qualifications; popularity; hospitality; musical abilities; things we've experienced or places we've seen; how we're raising our children, and how successful (or not) they are; and so on—all can be CCS triggers.

The workplace is full of CCS triggers. Most of us will have felt resentful or envious of a co-worker's promotion, pay-rise or praise. Perhaps we felt despairing of ourselves when we compared our abilities to theirs. Or we convinced ourselves that they just got lucky, and began to feel bitter that their "luck" hadn't been given to us.

And many of us will have felt proud about working more extra hours than someone else. Or superior to the person who simply cannot get their head round the computer system. Or entitled to an extra ten minutes at lunch, because it was our pitch that won the contract.

If, on the other hand, you're a stay-at-home mum, the triggers will be different. Are your CCS symptoms prompted by someone else's cooking or creative abilities? Or their ability

to keep their house running smoothly, hold down a part-time job, look after their elderly parents, and still look great every day? Or by someone else who is never on time, has let themselves go a little, and who lets their children run riot?

### **Goodness**

You may have read the triggers above and felt quite relaxed. You don't struggle with your image, because you know it's what's inside that counts. Wealth and holidays and so on don't matter much to you. And you're happy with the truth that some can do more, and some less, than you: what matters is that you do your best with what you've got.

What you value is character: kindness, thoughtfulness, patience, obeying the law, and so on—what we might call “goodness”.

On my better days, I'm this person. So it really stings to realise... these are all CCS triggers too! For instance, I sometimes think: “Yes, that family have nicer holidays than mine do, but they're basically selfish. They spend all their money and time on themselves. We're investing in others' lives; that's what really counts.”

I've simply started comparing our “goodness” with theirs. And I'm coming off better! I'm not looking up at their circumstances; but I am looking down at their goodness.

### **Christian-ness**

If you're reading this and you're not a Christian, you might think that my point is that Christians are better than this. If you are a Christian, you might be thinking: “I know that it's

not about image. That circumstances aren't important. That my achievements are God-given. That I'm not good enough for God, so there's no point in being proud."

It could seem that CCS doesn't apply to Christians; but in fact it does. The symptoms are the same, it's just that living as a Christian introduces a whole new set of triggers.

*"I am a good musician, and I love being part of the music ministry at church. Well, I love it except the times when someone new joins who quickly proves better than me at playing or singing. Then I want to pull out of doing it, because I don't want to look second-rate next to them. I envy their abilities; and I get resentful that they're better. Normally, instead of pulling out, I actually just practise more during the week, to make sure I'm as good."*

*"Sometimes, when I listen to someone else reading the Bible in church, I feel a bit smug. I know I read it better than they do, and I find myself thinking that they should really practise more beforehand, or else not be asked at all. So I'm always pleased to be asked to read, because I know I'll do it better."*

This is CCS with a Christian veneer. It looks really great—singing well as part of the music group, or reading well at the front of church—but in fact, it's moving the goalposts while playing the same game.

And these are just two Christian-ness triggers. If you're a Christian, have you ever caught yourself thinking:

- *I know my Bible much better than they do / I'll never remember as many Bible verses as they do?*

- *I would never commit that sin like they do / I keep on sinning so much more than everyone else?*
- *I do so much more for our church than others do / I don't have anything to contribute to my church?*
- *I have given up so much more than other people in order to live as a Christian / I'm useless at this Christian life, everyone else is so much better than me?*

In thinking these things, we look up at those who are “better” Christians, and feel despair or envy. We grow bitter with God for changing, helping or using others more than us. Or, we look down on others who are not such “good” Christians as us, feel proud of our own efforts and talents, and suspect that God is fortunate to have us as His follower, and that He owes us. It's CCS.

Like the “goodness” triggers, these triggers appear less “worldly” than others— but it's the same syndrome with the same symptoms. It's just that superficially, it's Christian-looking. I find it harder to spot, and easier to hide from or make excuses for.

And, just like all other bouts of CCS, it has a serious effect on us, and on those around us.





# OUTLOOK

CCS is a damaging syndrome, not just in terms of our feelings, but also when it comes to our relationships. In both the short-term and the long-term, the outlook for CCS strugglers is not good.

## **My relationship with myself**

Have you ever met someone who projects a great air of confidence, and yet at the same time seems radically insecure? Who comes across as pretty impressive no matter what the topic of conversation—who's always the funniest, or the highest-achieving, or the most experienced? It's pretty intimidating!

One of the things I find most unsettling, but also liberating, about the Bible is that it tackles the heart head on, and calls things for what they are. And what I've called "a great air of confidence", God simply calls "arrogance"; a desire to be self-sufficient. And He describes people who are "arrogant and never at rest ... never satisfied" (Habakkuk 2 v 5).

Perhaps you are someone who feels the need always to be better—and, let's be honest, it's exhausting. Your view of yourself becomes incredibly brittle. You struggle to admit

to yourself that someone does something better than you, because that undermines your whole self-image and your sense of significance. Your identity is based on the idea that you are better than others, though of course you don't put it like that. CCS has left you proud, and insecure about who you are.

On the other hand—and this is the more common feeling in women, I think—CCS can leave us hating ourselves. We see who others are, or at least we see how others project themselves to us, and we despair of who we are in comparison. We long to be like them. The Bible puts it poetically:

*A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots  
the bones.* (Proverbs 14 v 30)

Looking-up comparison leaves us thoroughly dissatisfied with who we are; crushed in our self-perception of our abilities and characteristics. We can't accept who we are until we meet some standard that we set by comparing ourselves with others. Down this road lies chronic under-confidence.

Often, we're a mixture of the two—looking up and looking down. I recently heard a model confess on TV that she thinks models are among the most insecure women of all. Why? Because they are continually being compared with others, and comparing themselves with others. Their whole job depends on comparing favourably. And even though they come off better than most women when it comes to beauty, there will always be another model to look up at; and there will always be the nagging knowledge that beauty tends to fade! High cheekbones do not guarantee a heart of peace—quite the opposite.

The brittle or despairing self-image that CCS causes is quite neatly encapsulated in the novel *Warnings and Gales*,

by Annie Sanders. Two women—the competent but slightly frumpy housewife, Imogen, and the feisty, sexy, single mum and doctor Jo—have ended up on holiday together. Towards the end of the book, they admit to each other how they feel about one another:

*Jo said, “I know it’s a bit late in the day, but I might as well admit it. Right from the word go, I’ve felt really envious of the way you make it all look so easy. One minute you’re whipping up hot chocolate, the next it’s wipes and plasters in your handbag—not to mention the cooking. You can even do the Heimlich manoeuvre better than me.”*

*Imogen smiled a little. “I did a course. You can’t...”*

*“...Be too careful?” Jo laughed. “It’s just really intimidating being with someone as competent as you.” Jo sat back, feeling strangely relieved to have off-loaded all that. But Imogen was staring at her, frowning. Had she said too much again?*

*“What? Me? Intimidating? Jo, I’ve felt intimidated by you from the moment you got here.” Jo was stunned. “Well, look at you. You’re slim, you wear fantastic clothes, you always look gorgeous, men stare at you wherever we go, you’ve got a great career... Next to you, I feel like a boring, lumpy, frowsy old bag!”*

*Jo mirrored the puzzlement and disbelief on Imogen’s face, then a low chuckle rose from her throat and she shook her head slowly. “What have we been doing to each other? This was supposed to be a holiday, not a form of torture.”<sup>1</sup>*

Remember that comparison was meant to show us that we're significant and satisfied and secure? Instead, it steals our joy.

## **My relationship with others**

One of the most depressing truths about suffering from CCS is that it stops us loving others.

The Bible is full of warning stories which are essentially examples of CCS run riot. Take the historical story of Joseph and his brothers, for instance. Joseph's father, Jacob (also called Israel) "loved Joseph more than any of his [eleven] other sons" (Genesis 37 v 3). And to show this, he gave Joseph, and only Joseph, "an ornate robe".

How did his brothers respond? When they "saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him" (v 4). They compared themselves with Joseph on the basis of their father's love, came off worse, and were filled with envious hatred.

How did Joseph respond? He shared his dreams with them: "We were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and bowed down to it" (v 7).

Why did Joseph choose to share his dream in which he ruled his older brothers? Maybe he was simply young and naïve. But probably he wanted them to know that, compared to them, he was greater, more successful, and headed for more significance than them. While his brothers show the symptoms of looking-up comparison, he displays the symptoms of looking-down comparison.

It all ended in tears, of course (though God, wonderfully, was working to bring good out of it in the end). One day, Joseph was

sent by his father to find his brothers, who were tending sheep miles away. As Joseph, wearing his special cloak, approached (v 23), the brothers decided to take him down a peg or two: “Let’s kill him ... then we’ll see what comes of his dreams” (v 20). CCS had produced a tinderbox of pride and envy, which now exploded into conspiracy to murder. In the end, they settled for selling Joseph as a slave to some foreigners, and lying to their father about what had happened to him (v 31-33).

Resentment is the by-product of envy. If we compare and come off worse, we resent those who seem to have it better. When something great happens to a friend, we can’t feel happy for them. We’re too busy feeling envious of them, and sad for ourselves. We’re too wrapped up in thinking: “It’s just so unfair”.

*“When my husband and I were struggling to have children, I found it almost impossible to be genuinely happy for friends who were ‘popping out’ numbers two, three or four. At one point I couldn’t even bring myself to go to baby showers. I didn’t want to hand over a gift or say congratulations. I tried to steer clear of people with children. I know other women who don’t have children and who were able to be happy for others, but for me there could be no real rejoicing.”*

If we’ve built our sense of significance as a person on being part of a group of friends... or if our security comes from being wealthier than those around us... then a change in other people’s circumstances threatens our whole sense of who we are. If a new girl joins the church and is one of those people who draws friends like bees to a honeypot... or if a friend

inherits a fortune from that rich, elderly aunt that everyone other than us seems to have... we resent them. We had been able to proudly look down in those areas; now suddenly we feel the envy of looking up. We wish they weren't around us; or we try to make sure that we're not around them.

What the brothers' envious resentment drove them to was pretty extreme. I imagine CCS has never prompted you to plot murder or sell a sibling into slavery! But what CCS feelings do cause us to do is to seek to make someone else's life worse.

Have you ever found yourself gossiping or making negative comments about someone whose popularity you're secretly a little envious of? Why do we do that? Because we want to drag them down a notch or two in front of others, so that we can more easily match up to them. The feeling of envy produced by CCS has turned itself into the action of gossip. Though we don't want to be known as a gossip, CCS turns us into one. And, when we realise this, what do we do? Either we realise we're much less nice compared to others, and here comes more despair, self-hate, and guilt. Or we just find someone who is more of a gossip compared to us, and here comes the pride and superiority!

In the end, CCS even stops us loving our loved ones. CCS makes life all about me; about me managing to match up, or stay ahead. When I do things for them, it's so that I compare favourably with others. When I encourage them to change, it's so that I'll look like a better daughter, wife, mother, or older Christian friend/adviser. When they make a mistake, I may well be more irritated about how that reflects on me than I am sad for them. It looks like I'm doing it all for them; actually, it's all for me.

