

# Snooping . . . Comparing and Other Natural Diseases

John 21:18-23

## Introduction

In one of his books, Loyd Olgivie retells an ancient Greek legend. In a major foot race, a young athlete came in second place. He was devastated. He had trained long and hard and believed himself to be a superior athlete. His memory was haunted by the face of his opponent and the cheering crowd. And, only recently, moved by his opponent's victory, the people had decided to build and erect a statue in his honor. Corrosive envy ate at the young athlete, physically and emotionally. He could think of nothing but his defeat and his desire to be that victorious athlete. Ultimately, he decided to destroy the statue that was a daily reminder of his lost glory.

A plan took shape in his mind, which he began cautiously to implement. Late each night, when the city square was empty, he went to the statue and chiseled at the base, hoping to weaken the foundation enough that it would eventually topple. One night, as he was chiseling at the sculpture with especially violent envy, he went too far. The heavy marble statue teetered on its already fragile base and crashed down on the disgruntled athlete. He died beneath the crushing weight of the marble replica of the one he had grown to hate.

Obviously, the moral of this Greek legend lies in the fact that this man, in reality, had been dying long before, inch by inch, chisel blow by chisel blow, until he became the victim of his own dissatisfaction.

Whether we would like to admit this or not, one of our gravest enemies; one of our most destructive adversaries is not a host of demons, a liberal court, or government. No! You and I saw the culprit up close very recently. The enemy was observed in the reflection we saw when we looked in the mirror this morning. And I am certain that nearly everyone looked in the mirror this morning. For some of us, there was not much to do. Lately, I just wave.

My wife headed for Atlanta recently, to take her mother home. I decided to surprise them and really splurge and take them out for breakfast before they

left. So, we got a booth at the Waffle House. I spared no expense! Hey, it is expensive – do you know how much it costs to hire a cook who can remember seventeen different orders at the same time?

Anyway, my wife was snuggled up next to me, which made me nervous because all these guys in jeans and cowboy boots were watching us. She was sitting next to me, running her fingers through my hair – on the side. Then, she says, rather loudly, with amazement, “Honey, I see a gray hair!”

How many of you guys have had your wife say that to you? How many of you men were dumb enough to say that to your wife? It was like everyone in the Waffle House looked. I know what they were thinking, “Where could that hair possibly be?!”

Well, for everyone who looked in the mirror, whether there was much to do or only a little repair work needed, you happened to see one of the greatest potential threats to your own personal fruitfulness and joy.

You see, there are viruses in the vineyard; diseases of the soul among the disciples that need close attention. An outbreak would be devastating, because these diseases shrink the heart, they shrivel the soul!

It is fascinating to me that, in the last few verses of John's gospel, he records the exposure and rebuke of one of these natural diseases. It is a disease that invades and corrupts the inner life of a believer when he acts and thinks as a natural man or woman, rather than a spiritual disciple.

It is found in John's gospel, chapter 21, just after the conversation between Jesus and Peter that we studied previously. Let us pick up our study at verse 15.

Look at verses 15 through 19.

*So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I*

*love You.” He said to him, “Tend My lambs.”*

*He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.”*

*He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.”*

*“Truly, truly I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.”*

*Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!”*

## **The Prediction of Christ**

The first thing to understand is the rather mysterious sounding prediction by Christ – a prophetic word about Peter’s future. It is in verse 18. Look at that again.

*Truly, truly I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; . . .*

In other words, “Peter, when you were a young man, you used to get dressed and go and do whatever you wanted to do – there was freedom from restraint; independence of movement.

*. . . but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.*

Now, at the time of this writing, Peter had already died – a martyr. He was crucified – most believe, upside-down.

Now notice the phrase,

*. . . and bring you where you do not wish to go.*

That is, Peter would become a martyr of the faith. It would be a death of violence that Peter would

experience, yet a death that he, like every one of us, would never volunteer for.

Tradition that extends all the way back to the second century, informs us that Peter was crucified on a cross. The word “gird” is an expression used for an executioner tying cords around the hands of someone to the crossbeam of the cross. It seems that Peter was bound to his cross, unlike Christ who was nailed.

The question could remain, “Did Peter understand what Jesus was prophesying?”

Yes! For in Peter’s second epistle, chapter 1, verse 14, he made a reference to his imminent death, saying,

*. . . as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me.*

## **The Command of Christ**

It is following this grim prediction that Jesus Christ utters a command, in verse 19b.

*. . . Follow Me!*

Literally, He is saying, “Peter, keep on following Me!”

It is implied, “Peter, follow Me all the way to your death.”

