

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Happiness, Comparison and Envy

You may have noticed that some cross-cultural workers are always unhappy, comparing themselves with others and wishing they had what others have. The list of things they wish for seems to be endless, including such things as being able to speak the language better, better housing, higher salary, larger classes, fewer committee assignments, more spirituality, more people attending their church, less paperwork, a better vehicle, and so forth.

If you are completely honest, you have probably noticed the same thing in yourself. You have wanted what someone else has. When you get it, you feel happy for a short time; then you want more—or you want something else.

This never-ending cycle is as old as humanity itself. In Genesis 3 the serpent appealed to Eve by noting that if she ate the forbidden fruit she would be like God. She was already made in God's image, but she wanted more. She ate, and sin entered.

In Genesis 4 Cain wanted the same blessing Abel had received, so he killed his brother (as if that would get God's blessing). Read on through the heroes of the faith in Genesis.

- Abraham: his wife wanted the child that her maid had (Genesis 16).
- Isaac: one son wanted the blessing the other one got. (Genesis 27).
- Jacob: ten sons wanted the attention their younger brother had (Genesis 37).

Over and over unhappy people compared themselves with others and envied what others had. Since this phenomenon is so pervasive and is found throughout history, let us look at the relationship between happiness, comparison, and envy.

Happiness

The second paragraph of the U. S. Declaration of Independence begins with “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” One must remember that this is a political statement, not Scripture. All people are not created equal except at the foot of the cross.

Believing that all people should be equal, contemporary Americans frequently make comparisons and are unhappy to find that people are not equal. One must also note that the Declaration says only that one has the right to pursue happiness (not that everyone will find it).

Happiness depends on two factors.

- First, happiness depends on your past experience, especially your recent past experience. For example, suppose you have lived in an apartment with 900 square feet for five years and your agency gives you one with 1200 square feet. It will feel very large, and you will be much happier with it—for a while. However, you will soon adapt to the new size, and your happiness will drop back to what it was in the smaller apartment. The same is true for an increase in salary, fewer committees, a new vehicle, and so forth. There is always an increase in happiness,

followed by a gradual return to the original level as you adapt.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 refers to this when it says, “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.” No matter how much money you make, how large living space you have, or what kind of vehicle you get, adaptation will occur, and you will want more.

- Second, your happiness also depends on what other people have. So let us now consider comparisons with others.

Comparison

You may be satisfied with what you have until you find out what others have. Using the apartment example, you may feel a little cramped in your 900 square foot apartment, but not even be thinking about how small it is until you walk into a couple of your colleagues new apartments and find that they have more space than you—both of them have nearly 1200 square feet!

People usually compare themselves with those they consider to be equal to, or slightly above, them. When they find out that those others have more, they become dissatisfied with what had made them happy.

This is illustrated in the parable Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 20. He told about the owner of a vineyard who early in the morning agreed to pay several men a denarius for a day's work. Four more times during the day he hired more workers and sent them in. When he paid everyone a denarius at the end of the day, the men hired early were unhappy and complained. They were happy with their wages until they found out what the others were paid.

These comparisons where we feel like we have come up short often lead not only to unhappiness, but also to envy.

Envy

Rather than just feeling dissatisfied, we want what the other people have—we envy them. Envy grows out of coveting and being unable to have the desired object, such as the 1200 square foot apartment. Envy is more than just coveting what another person has. It is not being able to have the larger apartment because someone else has it. No one easily confesses to such envy because it seems to be the nastiest and meanest of the seven cardinal sins.

Furthermore, envy can never result in gratification—no enjoyment, only endless self-torment as its appetite increases. Envy is not merely wanting another's good, but wanting to pull the other person down. This leads to resentment, backbiting, spite, accusation, hatred, and even murder, as we saw with Cain and Abel.

Envy eventually spreads to all of our attitudes and relationships. King Saul's envy of David after the Goliath episode is well known. Note in 1 Samuel 18 how this envy spread to other things about David.

- Son Jonathan's love for David (v. 3)
- Songs about Saul and David (v 8)
- David's relationship with God (v 14)
- David's success in everything (v 15, 30)
- Daughter Michal's love (v 20, 28)

Also note how his behavior spread to other relationships.

- Tried to kill David twice (18:10-11)
- Told Jonathan and attendants to kill David (19:1)
- Accused Michal of deception (19:17)

- Tried to kill Jonathan (20:33)

Envious people do not even really love themselves. They are not grateful for, or happy in, what they are or what they have. This sin is deadly, less because it destroys people, than because it will not let them live. It does not let them live as themselves grateful for the qualities and talents that God has given them, making the best and most rewarding use of those gifts. Their degradation of others is a reflection of their degradation of themselves. These people wind up alienated from themselves as well as others and “miss the party” like the elder brother of the prodigal son in Luke 15.

What can one do?

Few people readily admit their sin of envy. It is so filled with self, wanting something because someone else has it, that it seems to be completely mean and nasty. Whenever we notice differences between us and others, we are likely to begin making comparisons, and those comparisons often lead to envy. Since few of us escape feelings of envy, what can we do when the Spirit makes us aware of our envy? What can we do to avoid falling into this trap?

- Confess and repent. As with any other sin, we are to confess it, and God has promised to forgive (1 John 1). If we deny our sin, we deceive ourselves and remain in it. When we are forgiven, we are to repent, not only to feel sorrow for the wrong we have done but also to turn from the sin itself. Following are ways to help you turn from envy, to avoid it rather than be trapped by it.
- Compare self with self. If you must make comparisons, compare yourself with yourself. Galatians 4:6 says, “Each man

should examine his own conduct for himself; then he can measure his achievement by comparing himself with himself and not with anyone else.” Compare your apartment, salary, vehicle, and so forth now with what you had 10 or 20 years ago, not with what others have.

- Compare with those who have less. Rather than comparing yourself with people who have more, compare yourself with those who have less. Compare your apartment with the living conditions of the homeless. Compare your salary with the unemployed. Compare your vehicle with those who have no vehicle at all. Just as comparing yourself with those who are better off creates envy, so comparing yourself with those less well-off increases contentment. In fact, as you “count your blessings,” you may be motivated to share them with others. Such sharing will increase your satisfaction even more!
- Accept that nothing (no thing) brings lasting happiness. No matter what you have, you will soon adapt to it and want something better, whether it is housing, salary, vehicle, position, language ability, people in church, and so forth. Research in the late 20th century showed that relationships were most highly correlated with happiness. Specifically the following relationships:
 - With God: having a meaningful religious faith
 - With others: having close friendships or a satisfying marriage
 - With yourself: having high self-esteem, being optimistic, getting enough sleep and exercise.
 Although you cannot find happiness by pursuing it, happiness may find you as you are careful about comparisons, avoid envy,

and keep the Great Commandment to love God and to love others as you love yourself.

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Happiness!

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