It's worth pausing here and asking ourselves:

- *Are there ways I try to bring others down a peg or two, so that I can compare more favourably to them?*
- *Have I failed, underneath my smile, to celebrate good news with a friend, because deep down I'm resenting her?*
- *Are there ways I try to alter my friends or family so that I'll compare well with others, rather than acting for their sake?*
- *Do I ever become angry with my loved ones because of how their actions make me look?*

Of course, looking-down comparisons are no better for our relationships with others. A superior attitude can make us patronising, impatient, dismissive or worse to those we think of as inferior to us. And when this kind of CCS operates at a group level, its effects are multiplied. School bullying in the playground is often a group activity, because children love to feel part of an “in-crowd”, superior and safer than those who are on the “outside”. And in the adult world, group-level CCS leads to cultural prejudice and racism, where a group or a whole “race” seek to push others down so that they can find significance or security in being “better”. Living in South Africa, it's still very easy to see the sinister effect of one people group rooting their identity in opposition to, and comparison with, another. It's CCS on a national level; and it's horrible.

When CCS gets a grip, it doesn't only steal our joy; it stops our love. And that still isn't the worst of it, because CCS also affects...

## My relationship with God

Jesus once told a story about two men. It's essentially about two different ideas about how to have a relationship with God. Spot the CCS going on here:

*<sup>10</sup> Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

*<sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

*(Luke 18 v 10-12)*

Let's face it, in religious terms, this guy looks very, very good. He is a Pharisee: a religious leader, really strict with himself about keeping God's laws. And he is confident that he is right with God, in relationship with God, headed for heaven with God. Why? Because he's better than others.

So he thanks God "that I am not like other people" (v 11). He compares himself with those around him, and comes off very well. And you can hear the pride and superiority in his tone. CCS has told him that when it comes to God and him, all is well. He's entitled to God's friendship—after all, he's better than everyone else.

There's another man in the temple. He's a tax collector—a traitor, a cheat, the lowest of the low. Unlike the Pharisee, he...

*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". (v 13)*

To feel the force of what Jesus says next, we need to grasp who these two characters are. One is a good, moral, religious

man—the first-century equivalent of a minister. The other is a selfish, amoral, exploitative man—the equivalent of a conman who preys on old women.

But Jesus says:

*“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.” (v 14)*

The conman is “justified”—in right relationship with God; the minister isn’t. If that seems odd, it’ll all become clear in chapter six. But the point for now is that the Pharisee wasn’t justified. God rejected the man who approached Him on the basis of his comparative goodness.

And Jesus wasn’t telling that story for the benefit of Pharisees: He told it “to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else” (v 9). That brings it closer to home. Jesus has in His sights anyone who thinks they are fine with God because they are good enough, or moral enough, or religious enough.

That’s because “enough” has to be based on a comparison. If I say I am “good enough to go to heaven”, I’m saying that I am better than some other people, and so am entitled to a place in heaven. I’m looking down on some other people and saying: “God, I am not like other women—I’m not like them. I look after my family... I work hard... I don’t put others down... I go to church... I don’t sleep around. I’m good enough for you.”

That’s the looking-down CCS approach to our relationship with God. I reckon that’s the view of themselves and God that most people have. It’s the one I had for years. And Jesus says: it leaves you facing life without God. Be careful.

But, if we're in the grip of CCS, what's the alternative to looking down? Isn't it looking up?! It's very easy to look at those who are better, or nicer, or more "good" than us, and conclude that we have no hope of making God pleased with us. We despair at our own lack of goodness; or we grow bitter with God for setting the bar higher than we can manage; or we decide to ignore God and His standards altogether and hope that He isn't there, or won't mind.

A sense of superiority means God rejects us when we approach Him; but a sense of inferiority will mean we never approach God in the first place. It would be like that tax collector thinking: "Boy, look at that Pharisee. I've got to be that good to be in God's good books. I never fast, and I take other people's money instead of giving my own away. There's no point in even trying; God will never want me." And if he'd thought like that, he'd never have even turned up to the temple to speak to God that day.

CCS affects not only how we think we become right with God, but also how we stay right with God. That Pharisee presumably didn't get up that morning and think: "I need to get right with God". He thought he already was, and that his goodness compared to others kept him acceptable to God. The idea that God gives us a place in heaven, and then we have to do well enough to keep earning that place, is a common view among professing Christians. But again, Jesus says it doesn't work. And again, what's the alternative? To despair. To look at your Christian life and think: "I'm just not good enough. Look at how much better other Christians obey God than me. Look at how much more God won't keep wanting me in heaven. Look at how badly I'm doing."

*“As a result of years of struggle with a low level of fatigue, I often feel very unproductive compared with my Christian friends. I frequently need afternoon sleeps and can’t be busy many evenings in a row, or else my immunity plummets and I get sick. Until recently, I found that in the periods where I felt reasonably energetic and could keep up with others around me, I’d feel confident in my faith: that I was ‘good enough’. When I felt tired and could accomplish very little, I’d look at the other women in church, and feel inadequate and concerned about my relationship with Christ. Deep down, I thought my lack of productivity meant God wouldn’t be pleased with me. My relationship with God was on a roller-coaster, depending on who I spent time with and how busy and fruitful I felt in comparison with them.”*

Whether we look down or look up, CCS makes it all about us: about our goodness, or our lack of goodness. Either way, it ultimately destroys our relationship with God.

How seriously you take this depends on how you see God. The Bible reveals that for all of us, God is the source of everything we have that is good, including life itself (James 1 v 17; Job 12 v 10). That continues to be the case beyond death. In the life beyond this one, people in relationship with God—“justified” by Him—will enjoy only good things. Those who don’t know God, on the other hand, will be left with nothing, for ever, no matter what they achieved or accumulated in this life.

That makes a lack of justification by God eternally serious. CCS steals our joy and stops us truly loving others. But most importantly of all, it can destroy the only relationship which

will matter for ever: our relationship with God.

Which is why it's great news that there's a different way to approach God. The tax collector, the first-century conman, the guy who we would almost all naturally want to look down on, shows us this. He does something that leaves him, Jesus says, "justified before God" and "exalted" by God (v 14).

The great news is that Jesus cuts through CCS, taking us beyond looking up or looking down and showing that pride or despair aren't the only options. There is a way to live which allows us to be at peace with ourselves; to love others; and to enjoy life with God.

### **Experience contentment**

The Bible calls that experience "contentment"—a life knowing real significance, satisfaction and security. It's a life where we can say what one Christian, Paul, could say: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances ... I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry" (Philippians 4 v 11-12)—whether doing well and able to look down at others; or whether doing badly and having to look up at others.

Wouldn't that be wonderful?! To be contented with who you are, what you're doing, and where you're headed; and to have this contentment regardless of what is happening around you, regardless of your image and circumstances and achievements and goodness?

There is a way to know, to experience, to feel contentment. And it doesn't come from CCS. It comes from finding a way to live without it.

## False medicines

So how can we defeat CCS? There are lots of suggested treatments—we actually hear them quite often. Here are a few I've heard, and a few that I've said to other people too, which are totally unhelpful in the long run:

- *“When you feel down, just remember all the ways in which you are attractive/gifted/successful.” This is simply asking someone to replace a looking-up comparison with a looking-down comparison. It's essentially saying: Instead of thinking about something which makes you feel despair, find something which can make you feel proud for a while!*
- *“Remember, they probably have some problems in other parts of their life.” If my main “trigger” is looking up at someone else's marriage, then I am going to envy them. It doesn't make any difference if they have a problem in an area that isn't a “trigger” for me.*
- *“Do something about it.” This, again, is simply encouraging me to get to a position where I can swap “looking up” for “looking down”.*
- *“There are people far worse off than you.” Again, this is using looking-down comparison to treat looking-up comparison!*
- *“Accept yourself as you are.” This actually means “be proud of who you are”; it will mean I either think I am good enough for God (like the Pharisee), or that I keep Him at arm's length because I don't want to accept that I'm not good enough. It will also mean I have to try to ignore my flaws and failings, because otherwise how can I accept myself? My self-image will be very brittle.*

Ultimately, none of these are much more effective than applying a sticking plaster to a broken leg. That's because none of them deals with the cause of CCS. And if you don't understand the cause of something, you can't treat it...

# 5 CAUSE

It may well be that since you've started reading this book (unless you've read it in a single sitting!), two things have happened.

First, you've noticed far more often that you're comparing yourself to someone; it's worse than you realised! In fact, you're realising just how compulsive comparison is!

Second, you've been trying not to compare. But you can't stop doing it. It's really frustrating—it is a syndrome we can't shake. Is there a cure for CCS?

Yes, there is. But to treat it, we need to know what the cause is. CCS isn't a skin-deep problem. Ultimately, it's a heart issue. The roots of CCS are in our hearts, in the motivational and emotional engine-room of our lives. So it's our hearts that we need to treat. But before we can find effective treatment, we need to be clear what the cause is. That's what this chapter is about.

## **Long, long ago...**

CCS isn't a new thing. In fact, it's been a feature of life almost since humanity began. To see the cause of CCS, we're starting with the very first humans. They'll show us why CCS is so rooted in our hearts; and they'll show us that, wonderfully, it doesn't need to be like this...

*27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

*28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

*29 Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.”<sup>30</sup> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.*

*31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

*(Genesis 1 v 27-31)*

When the world was new, it was, as God Himself put it, “very good”. And people—men and women—were “blessed” (v 28). Blessing isn’t a word we use very often today. (Some people use it to describe a prayer before a meal, or after a church service, but that’s not how the Bible uses it.) To be “blessed” is to enjoy significance, security and satisfaction in this world, without dilution, disappointment or death.

Where does this blessing come from? From the One who designed the world; from God Himself. The reason the first man and woman—Adam and Eve—enjoyed blessing was because God was at the centre of the world, and blessing comes from Him. The reason all of us look for blessing in our lives today is because we were made to experience those things, just as Adam and Eve were. And we were made to receive our significance, our security and our satisfaction by enjoying

knowing God, just as they were.

Humans are made by God, and “in the image of God” (v 27). We are able to relate to God Himself, and reflect who He is to the world. That makes each and every human hugely, and equally, significant. God put you together in the womb (Psalm 139 v 13-16). He has already mapped out your life (139 v 15). He knows what you’ll say before you say it (139 v 4). And He’s made you to know Him.

That’s a glorious, honoured position to hold. Neither a rabbit nor a rock can know God and enjoy relationship with Him. We can, because He made us in His image. Our significance does not come from which family we’re born into, who we married, what we do Monday to Friday or how we serve on a Sunday. It comes from being made by God, to know God.

It’s really quite mind-blowing. The One who spoke planets into being and flung stars into space thought of you, made you to be you, and loves you as you. No one can take that away from you, or give you any greater significance than that. We can never be, and never need to feel, worthless.