Imagine – Peter would live the rest of his life under the shadow of a cross.

## **The Distraction of Peter**

Now notice verse 20.

*Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on his breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?”*

This is the apostle John, by the way. Continue to verse 21.

*Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”*

This is classic Peter. At a moment of great importance, he takes his eyes off of Jesus. Do you remember that it happened several times before?! Most notably, the time he walked on the water to the Lord and then, took his eyes off of Jesus, focused on the water, and immediately, began to sink!

But this is natural! We are given direction from the Lord about how we are supposed to live and then, we start looking at other people.

“Lord, what are You going to do with John?”

## The Rebuke of Peter

Notice the Lord’s response in verse 22.

*Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!”*

Ouch!

“Peter, if I want him to stay alive until the rapture, is that really any of your business?”

Now, John continues, in verse 23, to clear up a rumor that had been created from this event.

*This saying therefore went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?”*

It is interesting to know that the “rumor mill” was alive in the first century! John did live the longest, and the rumors were evidently flying that John was going to live forever. So, John squelches the rumor that has already begun to spread.

Jesus is simply asking Peter a hypothetical question, “Peter, supposing I want John to live until I come? I’m not saying that I do, but suppose I do? Is that really any of your business?”

The point is, whatever God wants to do with the life of another Christian, so be it. It is not the problem or business of anyone else.

Some Christians will:

- prosper, while others will encounter financial hardship;
- experience sickness, while others remain healthy;
- enjoy the security of family, while others will lose their loved ones early on;
- live a long life, while others will die young;
- reach differing conclusions about the Christian walk than others;
- not allow a television in their home, while others will allow one in every room;
- send their kids to public school, while others will send theirs only to a Christian school or believe schooling should be done at home;
- eat only natural foods, avoiding sugar, coffee, and white flour, and will die at the ripe old

age of eighty-five, while others will have coffee every morning, white bread for lunch, and chocolate covered doughnuts every night before bed, and will also die at the age of eighty-five, only much happier!

The list can go on and on. There are thousands of issues that are between the believer and His Lord.

“Peter, stop looking at John. What I do with him is none of your business.”

Notice again, the repeated command at the end of verse 22.

*. . . You follow Me!*

One of the crippling diseases among the flock is the disease of comparison, meddling, snooping. It is debilitating and discouraging to every one affected. While we madly chisel away at the foundations of other people’s lives – as we meddle and snoop into the affairs of other – our own lives suffer the consequences.

## Prescription for Unhealthy Comparison

I want to offer the antidote for these diseases. I want to prescribe the biblical cure. I want to supply the prescription for unhealthy comparison.

### Recognize that God made you for a unique purpose

1. Prescription number one is to recognize that God made you for a unique purpose. In other words, face up to who you are!

A thousand times, growing up, I heard my father teaching sailors, marines, and merchant seamen in the servicemen’s center on Friday nights. He would say to them, “Hold up your thumb. Do you see that thumbprint? No one else in all the world has one like yours.”

In verse 22b,

*Jesus said . . . “YOU follow Me!”*

The emphasis is on “you”. “*You*, Peter, follow Me!”

It is as if Jesus said, “Peter, I want who you are, how you are gifted, how you are wired – you follow Me with everything that you are!”

“Peter, I have a unique purpose for your life and your death. It will be different from John’s. Just keep following Me.”

## **Remember that God created other people for their unique purpose**

2. Prescription number two is to remember that God created other people for their unique purpose. In other words, face up to who you are not!

The point of I Corinthians, chapter 12, is to inform us that we have a special place in the body of Christ – but also to remind us that none of us are the entire body. Some of us are feet, some are mouthpieces, some are bone and others are muscle, some are sensitive flesh and others are callused hands.

Know what God has made you good at and, to put it bluntly, know what He has made you lousy at – it is that area that other people are gifted.

John Adams was a brilliant and influential founding father of our country. As a young man, he was driven by ambition. Richard B. Morris writes of him and quotes from his diary. Here is an entry that John Adams made as a young lawyer:

*How shall I gain a reputation! How shall I spread an opinion of myself as a lawyer of distinguished genius, learning, and virtue!*

However, it seemed that John Adams never had the right stuff to really gain popularity among the masses. But, he was a diplomat and eventually our second president.

