

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

8-25-2017

Culture of Comparison

Justin R. Vander Werff

Dordt College, justin.vanderwerff@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vander Werff, J. R. (2017). Culture of Comparison. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/774

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Culture of Comparison

Abstract

"When we find ourselves caught up in the world's measuring sticks... let's remember that one sinful human measured against other sinful humans is still just a sinful human."

Posting about our confidence in Christ from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/culture-of-comparison/>

Keywords

In All Things, lectionary, culture, comparison, awards

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Culture of Comparison

 inallthings.org/culture-of-comparison/

August 25,
2017

Justin Vander Werff

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 138](#)

[Ezekiel 31:15-18](#)

[2 Corinthians 10:12-18](#)

I have to do a little self-reflecting when I read Paul's ironic, almost sarcastic, criticism of those in Corinth "who are commending themselves," who "measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another." I have to ask myself if I would be one of those whom Paul would be mocking. Both the academic and engineering worlds in which my work regularly resides rely heavily on peer review, mutual comparison, lateral evaluation, and the like. And both the academic and engineering worlds regularly hand out awards, offer promotions, or even promise job security based primarily on these lateral measurements and comparisons. Such activity sounds an awful lot like "commending themselves."

Of course, Paul is not condemning such activity in and of itself. The remainder of the verses in 2 Corinthians 10 makes it clear that the primary fault is in the posture of these mutual comparisons. Boasting in ourselves or finding our source of identity simply by comparing ourselves with each other is where the problem lies.

But isn't it so easy to do just that? Already in grade school we are immersed in a culture of comparison, a world where peer pressure dominates and where it is almost impossible to prevent our perception of self-worth from being based on what the other kids are doing, or getting, or saying. Then we get to junior high and high school and this type of pressure increases multi-fold. This pressure is even more exaggerated by the way that today's social media makes such comparison inevitable and relentless. And of course, many of these things don't change as we become adults. In fact, we often choose to systematize peer pressure in self-promotion mechanisms such as those mentioned related to academia or engineering or similar peer groups.

Our culture has perceived that peer comparison can be problematic and damaging, perhaps leading to today's parades of participation awards and endless professional awards and maybe even grade inflation. Such measures apply a band-aid of self-worth, a covering of identity, over top of the peer pressure and self-comparisons. And there's nothing wrong with many of these awards and incentives, as long as our attitude toward them is correct. But, of course, they don't get at the root of the problem; they don't steer our identity search away from each other and toward a source of true identity.

Psalm 138 provides the antidote. This psalm directs us toward the Lord God as our only true source of identity. When we pray or sing these words to our Lord and Savior, our focus is directed away from lateral, mutual comparisons and upward to the one true source of comfort. We are no longer searching for our identity by being a little better than the next guy. We find our value in the steadfast love and faithfulness of our heavenly Father.

The language of Psalm 138 is as relentless as the suffocating peer pressure of our culture. Our Lord's love and sustenance is described with active, present-tense verbs in the entirety of the psalm. He is right there, all the time.

"On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased."

"You preserve my life."

"Your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever."

When we find ourselves caught up in the world's measuring sticks, stressed out and feeling inadequate because of our sinful hearts' tendency to go along with relatively meaningless comparisons, let's remember that one sinful human measured against other sinful humans is still just a sinful human. We don't need to, and can't, look for our confidence and self-assurance by boasting in our relative worth compared to other fellow humans. Our confidence comes in Christ, and through His merit we experience our heavenly Father's amazing, overflowing, ongoing love and sustenance. As the Holy Spirit teaches through Paul, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."