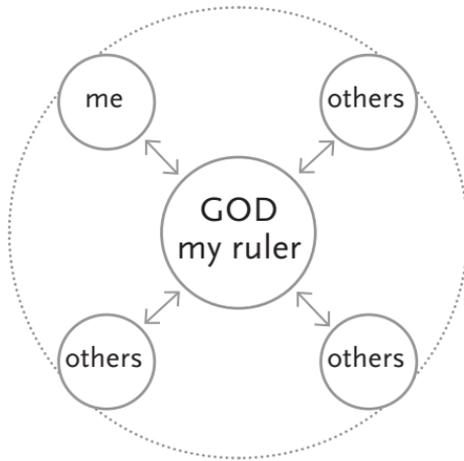
And humans are made to enjoy a “very good” world in relationship with its Creator (Genesis 1 v 31). The first two chapters of Genesis give us a glimpse of a world in which everything works and nothing frustrates—in which everything gives satisfaction. God told the first humans to do two things; to “be fruitful and increase in number”, and to “rule” the rest of the creation (v 28).

In other words, God gave them two gifts: having families, and doing the job of looking after the world. In this “very good” world of perfect relationships between God and people,

neither families nor work provoked frustration or prompted fear; both always provided fulfilment. Whether at home or at work, this was a world where humans could end every day satisfied with their place in the world, and could know they were not missing out in any way. They were God's people living according to God's design.

But neither significance nor satisfaction in life can be fully enjoyed if they can be lost; we can't enjoy 100% today what we know we might lose tomorrow. What was wonderful about the way God designed humans to live was that He gave them complete security. In the centre of the wonderful garden that He gave Adam and Eve to live in were two trees—the “tree of life” and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2 v 9). And God told them they could eat from the first, but not from the second (v 16-17). Both the eating and the not-eating were wonderful. Because they could eat from the tree of life, these humans knew the security of being free from the fear of death. They could enjoy life in this world every day, knowing that it could not be their last. And because they could not eat from the second tree, which represented the power to decide right and wrong, to rule the world, they could know that God was in charge of the world and of them. They could live secure in the knowledge that they were in the safest hands possible—that God was ruling, guiding, helping them.

We were made to know significance, satisfaction and security. We were all designed to enjoy blessing in God's world from knowing and finding our sense of who we are from God our Ruler:



And that's exactly what the first humans experienced. So what went wrong?!

### **Pushing God aside**

CCS is, ultimately, caused by our desire to put “me” at the centre of the universe, and at the centre of our hearts. Here's where it started:

<sup>1</sup> *Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”*

<sup>2</sup> *The woman said to the snake, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, <sup>3</sup> but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”*

<sup>4</sup> *“You will not certainly die,” the snake said to the woman.*

<sup>5</sup> *“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes*

*will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

*<sup>6</sup> When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

*(Genesis 3 v 1-6)*

Why did the woman eat from the “tree that is in the middle of the garden” (v 2), which God had told them not to eat from? Because the devil (appearing to her as a serpent) convinced her that if she took it, she would “be like God” (v 5).

The devil’s lie is simple: life would be better if you got rid of God, and became your own Ruler. You’d know more blessing without God than you do with Him. And tragically, the woman chose to believe him. Forgetting how wonderful life with God as Ruler was, and forgetting that blessing was found in knowing God, she chose to push Him out and put herself at the centre of her life. And, when her husband saw her doing it, he decided to do the same.

## **Myself at the centre**

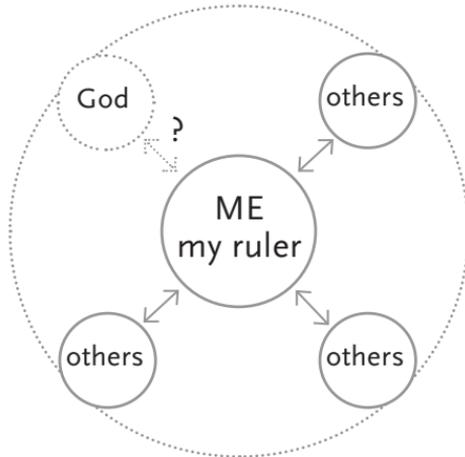
What’s the first thing you do when you look at a group photo that includes yourself? You find you, of course! We view the world through a lens which has our own image and interests firmly at the centre. Our first instinct when something happens to us, or we see something new, or someone else does something, is to ask: “How does this affect me? How does this make me feel?” We love to be in control, to be in a privileged position, to receive admiration. We love to take God’s place.

We're at the centre. God (if we acknowledge His existence at all) is not the ultimate being—I am.

But now that I'm in the middle, how do I know I'm experiencing the best I can? How do I know I'm making a success of life? I can't find my significance, my security and satisfaction from knowing God as my Ruler—I pushed Him out of that position and seated myself in the throne.

I can only look for it in relation to others, by measuring myself up against them. I'll have to check that I'm doing better than they are. I'll have to see how they're doing better than me so I can try to get what they have.

Here's how the first woman changed her world—and how we instinctively view ours:



So we look at other people and think: "If I were as good at that as she is, I'd be significant—I'd be a valuable person." "If I had as much of that as they do, I'd be satisfied—I would be able to really enjoy life." "If I had that aspect of their life, then I'd be

secure—I'd feel that life was under control.”

The that could be anything; we use it to measure ourselves against others, because we think that if we have enough of it, we'll be blessed. The Bible calls these measures “idols”—things that seem to offer significance, satisfaction, security. Author and pastor Timothy Keller puts it like this:

*“If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol”<sup>2</sup>.*

As we compare ourselves with others on our idol measures, if we score higher then we'll look down; if we score lower, we'll look up.

How do we choose what measures to use when we compare ourselves with others? Sometimes, it's by looking at people around us to see what they think will bring them blessing, and then comparing ourselves with them on that measure:

*“I was happy with my marriage until I heard some other women at work talking about their relationships. Their husbands sounded really romantic—and they had lots of sex! Suddenly, I felt dissatisfied with my husband. His kindness, trustworthiness and stability didn't matter anymore—now he seemed inadequate. It changed the way I thought about him; I found fault with him at every opportunity. My marriage didn't measure up, and I felt he was to blame. I wasn't going to make an effort until he became a husband as 'good' as other husbands. It was horrid.”*

Knowing God wasn't where this woman looked for satisfaction; a romantic marriage had replaced Him. That was her

idol-measure, given to her by her co-workers. If only her husband were as fun and romantic as her co-workers' husbands, she would be satisfied in life. Since he wasn't (or didn't seem to be), she was dissatisfied. She was trapped in CCS.

More often, though, our idol-measures are provided by our upbringing and childhood experiences:

*“My family always set huge store by exam results. I grew up being taught subliminally that people with academic intelligence were ‘better’ than others. Since I tended to be towards the top of the class, that meant I was ‘better’. Years later, I still struggle not to seek to appear cleverer than those around me, and I feel insecure and intimidated when I’m with anyone who I know is more intelligent than I am.”*

Being made by God, uniquely formed by Him in His image, isn't where this woman finds her sense of self-worth; in other words, her significance. Instead, intelligence is. That's her idol-measure, given to her by her family. If she has enough intelligence—if she is intelligent when compared to those around her—she feels significant. If not, all her self-worth disappears. She's trapped in CCS.

Our idol-measure can be anything. Romantic marriage and intelligence are just two. Some of us may see savings as what gives us security—and we compare our investments with those of others to see if we're really secure. Some of us need to lose weight to feel self-worth—as long as we're a bit slimmer than our friends, that will be enough. Some of us find our satisfaction in our lovely home—until someone in our neighbourhood has a beautiful extension put on theirs. None

of those things are bad in themselves—it's just that we've made these good things into ultimate things.

We're so easily, and so often, trapped in compulsive comparison syndrome—and CCS is way more serious than a very common bad habit. Measuring ourselves against others, desiring a better position, is a direct result of us taking God's place at the centre of the world and looking for blessing in things that are not our Creator. The reality of CCS shows that our hearts are rejecting God's loving rule in our lives.

In a world where “I” am at the centre instead of God, CCS will be a constant companion. It has to be.

### **CCS unleashed**

The link between rejecting God's rule (“sinning”), and losing blessing and so suffering from CCS, rapidly becomes clear as humans live in a world with themselves at the centre.

First, it shows itself in their relationship with God. When God confronts the two humans about what they've done, He asks the man: “Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?” (3 v 11).

The man's response is a classic attempt to base a relationship with God on looking-down comparison: “The woman you put here—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (v 12). The man approaches God on this basis: “Yes I ate it. But she took it from the tree. Compared to her, I'm not that bad!”

God then turns to the woman: “What is this you have done?” And she answers: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (v 13). Her grounds for thinking she's OK with God are: “Yes I ate it. But the serpent was the one who tricked me.

Compared to him, I'm not that bad!" Notice that she doesn't compare herself with her husband, but with someone that is less good than her.

This is the approach to God which that Pharisee adopted in Jesus' story; finding people to look down on so that we seem comparatively "good enough" for God. As Jesus said, God does not accept the proud. And the next time God speaks to the first man and woman, it's to banish them from the garden and from His presence and blessing.

CCS ruins people's relationship with God; it also wrecks their relationship with each other. Eve had two children: Cain and Abel. When they both brought offerings to God, God was pleased with Abel's, but not with Cain's (Genesis 4 v 4-5). We're not really told why; that's not the point. What matters is how Cain responds.

"Cain was very angry" (v 5): he compared himself with his brother and came off worst. He was envious of his brother's acceptance, and he was bitter towards the God who had not given him what he wanted.

And his feelings led to actions: "Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him" (v 8). It's only a generation since humanity was enjoying eternal life; now one human ends the life of another.

Fast forward through the millennia, and CCS is simply a part of our lives. Here's how the Bible describes humanity throughout the ages. It doesn't make for pleasant reading but, if we're honest, it does make for an accurate summary:

*<sup>29</sup> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters,*

*insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;<sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.* (Romans 1 v 29-31)

Did you notice how many of those descriptions of humans were feelings that are symptoms of CCS (envy, arrogance, boastfulness ie: superiority) or the actions that those feelings become (murder, strife, deceit and malice, gossip, slander, faithlessness)? Not all sin is a result of CCS; but all CCS is, at root, sin—a result of pushing God out of the centre so that we can rule our own lives and seek our blessings elsewhere.

### **Broken cisterns**

We've already seen that a life spent seeking blessing through comparison doesn't deliver. Now, we can see why it doesn't deliver—and why it never will.

It's because, as Romans 1 puts it neatly, people did not, and do not, “think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, [and so] he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done” (v 28).

We each choose not to treat God as God, not to know Him as our Ruler. So He allows us to have what we've chosen; minds and hearts which seek blessing elsewhere. And He allows us to act as we have chosen—to do the things which searching for blessing elsewhere produces in our efforts to gain or keep that blessing.

But God created a world in which we could and would find significance, satisfaction and security from knowing Him; in relationship with Him, living under His rule. Blessing isn't found anywhere else. God gives us a helpful image to describe what we've done:

*People ... have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and  
have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold  
water. (Jeremiah 2 v 13)*

We could have known blessing from God. But we've chosen to look elsewhere for significance, satisfaction, or security. Those things weren't designed to deliver them; and God won't let them.

We were made to know “the spring of living water”—God; created to enjoy His blessing and to overflow it to each other and the world. Pushing God out of our lives and making ourselves our own ruler doesn't stop us being human. But it does mean we've cut ourselves off from the only source of blessing. We go on living, yet we are so much less than the people we could be, should be, were made to be. And one day, we'll leave all our successes behind anyway.

Of course, we still live in a world which was made to be “very good”; and we see very good reflections of that original, wonderful creation all around us, and in our own lives. But blessing proves elusive. Wherever we seek it, chase it, and even seem to grasp it, it slips away.

After leaving home, I lived in a shared flat for just over a decade before I got married. All that time, I longed to have “my own home” which I could decorate and buy stuff for; a house like some of my friends who were getting married lived in. But after my wedding, we lived in a small, rented one-bedroom flat. I carried on dreaming of getting my own big house, and envying those who did. If I just had that kind of house, I imagined, my messiness would sort itself out, I'd love coming home, and I'd feel settled and secure about life.

We got that kind of house, eventually. It was great—but it wasn't what I'd pictured. The messiness continued (it just had more space to spread out in!). The decorating proved very stressful and then mildly disappointing, or just didn't happen at all. It was a lovely house—but after a while, I realised it wasn't going to give me all that I thought it would. After all, it was only a house.

We know what it is to compare ourselves with someone, fall short, and conclude that we need more of what they have—surely then we'll feel blessed. We know what it is to wonder if we've been chasing the wrong thing, and switch our efforts to gaining something else instead—surely then we'll feel blessed. And we know what it is to make huge sacrifices to finally grab what we thought would give us blessing—only to find that what we'd craved doesn't deliver all that it promised, for as long as it promised. So we look for more of it, more of something else, or give up and despair.

In other words, our experience of life confirms to us that God's words are true. We dig our own cisterns, and we make a rubbish job of it. They're cracked, and no matter what we seek to fill our lives with, blessing drains away.

But since God's words are true, there is a spring of living water. There is a treatment for CCS...

# TREATMENT



In the end, the treatment for CCS is wonderfully, challengingly simple. The medicine can be summed up in a few words:

*Let God be God.*

Our compulsive need to compare comes from pushing God out of the centre; as does our forlorn and futile search for blessings. So the cure is simply to reverse the way we see the world, and ourselves. We need to restore God to the centre of our lives, and to find all we need, at each point of our days and in every part of our dreams, in Him.

*Let God be God.* If ever something was easier said than done, it is that! It's not difficult to understand the truths that we're looking at in this chapter, and to know that God should be God in our lives. But to actually live as though God is God, so that our blessings are all found in Him... that's a very different thing. I'm aware that I often walk around knowing in my head that God is the source of blessing; but I leave that package of knowledge just there, in my head. I don't apply it to my heart. I don't trust it. I don't let it shape my life.

So it may be that you're reading this book and you're well aware that you haven't got your head around what Christianity is (in which case, read on—this chapter contains its core message). But it could also be that you're reading as someone who has all these things worked out in your understanding; but you haven't wrapped your heart around them.

The truth about God—the gospel message—is something we need to know not only intellectually, but also emotionally.

So where do we start in letting God be God? By remembering and knowing and living out two key truths about Him: that God is the blessing-bringing Creator, and that He is the blessing-restoring Saviour.

## **1. The blessing-bringing Creator**

Remembering that God is our Creator means that we will find our confidence in who we are, what we're doing, and where we're heading through knowing Him, rather than through comparing ourselves with others.

Have a read of Psalm 8, written 3,000 years ago by the Old Testament king of Israel, David. See if you can pick out from this song where he is finding his sense of significance, satisfaction in life, and security for his present and his future.

<sup>1</sup> *LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory  
in the heavens.*

<sup>2</sup> *Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,*

*to silence the foe and the avenger.*

<sup>3</sup> *When I consider your heavens,*

*the work of your fingers,*

*the moon and the stars,*

*which you have set in place,*

<sup>4</sup> *what is mankind that you are mindful of them,*

*human beings that you care for them?*

<sup>5</sup> *You have made them a little lower than the angels*

*and crowned them with glory and honour.*

<sup>6</sup> *You made them rulers over the works of your hands;*

*you put everything under their feet:*

<sup>7</sup> *all flocks and herds,*

*and the animals of the wild,*

<sup>8</sup> *the birds in the sky,*

*and the fish in the sea,*

*all that swim the paths of the seas.*

<sup>9</sup> *LORD, our Lord,*

*how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8)*

David is simply doing what Adam and Eve did until they listened to the serpent; he is remembering that God is His Creator, His Ruler. And so he enjoys the significance, in a vast cosmos, of knowing that when it comes to humans “you have made them ... and crowned them with glory and honour” (v 5)—he knows he’s made in God’s image.

He enjoys the satisfaction of being able to say to God that “you care for” me (v 4); of knowing that God loves and looks after him. In another psalm, David encourages people to “taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34 v 8). In other words, the most satisfying thing that God gives people is... Himself! Knowing

God is what brings David ultimate, lasting satisfaction; and so, because he knows God, he's satisfied with the life God has given him, getting on with the job of looking after His world (v 6).

And thirdly, David enjoys the security of remembering that God's name is "majestic ... in all the earth" (v 1, 9). He knows God is in charge. He understands that God knows what He's doing. He rests secure in the knowledge that the One who cares for him is the One who is in charge of everything.

### **Seeing ourselves as we are**

Psalm 8 points us to God as our blessing-giving Creator. But it also reminds us of our place. David begins his song not with "I" but "You": "You have set your glory above the heavens" (v 1). If we're to let God be God, we need to remember that we're not God. The God who made the moon and the stars (v 3)—He's the One this world is all about. He's the most important Person in the cosmos; which means that you and I are not!

And naturally, we find it difficult to remember this. As we saw in the last chapter, there's something very attractive about making ourselves our own rulers. But it's as we have a right view of God, as we put our confidence in Him, that we find ourselves living the life we're searching for. We can only see God as He truly is if we're prepared to see ourselves as we really are.

But seeing ourselves as we really are doesn't stop there. It involves not only seeing that God is God, and we're not; it means accepting that we have lived as though we are God, and He isn't. The Bible calls it sin.

Sin is an unpopular concept in our culture, which tends to

tell us that the answer to our problems and worries is to build ourselves up, think better of ourselves, and love ourselves more. The Bible does the opposite: it shows us that we're worse than we like to think, that we are not lovely in any way:

*<sup>1</sup> As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But... (Ephesians 2 v 1-4)*

I don't like to think of myself as God does! I'd far rather listen to the world telling me that I'm OK really—yes, I make some mistakes, but I'm basically fine. It's far easier to think of myself like that than as someone who is “by nature deserving of wrath” (v 3)—of God's punishment beyond death, of eternity without any blessing at all.

But, if I'm honest, God's way of looking at me, my life, and my contribution to this world is far more accurate than mine. We've already seen that we push God out of the centre, which causes our CCS. We've seen the ugly symptoms that CCS produces. When I look honestly at my own heart, at the pride and envy and anger and bitterness that live there, I begin to see that I am truly what God says I am: a sinner. Just as that tax collector, when he spoke to God, called himself simply “a sinner” (Luke 18 v 13), that's the description which best sums me up. A sinner, facing not God's pleasure and blessing but God's punishment and anger. Someone who could have known blessing in God's world by living with Him

as my Creator, but who has chosen not to and has forfeited all blessing, for all time.

That's the reality. It's very depressing. But at least it's real. And in that sense, it's liberating to know that I'm a sinner. It means I don't need to pretend, to make such an effort hiding my flaws and excusing my failings. I can be honest about who I am, with myself and with God. And I can begin to appreciate the last word of the Bible passage on the previous page. "But."

Verses 1-3 are all about what we have done—sinned—and where it has got us—deserving God's eternal punishment. But... that is not the last word. God has done something to restore our lost blessing.

## 2. The blessing-restoring Saviour

*<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* (Ephesians 2 v 4-10)

If God were only our Creator, then as sinners we'd have only two options. We could hide from our true selves, and use

CCS to find some people to look down on, and think that we deserve blessing, eternally; we could be proud, self-sufficient, entitled, and not justified, not right with God. Or we could accept that we're sinners, and despair.

Which is why letting God be God means asking Him to be our Saviour, as well as remembering that He is our Creator. Just as Psalm 8 is really about God, and not David, so Ephesians 2 is really about Jesus, not us. It's pointing us to the truth that God has made His Son the Ruler of the cosmos (the "Christ"); which means that it's in making Christ Jesus the centre of our lives that we can have our blessings restored. We don't grasp blessing for ourselves; it is given to us by Him.

### **Significance**

God "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (v 5). That's how significant you are: God loves you enough not to leave you facing His punishment. In Christ, He came and lived and died and rose as a man so that you could be made alive.

That's how loved you are; how valuable you are. No one can love us any better, any more, than the Lord Jesus, who gave up heaven and experienced hell for His people. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4 v 10). The Father sent the Son, and the Son willingly died on a cross, so that the punishment for our sin could fall on Him, and the blessings that He deserves could be given to us. It's Jesus' death that enables God to look at a sinner like that tax collector and say: You are justified, you are at one with me, you will enjoy life with me. The cross is the ultimate proof that God is a God

who loves. This is love: that God loves His people enough to die for them. The definition of love is the crucifixion of Christ.

If you are trusting Jesus, that's the value God places on your head, simply "because of his great love" (Ephesians 2 v 4). It's not image, circumstances or achievements that make us valuable. It's God choosing to love us. And He loves you enough to have made you part of His people and give you blessings with Him for ever.

### **Satisfaction**

And not only has God given you eternal life, He's given you work to do throughout that life. By saving us, He has "created" us "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v 10). Each day, someone who has Jesus as their Saviour can know that God has useful work for them to do; a part to play in His eternal plan for this world. And they can know that they are just where they need to be, with the life that's best for them to have. They are not missing out in any way; in fact, they're part of the only work that will last for ever.

This changes how I look at life. When I wash the dishes for the umpteenth time that day... when I drop my plans for a relaxing evening to comfort a friend... when I give up buying a top because someone else needs that money more... when I remain patient in the face of a (very) trying son or daughter... these are not just random, tiring, mildly annoying parts of my day. They are good works, which God designed specifically for me to do. They are part of a plan which I can't see, but that He's working out—a plan which is of eternal importance.

But that's not the best of it. The best is yet to come, because in the future God will "show the incomparable riches of his grace" (v 7). He has saved His people for a future that is far, far better than any blessing we know in this life. He's saved us for a new world which has nothing dissatisfying in it; even the best of this world is only a faint glimmer of that one.

## **Security**

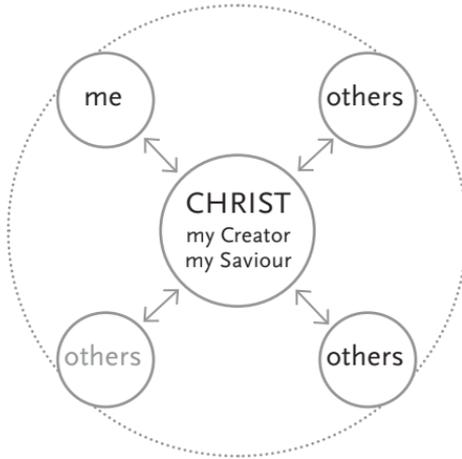
And how do we know we'll be there? "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms" (v 6). In a sense, when Jesus was raised from the dead 2,000 years ago, and returned to heaven, so was everyone who would trust in Him.

It's as if when He reached heaven, Jesus reserved a seat at a table for each one of His people. So there's already a chair with a name card on it that says: "Sophie de Witt". The Christian's future is completely secure, because God has secured it. The God who made the stars is quite capable of getting His people to His heaven! We are "shielded by God's power" until we reach our heavenly home (1 Peter 1 v 4), led each day along a path laid out by the One who called Himself the "good shepherd" (John 10 v 14). We are guided daily, and we are safe eternally. That's the biggest answer to all our worries about our lives and our future.

And so the treatment for CCS is to let God be God, with Christ at the centre. As we do that, we find the significance, satisfaction and security for which our hearts yearn, for which we were made, and for which the world is searching elsewhere. We know that we are made by God, and rescued by God; we can experience living God's way in God's world now as we head for His perfect future world; and we can enjoy knowing

that we are cared for by the God who has already secured our eternal perfect future.

Instead of making ourselves “god” and seeing ourselves in comparison with other people, we need to see ourselves the way that, if we put our faith in Christ, God sees us:



### **From here to heaven**

The beginning of the Bible shows us a “very good” garden, a blessed past which humanity lost by sinning. The end of the Bible presents a vision of a perfect city, a blessed future which Christ offers:

*<sup>1</sup> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in*

*the city, and his servants will serve him. <sup>4</sup> They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22 v 1-5)*

The language here is highly symbolic, but it's describing a concrete future reality—a place of blessings restored. People who live in this city enjoy the significance of being God's people, in His image—"his name will be on their foreheads" (v 4). They will enjoy the satisfaction of reigning over the world (v 5)—the satisfaction of living the life they were designed for. And they'll enjoy the security of eating from "the tree of life" (v 2)—of knowing that they can live there for ever.

Behind the symbolism is the message: This is the place you long for, you search for, you strive for. This is the place of the blessing you were created to experience. And in its centre is the blessing-giver: "the Lamb", Jesus, God's Son, who died like a lamb and rose again so that He could give people a place in this city. There, He doesn't give just a spring of living water, but a whole river!

This is what people who have remembered God is their Creator, and ask Him to be their Saviour, are looking forward to. The blessings we enjoy today by letting God be God, by living with Christ at the centre of life, are wonderful; the blessings we'll enjoy in the future, in heaven, are unimaginable.

### **From head to heart**

As we walk towards that "river of the water of life", we can drink deeply from that "spring of living water". But between

here and heaven, that's going to be a daily struggle. Even if we understand, in our heads, the facts about who God is, and what God has given us, it takes a revolution in our thinking, and our feeling, to let God actually be God in our lives. If you're a Christian, it's likely that you're frustrated by your inability to do this. The distance between our heads and our hearts seems unbridgeable!

And it is, if we try to do it on our own, or expect it to happen overnight. It is not the case that being a Christian means we don't or can't struggle with CCS. Being a Christian means that we can experience the blessing of knowing Christ today; but it doesn't mean that we always will, because it needs us to apply what we know in our heads to our hearts. It requires us to live today as though what we know is true really is true.

It takes time, and it needs outside assistance. We have to let God help us let God be God. Again, we need to see ourselves as we really are. We are not God. We are sinners. And we're unable to live with God as God without His help!

That's why God has given us His Spirit. God the Spirit is the gift of God the Father to everyone who has asked God the Son to save them. In fact, it's only through the Holy Spirit's work that we're able to understand who God is in the first place (1 Corinthians 12 v 3). And then it's only through the Spirit's work that any of us are able to live with Him as God, seeing life from His perspective, and enjoying blessing from Him:

*<sup>11</sup> No-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

*<sup>12</sup> What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us ... <sup>15</sup> The person with the Spirit makes*

*judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments. (1 Corinthians 2 v 11-12, 15)*

“What God has freely given us” is, supremely, His Son Jesus. It’s in knowing Him that we find blessing. Jesus is God’s amazing gift to you and me. He is the treatment for our CCS. But we need to apply that treatment. And that’s what the Holy Spirit does for us. We are given the Spirit “so that we may understand” what is already ours. He makes it possible for us to experience— to live out and enjoy—all that Jesus has given us.

The Spirit is the doctor who applies the gospel medicine to our lives.

Perhaps you are a Christian. You have been for years. You know the gospel—you know that Jesus is your Creator and your Saviour. You know you’re headed for heaven. This chapter hasn’t told you anything you didn’t already know. And yet CCS is a constant part of your life. You know despair, or pride, or both. Envy is your constant companion, except when you’re feeling superior. You’d love to enjoy the blessings knowing Jesus brings; but you don’t. How can you change?

You can’t! But the Holy Spirit can change you. He will teach you to “make judgments about all things”—to see through the lies which say that image, or circumstances, or achievements, or goodness, or even Christian living itself can bring you significance, satisfaction or security. He will enable you not to worry about “merely human judgments” from those around you. He will apply to your heart, step by step, what your head already knows—He’ll change your desires as well as your understanding.

What do you and I need to do? “Keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5 v 25). Ask God to set His Spirit to work.

Look for His leading in your life; listen to His promptings; let Him loosen your attachment to your idol-measures. Love Him as He helps you to appreciate, to treasure, and to enjoy the blessings that are already yours in Jesus.

We need to make each CCS trigger-event a fresh opportunity to find our significance, satisfaction and security in being created by God and saved by God; a fresh opportunity to live with Christ at the centre in our heads and in our hearts. And we are able to make each failure, each time we give in to CCS, a moment where we say to God: “Have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18 v 13), and know that because of what Jesus has done, He will.

Perhaps you’re not a Christian, but you know you struggle with CCS, and you’d love not to. God is offering you all the significance, satisfaction and security you’re looking for. Let Him be your God. You can tell Him you know He’s your Creator, and ask Him to be your Saviour, and ask His Spirit to go to work in you; and then you can know real, lasting blessing, and know that nothing—not even death—can take it away from you. And if this is something you know you need to find out more about, there are a few suggestions on page 107.



## HEALTHY LIVING

One of the tragic everyday sights when living in South Africa is the beggars. They approach you at traffic lights, hoping for some spare change, which will get them their next meal; and then they're back again, begging for a little more. We see them on "rubbish day" each week, scrabbling through the rubbish for something of value.

But just imagine that one day, one of them was handed a cheque for 100 million rand (£7 million, or \$12 million). They wouldn't be sitting on the roadside the next day! They'd be opening a bank account, paying the cheque in, and enjoying the money. And if a fellow beggar pointed out they were missing out on some spare change, they wouldn't mind. They'd have been given unimaginable riches. The spare change would have lost its value. Instead of scrabbling, when they needed money they'd simply visit an ATM.

God has, Paul wrote to some first-century Christians, "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1 v 3). "Every" is a pretty normal, everyday word; it's also a seriously exciting word in that sentence! Every blessing any of us need—all the significance,

satisfaction and security that we were made to know and which everyone is searching for—is found in knowing Jesus as our God, as our Creator and Saviour.

So there's no need to scabble for blessings elsewhere; no need to constantly compare ourselves with others to see if we're doing well enough, or missing out; to see if we're worthwhile or useless. All the Christian needs, the Christian has.

That's why Paul is able to say:

*<sup>12</sup> I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry ... <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

*(Philippians 4 v 12-13)*

He finds all he needs in “him who gives me strength”—in Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus, and knowing we have all we need in knowing Jesus, leads to a real, lasting, deep contentment. It means we can echo Paul and say we know the secret of being content:

- *however we look, great or not-so-great;*
- *in any and every circumstance, good or bad;*
- *regardless of our achievements, better or worse;*
- *whether we are meeting our moral standards, or failing.*

Why? Because our significance, satisfaction and security doesn't come from gaining, keeping or increasing any of those CCS triggers. Instead, it comes from Christ. Compulsive Comparison happens when we seek blessing anywhere other than in knowing Jesus—when we see our image, circumstances, achievements, goodness, or Christian performance as being who we really are. As soon as we do

that, we'll lose contentment, and we'll start to compulsively compare to see if we're matching up. As long as we look only to our relationships with Jesus to give us our blessing, we'll know contentment, and we'll be able to get on with enjoying the things in our life.

So imagine that your core identity—your sense who you are, the thing or things that give you contentment—are a circle. All around this core identity is the rest of your life: what you're like, what you have, what you do. For instance, have a look at this woman:



This woman will be content. Her sense of significance, satisfaction and security are unshakeable and unloseable, because she finds each one of them in her relationship in Christ.

But for each one of us, it's a daily struggle to keep living, thinking and feeling this way—to stop ourselves seeking blessing by comparing what we're like, what we have or what we do with how others are doing. Our imaginary friend finds it hard, too:



Now, she's looking to her looks, her house, and her Bible-reading habits for her sense of significance, her satisfaction, her security. Her "blessing" has become shifting and elusive—a bad hair day when going to a party, or visiting a friend's larger house, or meeting someone who reads their Bible more, and it's gone. As soon as we allow a characteristic, or circumstance, or achievement to be our blessing-giver, we'll lose blessing, start CCS, and give up contentment.

And it's only Christ-centred contentment, keeping our relationship with Him as where we find our sense of who we are, that transforms our relationships. Knowing Jesus, and knowing that we have all we need in knowing Jesus, means not that we will never compare, but that we will compare healthily, in ways which mean we love others more, not less, and enjoy blessing more, not less.

The rest of this chapter will help us see how letting God be God in our lives reverses the consequences of CCS by enabling us to compare in healthy ways in our relationships—with God, with others, and with ourselves.

## My relationship with God

To imitate someone, you first need to compare yourself with them. And the Bible is full of encouragements to imitate God. Way back in the Old Testament, God called His people to be pure: “Be holy because I ... am holy” (Leviticus 19 v 2). The New Testament makes the same command: “Follow God’s example ... and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5 v 1-2); “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2 v 5).

What was Jesus’ attitude? The opposite of CCS. He deliberately accepted a lower position than He deserved, to serve others. Though...

*<sup>6</sup> being in very nature God, [he] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death; even death on a cross!*

*(Philippians 2 v 6-8)*

And God’s desire—what He’s working in Christians to do—is for us to be “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8 v 29)—to be re-made in the image of God.

If our approach to God is based on CCS, then comparing ourselves to Jesus, the perfect human, will crush us. CCS tells us that to be blessed, we need to be as good as Him. And none of us can be as perfect as the Son of God. We can only despair at ourselves and our failings; or grow bitter with God for His perfect standards; or ignore the call to be like Jesus, and settle for a standard which we make up for ourselves.

But knowing Jesus as our Creator and Saviour turns this around. It tells us that our blessing is not dependent on us matching up to Christ; it is dependent on Christ giving it to us. The gospel is not: be good enough, and Jesus will bless you. It is: the perfect Jesus has blessed you; now enjoy becoming more like Him.

I have a friend who has played tennis at international level. I can stagger around a tennis court. Imagine that our friendship rested on me matching her skill when we played together. I would hate it; it would crush me, or I would avoid playing her at all. But we're friends anyway, regardless of our relative tennis performance; and that frees me simply to enjoy playing with her. I'll never beat her, but seeing how she plays makes me a better player.

If you're not a Christian, your performance will never be good enough to secure blessing for yourself. If you are a Christian, your performance doesn't affect your blessing at all—it's already been given to you by Jesus. He "loved us and gave himself up for us"—He lived the perfect life we can't, and died the death we deserve, so that we could know Him and be blessed by Him. When a Christian succeeds in loving as Jesus would, He doesn't love or bless them any more; and when a Christian fails, He doesn't love them any less.

We'll never be as good as Jesus, but that doesn't need to make us despair or become bitter. We can simply look at Him, see how He lived, and seek to become more like Him:

*"During the first six months of our marriage, Sarah and I fought like cats. Then one day I was reading the end of Ephesians 5, and I realised that the problem in my marriage was that I was comparing myself with Sarah,*

*and thinking that I was doing better than her, and getting cross. But Ephesians 5 said I was to be a Christ-like husband, and Christ laid down His life for His people. It was as if Jesus was telling me: ‘Ray, get your eyes off Sarah and onto me. When you think you have gone as far as me you can stop—until then, keep loving your woman.’ That took the wind out of my sails. I was the problem! I needed to change. I needed to stop comparing how good a spouse I was with Sarah, and get on with being the Christ-like husband she needed me to be.”*

One sign that you’re beginning to let the Spirit treat your CCS is that you take being like Christ seriously. You don’t make excuses; you don’t cut corners. You can compare yourself to Christ, come off worst (obviously!) and ask His Spirit to change you, all without despairing, because you know that your relationship with Him is secure.

### **My relationship with others**

The contented Christian woman doesn’t stop comparing herself with others, either! But again, the comparisons are transformed.

Christians compared with other Christians

At one point, as he writes to a struggling church, Paul tells its members to...

*follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

*(1 Corinthians 11 v 1)*

To another, thriving, church, his instruction is the same:

*Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.*

*(Philippians 3 v 17)*

One way we become more like Jesus is by imitating other Christians who are more like Him than we are. And that's going to mean comparing ourselves with other Christians. How will we avoid looking-up comparisons and the despair or envy that accompany them; and looking-down comparisons and the pride and superiority that they prompt?

It's because we're not comparing as part of our search for blessing. If, for example, my sense of security for tomorrow and eternity rests on me obeying God really well, then seeing someone who obeys God better than I do will undermine all my security. But if my security comes from knowing that Jesus has given me a guaranteed place in heaven, then everything changes when I see someone obeying Him better than I do. I'll praise God for them. I'll pray that God would make me more like them. And I won't lose my security, because that's found in knowing the Lord Jesus and knowing that He's given me eternal life, not in obeying Him. Jesus is my blessing-giver; my obedience isn't.

On the other hand, if we see a fellow Christian struggling in some way, either spiritually or practically, we won't feel proud or superior or relieved. CCS would prompt us to look down on them; but now, we're freed to love them.

It all comes down to where we find our significance, satisfaction, or security—or what Paul labels “hope”:

*Those who are rich in this present world [should not] be arrogant nor ... put their hope in wealth, which is so*

*uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (1 Timothy 6 v 17)*

If our security is in God, then Paul says we will be “generous and willing to share” our money (v 18) and everything else—time, and emotional energy, and friendship groups, and so on. We won’t need to hang onto these things to enable ourselves to feel blessed as we wallow in looking-down comparison.

The solution to CCS is not simply to stop all comparisons. It’s to find blessed contentment in Christ, and practise healthy comparison. How do we know the difference? By looking at what our comparison produces. If it’s praise to God, prayer for ourselves, and prayer and practical love for others, then it’s healthy. If it’s envy, or despair, or pride, or any other symptom of CCS, then we’re allowing something other than Christ to be what we look to for blessing.

At the moment, I’m finding myself comparing my lack of generosity and my regular bouts of impatience with other Christians who are so much more like Christ than I am. Maybe for you it’s something else. Perhaps you’ve noticed that someone else prays more than you; or is more gentle; or better at talking to her friends about Jesus; or more content to be single or childless. Remember that in Jesus, you already have everything you will ever need. Don’t think you need to be like them to be blessed. Then you’ll be able to want to be like them to better serve your blessing-giver.

*“I’m married with kids, and in my forties. One of my best friends is the same age, and single. And she’s one of those people who packs an amazing amount into her days. I often look at her and feel envious of how flexible she can*

*be—she has no children to keep fed and clean. Or I'm struck by a sense of my own inadequacy compared to all she accomplishes in her week. Or deep down I feel relief that I'm not single at 40. Or I feel all three at the same time! Sometimes, I remember to stop comparing myself with her like that, and know that my blessing and hers come from Jesus. That changes everything! I'm simply grateful to God for a friend who throws herself into His work so whole-heartedly. I can see her as a really good example. I pray for myself, that I'll become more like her in her passion for serving Christ. And I pray for her, that she'll find contentment in knowing Him, not in her circumstances. I think that when I stop my CCS, I become a much, much better friend!"*

It's only if we seek our blessings in Jesus that we're able to appreciate and enjoy the truth that God deliberately made us different and that He deliberately gave us different gifts. Your church is a "body"; and "the body is not made up of one part but of many ... God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12 v 14, 18). God has given you some gifts, and others some different gifts, so that you need each other, and can help and encourage and support each other.

But CCS prevents us doing any of that—and I think CCS is rife in churches. It's damaging for church members; and it's seriously offputting to outsiders, who instead of witnessing Christian community are in fact experiencing gatherings full of pride, envy, superiority and bitterness. It will stop us enjoying both our own and others' gifts; it will tell us we have nothing to offer; and it will encourage us to use our abilities to make ourselves look better.

But knowing Jesus, and knowing that His Spirit gives us different gifts to use for each other, means we'll enjoy being ourselves; that we'll use all that we are to serve His people; and that we'll contentedly let others use their gifts to serve their church—including us, when and where we need it. What a wonderful community that would be!

Incidentally, this is the kind of comparison that it's helpful to teach children, in our churches and in our families. Most schools encourage competition; most children know exactly where they rank against their peers on all kind of measures: multiplication tables, style of shoes, exam results, cell phones and so on.

If you have children, it's just as key for them to know Jesus, and know that eternal blessing comes from knowing Him, as it is for you. Then in their day-to-day lives they're able to praise God for the gifts He's given others, and pray that they will use their own gifts for Him (not, as schools tend to suggest, for furthering their own ambitions and careers). They're able to help those who have "less" in some way than they do. And they're able to live in their world, surrounded by CCS, without feeling pride or envy, but simply experiencing joy in knowing Jesus and the significance, satisfaction and security He gives.

This isn't easy to explain to a child (I've tried)—but that's a subject for another, as yet unwritten, book! The big point is that CCS is no less a danger for children than for adults, and the treatment is just the same—to know, and love knowing, Jesus.

Christians compared with non-Christians  
Asaph was a man who followed God about 3,000 years ago, and who experienced a serious bout of looking-up CCS with

those around him who didn't know God. When it came to following God, he says, "my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold" (Psalm 73 v 2). He was about to give up. Why? Because:

*<sup>3</sup> I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. <sup>4</sup> They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*

*<sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens ... <sup>12</sup> this is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. <sup>13</sup> Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure... <sup>14</sup> Every morning brings new punishments.*

*(Psalm 73 v 3-5, 12-13, 14)*

If you're a Christian, can you sympathise with Asaph? Have you ever thought: "Wow, this Christian life is hard work, without much to show for it. And look at that non-Christian friend. She's living for herself, she laughs at the idea of God, and she's doing really well. They've got more money than us. They're healthy, and we're struggling. Life just falls into place for them. I'd love their life. Why do I bother living for God?"

When we find ourselves tempted by a bout of CCS, we need to do what Asaph did:

*<sup>17</sup> I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. <sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.*

*(Psalm 73 v 17-18)*

The "sanctuary of God" was the part of the temple where, in Old Testament times, God dwelled among His people. Essentially, Asaph began to look at the world from God's point of view; with an eternal perspective. He took account

of the future, of “final destiny”. And he realised that all that wealth, health and comfort was built on quicksand. Those who didn’t know God were headed for a life beyond death without anything good at all, an existence outside God’s love and care. He would “cast them down to ruin”.

Understanding the future—our final destination—is key to defeating CCS. What matters is not the journey, but the final destination. Having a first-class ticket is of no use if you’re on a trip to nowhere. It’s tragic, but it’s true, that people who don’t acknowledge Jesus as their Creator and Saviour are headed for ruin; for nothing; for eternal misery. However great their life may look now, there is nothing to envy.

In reality, Asaph realises, he is in a far better position, because he knows that one day, God “will take me into glory” (v 24). His glorious destination is secure, because God has secured it. And on the way, though he may sometimes feel like hold luggage, kicked around by life, in fact:

*<sup>23</sup> I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*

*<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel ... <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*

*(Psalm 73 v 23-25)*

Asaph began his psalm with a severe case of CCS as he looked up at non-believers around him. He finishes it content; knowing the blessing of a secure and glorious future, and the satisfaction of knowing God in the here and now. He knows that in God he has everything he will ever need.

The gospel defeats looking-up comparison with non-Christians by reminding us that in Jesus, we already have everything we will ever need.

And it also defeats looking-down comparison with non-Christians. Let's be honest, it's easy to feel that we're better than non-Christians. We live as God wants, at least some of the time; we don't commit what we think of as really bad sins: sleeping around, smoking drugs, skipping church. We had the sense to invite Jesus to be our Saviour as well as our Creator, so that we can enjoy the blessings of knowing Him eternally. Aren't we just, well, a little better, a little wiser than non-Christians around us, who are still seeking blessing in the wrong places?

*Here is a trustworthy saying, that deserves full acceptance:*

*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I  
am the worst.*

*(1 Timothy 1 v 15)*

These are Paul's words: a man hand-picked by Jesus to be an apostle, who wrote lots of the New Testament, and who gave up everything to tell others that, in Jesus, they could find all they would ever need.

Yet he still describes himself as "the worst of sinners". Paul knew his heart: that despite knowing Jesus, he naturally put himself at the centre of his life, and looked for blessing elsewhere. And Paul knew the gospel: that it was only through Jesus' death and resurrection, and not through any of his own efforts or achievements, that he had every blessing for eternity.

He knew that it took no less than the death of the Son of God to save him, just as it would take no less than the death of the Son of God to save anyone and everyone else. There was no reason and no excuse for him to look down on anyone. As an eighteenth century-pastor, William Law, once wrote:

*“We know more of the folly of our own heart than we do of other people’s . . . [so everyone] may justly look upon himself to be the greatest sinner that he knows.”*

The gospel defeats looking-down comparisons with non-Christians by reminding us that it’s only in Jesus, and not in our own performance, that we have everything we will ever need. It frees us from CCS. It gives us contentment.

### **My relationship with myself**

How do I know how I’m doing in life? CCS tells me to compare myself with others to see if I’m doing well enough. But the Bible tells us:

*<sup>4</sup> Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, <sup>5</sup> for each one should carry their own load.*

*(Galatians 6 v 4-5)*

Timothy Keller puts it like this:

*“God has given each of us a different set of difficulties and opportunities, a different set of weaknesses and gifts. These are our ‘load’—our responsibility before God.”<sup>3</sup>*

So instead of comparing ourselves to “someone else”, to whom God has given a different “load” of abilities and circumstances, we need to compare ourselves to . . . ourselves, to who we could have been for God, given the abilities and circumstances He’s given us.

When we stand before God after we die, He’s not going to ask us why we didn’t have someone else’s load; He’s going to ask us what we did with ours. We’ll have to answer for how we used our life, not someone else’s.

So it's useful to ask ourselves: Given the particular load God has given me to carry today, have I acted for Him in all the ways I could have done? How does my day compare to the day I could have had?

This is liberating. We're often very good at looking at others who seem to have a lighter load, and despairing that we're not like them, or becoming bitter with God because He hasn't made us like them. But wonderfully, knowing Jesus is all we need; and Jesus only asks us to live for Him in the situation He has given us.

It's also very challenging, of course. We're often very good at looking at others and feeling proud that we're doing more for God than them, and feeling entitled to extra blessing from God because we're doing better than them, and ignoring the fact that they may be carrying an unseen heavier load. But Jesus is all we need to be blessed, not doing more for Him. And Jesus has simply asked us to live for Him in the situation He has given us.

That's a hard lesson to learn. Even one of Jesus' closest friends during His time on earth took a while to get his head round it. After Jesus had risen, and before He went back to heaven, He took the disciples Peter and John for a walk; and He told Peter that he would be a leader in the church, and that Peter would die by being crucified.

How did Peter respond? He looked at John and said: "Lord, what about him?" (John 21 v 21). He wanted to compare Jesus' plan for his life with Jesus' plan for John's. Who knows whether Peter wanted to check that he would have a higher position in church leadership than John, or whether he would have a worse death than John; whether

he was seeking to do looking-down comparison, or anxious about looking-up comparison? But Jesus' reply is short and so, so helpful:

*If I want him [John] to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me. (John 21 v 22)*

Jesus doesn't want His followers to compare their path through life with others'. He wants them to focus on walking their own. We're to compare ourselves with who we could have been and what we could have done each day; not with who someone else has been or done that day.

There will be times when we can honestly be pleased with how we have carried our particular load. And there will be (many more!) times when we'll know that we could and should have served Jesus more effectively, followed Him more obediently, lived for Him more radically than we have done—and we'll need to ask for forgiveness.

This self-comparison does come with a health warning, though—because we need to guard against this kind of useful self-assessment becoming a trigger for CCS. We can be proud or despairing as we compare ourselves with who God had given us the opportunity to be, just as much as when we compare ourselves with who others are.

But again, the truth that in Jesus we already have all we need frees us from CCS. We need to daily remind ourselves that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2 v 8-9). When our works are not what they should have been, there's no need to despair—God in His undeserved kindness, His “grace”, has given us all we need in Jesus. And when our works

are all that they could have been, that's no cause for boasting, for feeling self-sufficient and entitled to blessing—it is only God's undeserved kindness that gives us all we need in Christ.

However our day has gone, we can be content: content because we know Jesus.

# THE CONTENTED WOMAN

There's a woman in the Bible who threatens to trigger my CCS whenever I think about her. She's only mentioned once in Scripture, and I've put the whole description of her below; see how you feel as you read about her.

<sup>10</sup> *A wife of noble character who can find?*

*She is worth far more than rubies.*

<sup>11</sup> *Her husband has full confidence in her  
and lacks nothing of value.*

<sup>12</sup> *She brings him good, not harm,  
all the days of her life.*

<sup>13</sup> *She selects wool and flax  
and works with eager hands.*

<sup>14</sup> *She is like the merchant ships,  
bringing her food from afar.*

<sup>15</sup> *She gets up while it is still night;  
she provides food for her family  
and portions for her female servants.*

- <sup>16</sup> *She considers a field and buys it;  
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*
- <sup>17</sup> *She sets about her work vigorously;  
her arms are strong for her tasks.*
- <sup>18</sup> *She sees that her trading is profitable,  
and her lamp does not go out at night.*
- <sup>19</sup> *In her hand she holds the distaff  
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.*
- <sup>20</sup> *She opens her arms to the poor  
and extends her hands to the needy.*
- <sup>21</sup> *When it snows, she has no fear for her household;  
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.*
- <sup>22</sup> *She makes coverings for her bed;  
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Her husband is respected at the city gate,  
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*
- <sup>24</sup> *She makes linen garments and sells them,  
and supplies the merchants with sashes.*
- <sup>25</sup> *She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
she can laugh at the days to come.*
- <sup>26</sup> *She speaks with wisdom,  
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*
- <sup>27</sup> *She watches over the affairs of her household  
and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Her children arise and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praises her:*
- <sup>29</sup> *“Many women do noble things,  
but you surpass them all.”*
- <sup>30</sup> *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;  
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*

<sup>31</sup> *Honour her for all that her hands have done,  
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.*

*(Proverbs 31 v 10-31)*

This sister has caused many a bout of CCS in Christian women.

Here is a woman who has the energy to get up while it's dark (v 15); she sews (v 19) and so is able to keep her home looking good on a budget (v 22); she cares for the poor (v 20), she works part time (v 18, 24); she's totally trustworthy (v 11); she's prepared for anything (v 21); she has a husband, and he's always helped and never hindered by her (v 28-29); and she has children too, who love her and respect her (v 28).

It's easy to see this as the blueprint for the godly woman, wife and mother. So we talk about the benefits of using time wisely; we encourage each other in crafts and living on a tight budget; we set up a soup kitchen for the poor; we support women who go back to work part-time; and so on.

But do you feel despair as you compare your home to hers? Or envy at the fact that she has this happy marriage; or that she's able to have children; or that her children treat her so well; or that her business is thriving? Do you feel inferior and a bit useless? I know I do.

And what if you actually managed to live like her? How would you feel if you had the husband and the children, ran her business, and was as respected as she was? Quite proud of the life you'd made for yourself? A bit superior compared to those "many women" your husband says you "surpass" (v 29)?

In the ways we're not like her, CCS prompts us to look up at her. In any ways we are like her, CCS encourages us to look down on everyone else.

But God doesn't include this woman in His word to trigger CCS. He mentions her so He can point us to the wonderful contentment that comes from defeating CCS. This lady is, first and foremost, "a wife of noble character" (v 10), not a wife of noble deeds.

So what does it mean to have a noble character? What motivated that whole list of things in verses 11-29?

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. (Proverbs 31 v 30)

The most important thing about this lady is that she feared the Lord, which is Proverbs language for having a right recognition and respect for God. She was a woman who let God be God in her life, who kept Him at the centre. A woman who knew that her gifts of charm and beauty and, presumably, energy, business savvy, wisdom, forward planning, budget-balancing, and so on were "deceptive" and "fleeting"; that they were not what brings true blessing now, nor in the future.

This is a picture of a woman not bogged down in debilitating comparison with others. She's not crippled by the constant sideways glance in the ancient equivalent of shopping centres. She has let God be her God, at the centre of her life; and she is using the circumstances He's given her, and the abilities He's given her, to serve Him. She's content.

So you can follow this woman's example if you are single; if you are young; if you are old; if you are weak; if you are childless; if you are tired or disorganised or poor; if you are unemployed or full-time, housewife, empty-nester or high-flyer.

You can remember that seeking blessing from how you look, what you have or who you are is deceitful and fleeting.

You can find and know and enjoy the blessing you were made to experience: by knowing God, the Lord Jesus, as the centre of your life, and finding that in Him you have all you will ever need.

You can experience real contentment.

CCS is not easy to be rid of. But it is wonderful to live without. This side of death, we'll all be recovering sufferers. But as we live the gospel, letting God be God, treating Jesus as our Creator and Saviour, we can know real blessing. We can experience the significance of being made and loved by Him; and the satisfaction of living for Him; and the security of knowing He will give us fullness of life without end. What a wonderful life He has given us! How can you and I not say...

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual  
blessing in Christ.* (Ephesians 1 v 3)

That's really the sign of a woman who enjoys a heart which has replaced CCS with contentment: she praises her God, and is looking forward to doing so for ever.



## APPENDIX: WHAT ABOUT...?

We've seen that we don't need to, and shouldn't, be comparing ourselves with others to measure our position or ranking on certain scales. And we've seen that the treatment for this compulsive comparison is treating Christ as our Creator and our Saviour—putting Him at the centre of our universe and finding our significance, satisfaction and security in relating rightly to Him.

But this raises some practical questions:

- *Is it ever right to want to improve my image, circumstances, achievements or “goodness”, or should I be content exactly as I am?*
- *Are Christians allowed to be competitive at all, or does it always involve unhealthy comparison?*
- *Is there a place for pride in our accomplishments, or of the accomplishments of those we love, or will this always become an attitude of smug superiority?*

This short section will only start to answer these three questions, but they are questions well worth thinking through in more detail, and discussing further with friends.

## **1. What about change?**

Does all this mean I shouldn't want to change in any way? To improve my appearance, move to a bigger home, get fitter, learn some new skills, pursue a better income, find a boyfriend, have more children, have more obedient children? Is it a case of thinking: "God made me who I am; He's given me my situation, so I have to like it or lump it"? A sort of Christianised version of: "Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be"?

The answer is yes... and no!

Yes, the fruit of knowing that Christ is at the centre of the universe, and that only He gives us true significance, satisfaction and security, should be contentment—a state of not needing to rail against our situation. We can and should be content in God's goodness and sovereignty. We are not merely resentfully resigned to the status quo, but instead know that our Lord is the only sure place in which to put our trust, whatever our circumstances.

That said, we also know that God doesn't actually want us to remain as we are. He is in the business of change—He longs to transform us. In what sense, and why?

It is not worldly, temporary improvements God is after; it is deep and lasting change—change that sees us become "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8 v 29). God wants us to grow in our character, and in our view of and use of the gifts He's given us, and He wants us to be motivated not by self-protection or self-promotion, but by a desire to display and glorify Christ. Motivation matters to God. So the change itself is not the important thing; the motivation for the change is.

I'm someone who struggles rather a lot with organisation and order, and countless times I've felt like a complete failure when I visit a friend's immaculate house or have been on the receiving end of their impressive administrative capabilities. I often feel as if I am drowning in chaos, and that I am ineffective compared with others, and I want to change. I desperately want to change. But why?

I've come to realise that the motivation is often a desire for others to think better of me, to be impressed by me rather than looking down on me (not that I know that they do—I just tell myself that they do!). But God does not want me to change, even if it's outwardly for the better, if my motive is desire for a higher position on my man-made comparison measures. So I need to purify my heart and seek improvement that means becoming more like Christ, for His glory and not my own.

This means there are times when I need to knuckle down, even though I'm exhausted, to those jobs I hate doing, if that means I am better able to serve others out of love. But at other times, that striving can prove counter-productive to loving others, because it results in high stress. Then I need to accept the chaos and mess, focus on people and their needs, and not worry about what image I am projecting. I need to remember to keep God and His gospel at the centre of my motivations for order, and not myself in competition with others.

There's a traditional prayer which goes like this:

*“Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can; the serenity to accept the things I can't; and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

It's a good thing to ask for—but I think it's most useful if we make a couple of additions: “Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can (and should change); the serenity to accept the things I can't (or shouldn't be so bothered with); and the wisdom to know the difference.”

I think this will mean different things to different people. Some may choose to have an image makeover, go on an adult education course, join a Christian internet-dating service, or do home renovation; and they may do those things out of a desire to be less self-conscious and more able to focus on others, or to be able to earn more income in the face of financial stress (or even to give more), or reach out to people with the gospel, or to be in a position to meet a potential spouse without having to leave their current church, or to make hospitality easier. Another woman may do exactly the same things out of a wrong desire—to feel more secure in her looks, or to sound more intelligent in company, or because she feels she'll never be satisfied without a husband, or because she “knows” truly successful women have a beautiful home. The decision and action may be the same; it's the motivation that matters.

## **2. What about competition?**

Are Christians allowed to be competitive? What about those explosive games played on church weekends away? What about Christians involved in professional sport? What about school tennis, debating or tiddlywinks championships? Or submitting your resumé to be a big company along with hundreds of others, all vying for a highly sought-after trainee position? Isn't the aim of all of these to come out “on top”, to be the best compared to the opposition?

Competition can be good in many areas of life where it encourages excellence and efficiency rather than mediocrity or sloppiness. It provides goals to work towards. It helps employers in assessing who the best candidate is for the particular role. Competition can even foster unity; a striving against each other but towards the same goal, such as the team members who compete against one another in training so they can spur one another on to improve their game and increase the chances of the whole team winning.

Alex Chediak has some helpful insights in his article, *Christians and Competition*, in Boundless Webzine ([boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001572.cfm](http://boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001572.cfm)):

*“Assigning merit-based grades and letting the best team or player win encourages excellence and helps individuals discern their strengths. Whether we redouble our efforts in an area of weakness, or re-channel them into an area of greater personal aptitude, the recognition of excellence leads to improvements in performance—and not just for the winning party.”*

And this is what Stuart Weir says in *What the Book says about Sport*:

*“Sport lives by comparison. Although many claim that they compete to find their own limits of performance, this can only be established by comparison with others’ performance. To be better than someone else is a basic thought in sport. We need competition in order to judge our own performance.*

*The literal meaning of ‘compete’ is to strive together ... Christian competition is about striving with all our*

*might but within the rules and etiquette of the game. It is striving to maximise the gifts God has given us in a competitive environment. Will not the God who promised us 'life ... to the full' (John 10 v 10) rejoice when we compete and reach our full potential?" (page 69)*

The challenge for Christians is to check our motives as we enter a competitive arena of any sort. Am I taking part in the competition to raise my position among my peers in order to boost my sense of significance, or am I taking part to grow and reach my full potential in that particular skill, in God's strength, for His glory? Or in the case of "fun" competition (like playing a board game with the family), is my aim to help grow relationships and openness as we battle it out together, rather than to impress people and gain their admiration?

It's helpful to view others, especially other Christians, as running mates rather than rivals. Christ, not me, is at the centre of all things; significance, satisfaction and security are found through being in right relationship with my Creator. Others are not the enemy, the obstacle to my "success" in life. It is not a case of survival of the fittest. I do not need to beat them to be blessed.

If we're parents, it'll help our children if we teach and model to them from an early age that their identity is secure in knowing they're made by God, and loved by Him in Christ Jesus, so they don't need to seek approval or significance by being better than others. They are free to be competitive in certain contexts, if it is for the sake of doing their best, seeking to improve their skills and rejoicing in the abilities God has given them. But a competitive attitude must involve perseverance, endurance and grace rather than irritation,

rudeness, anger, arrogance or despondency. Quite a challenge for adults as well as children, I know!

### **3. What about being proud?**

“I’m so proud of you,” we might tell a friend who’s picked themselves up after a difficult experience, or made a good decision despite it making their life more difficult. “I’m so proud of you,” we tell our husband as they get a well-deserved promotion or complete their first DIY project! “I’m so proud of you,” we tell our children when their team has come first in the relay race at sports day, or when they’ve shone in their music performance at the school concert, or learned to share with one of their little friends.

Is that right? Is there a place for being proud of those we love, or even proud of our own performance?

Again, no, and yes, because the question is: what are we proud of? The superior position, the reflected glory that comes to us? Or the effort, or the outcome? To put it another way, does our pride result in us praising ourselves in some way, or praising God for enabling the effort and working the outcome?

In this sense, our pride in a loved one’s achievements should actually be a sense of gratitude to God for enabling their efforts, and enabling us to help, so that they are able to do the right thing, bounce back from failing, make a costly decision, and so on. It shouldn’t be them “winning” or being “one of the best” that determines our praise and pride, but their perseverance in some challenge, and humility as they achieve—or fail.

The same applies to Christian discipling. Graham Beynon (in *Mirror, Mirror*, page 114—see “Useful books to read” on page 107) points us to an example of Paul’s “pride” in his ministry among the Thessalonian church: “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2 v 19-20).

*“Paul says he will ‘glory’ in these people— that is what has been achieved in them. They are his crown! He’s not embarrassed about what he’s achieved, is he? But Paul has previously thanked God for how these people became Christians and have grown as Christians (see 1 Thessalonians 1 v 2-3; 2 v 13). Why? Because God is the one at work in them through Paul.*

*So how should Paul feel about all he has achieved? Could I suggest ‘humble dignity’? Paul can have a great feeling of dignity, even pride, at what he has done, but it is humble because it was only because of God working through him.”*

There’s nothing wrong with having and sharing a sense of blessing, privilege or wonder at a friend or family member’s development, or the Christian growth of someone you have been praying for and encouraging. What is wrong is to root our pride in ourselves, or someone we know, doing better than others, so that they or we get glory and praise.

The success of someone we love (including ourselves!) is a trigger for CCS-based pride. It’s also an opportunity for God-praising, grateful pride. As I said in chapter six, we need to make each Compulsive Comparison trigger-event a fresh

opportunity to go back to the Lord and wrestle through our hopes and dreams, our identity and worth, with Him; an opportunity once again to put Christ at the very centre and to experience His peace.



# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Annie Sanders, *Warnings and Gales*, page 411 (published Orion)
- <sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, page xix (Penguin)
- <sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You*, page 153 (The Good Book Company)



# USEFUL BOOKS

## **On exploring the Christian faith**

*One Life: What's It All About?* Rico Tice & Barry Cooper

*Original Jesus*, Carl Laferton

*Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller

*If You Could Ask God One Question*,

Paul Williams & Barry Cooper

## **Books for women**

*Calm My Anxious Heart: A Woman's Guide to Finding Contentment*, Linda Dillow

*Lies Women Believe*, Nancy Leigh DeMoss

*What women really want need*, Lesley Ramsey

## **On idolatry and identity**

*Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller

*Idols*, Julian Hardyman

*Mirror, Mirror*, Graham Beynon

## **On keeping God in the centre**

*Desiring God* and *Future Grace*, John Piper

**Helpful group Bible studies**

*The Good Book Guide to Contentment*, Anne Woodcock

*The Good Book Guide to Biblical Womanhood*, Sarah Young

# THANK YOU...

...to Rebekah Brown, for first asking me to speak on the subject at the KZN Women's Convention in South Africa in 2010, and helping me think through and structure the material in the run up to the event.

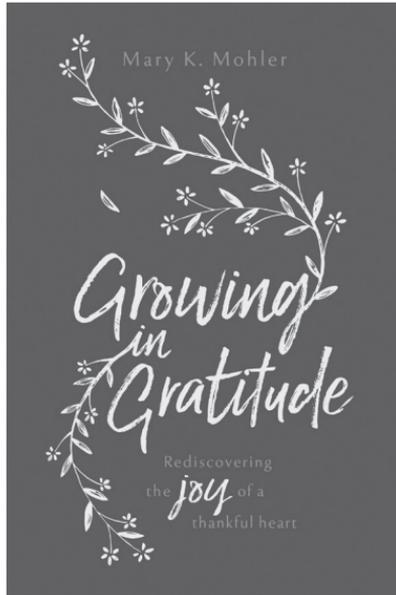
...to the 70+ people who completed my survey on CCS; and to all the people who shared your stories, and whose words I've quoted in this book (you know who you are!).

...to the dear friends with whom I have chatted in depth about the subject, and those who read through various drafts of the book: Sydnie J, Sarie K, Ali S, Heather J, Taryn H, Laura D, Sue H, Jane V, Sue & Debbie dW, Cathy F, Rico T, Lizzie L, Claire R, and Mum! Thanks for your time and wisdom.

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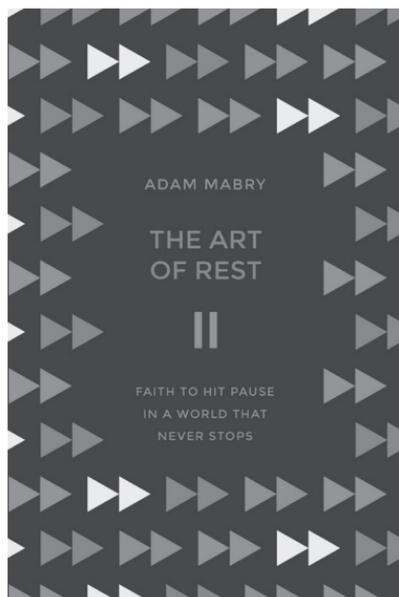


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