Sewell, one of his best friends in his youth, but with whom he parted over the issues of the revolution, said Adams was a misfit. He said of Adams:

*He is an honest lawyer as ever broke breath but he is not qualified, by nature or education, to shine in courts. His administrative abilities are superior but that is not enough. He cannot dance, drink, flatter, promise, dress, swear with the gentlemen and flirt with the ladies. In short, he has none of the essential ornaments which constitute a politician.*

When John Adams was older and less ambitious, he had a discussion with Thomas Jefferson about who should write the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was willing to defer to Adams, as his senior in years and in reputation, as a chief architect of independence. But, Adams insisted that Jefferson do the writing. When pressed for his reasons, according to his very late recollection, he stated:

*Reason first – you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business.*

*Reason second – you can write ten times better than I.*

I love that! “You can write – I can’t!”

Face up to who you are not – and know that God will use someone there for the benefit of everyone.

## **Recognize that the object of your human comparison is a human being**

3. Prescription number three is to recognize that the object of your human comparison is a human being.

We mentally build all of these greener pasture myths about someone else’s ability, someone else’s walk with God. We perceive that certainly, their lives must be happier, easier, richer, and more bearable. We imagine that their lives must be just short of heaven.

No! The truth is, the greener grass on the other side is just as hard to mow!

Paul tells us, in II Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 12, “When you compare yourselves among yourselves, you are not wise.”

You are comparing clay pots with clay pots – big deal!

## **Realize that human comparison will always produce spiritual diseases**

4. Prescription number four is to realize that human comparison will always produce spiritual diseases.

Let me give you some of the symptoms:

- discouragement – “I’m just not measuring up.”
- pride – “I’m actually better than that other person.”

Spiritual comparison can give you the posture of wise counselor, instead of needy patient. We would all far rather give advise than take it, right?! Then make sure you always find someone to compare yourself to who is less committed, kind, diligent, spiritual . . .

- envy – “I can’t believe that God has used, blessed, prospered this person more than me.”

One of Satan’s choicest tools is envy. I love the legend about the holy monk who lived a primitive life of piety and devotion. The demons were intent on causing him to sin, but they failed in every attempt. Finally, the devil himself got involved to teach his imp a lesson. He said, “Watch this.”

He then approached this holy man, even as the man was praying, and whispered softly in his ear, “Your friend has just been appointed Bishop of Alexandria.”

A scowl formed over his mouth and his eyes tightened up. Satan said, “Envy is often our best weapon against those who seek to be holy.”

Solomon himself wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 14, verse 30b, that, “. . . envy [is] rottenness of the bones.”

- hatred – “I will do everything possible to make the object of my comparison miserable. They have no right to be enjoying that, doing that, receiving that, spending that . . .”

Remember, ultimately, the person you are mad at is God – because if God really came through, then He would do for you what He is doing for someone else.

- fruitlessness – your mind and energy is being wasted; your meddling in another person’s life has destroyed your own.

You are an apple tree, yet you are so frustrated that you are not bearing oranges that you refuse to develop the ability to bear sweet apples.

Can you imagine Peter wanting to be John? What a loss there would have been to the Christian church. Peter would be the fiery preacher who would blaze out to God’s glory as a martyr. John would be the thinker, the writer, the witness who would give for decades – exiled, alone.

God allowed John to be exiled on the island of Patmos, not Peter. Peter belonged around people! He was an incredible cheerleader who encouraged and exhorted the Christians to stand firm.

John was the contemplative, studious, thinker who could handle the rigors of isolation, and the discipline of writing that would yield, for us today, the gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and the weighty book called Revelation.

Then finally, ultimately, there is the telltale symptom of,

- Defeat – “Why keep trying? There is always someone who is better, smarter, lovelier, holier . . . I quit.”

You have reached the point where the diseases in your soul and spirit have set you aside.

Is there hope for me? Yes. Here is the final antidote – if you are willing to take it.

### **Readjust your sights so that they are no longer earthly, but heavenly**

5. Prescription number five is to readjust your sights so that they are no longer earthly, but heavenly.

I want you to turn to the ultimate antidote; one of the clearest prescriptions for healthy Christians – Hebrews, chapter 12. This is for every one of us who are prone to snoop, to meddle, to compare.

Look at the last part of verse 1 through the first part of verse 2.

*. . . let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith . . .*

Skip to the last part of verse 3.

*. . . so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.*

That is sports “lingo” for a runner who collapses in exhaustion. What made him so tired? What exhausted him? He was not absorbed or fixed upon Christ!

This is telling us a couple of truths. Let me give them to you.

- As you run, do not become preoccupied with yourselves!

We buy the latest running shoes, the most wind resistant running suit; we read a book or two on jogging to better health; we consult our physician, buy a walkman so we can listen to Christian jogging music – we get all dressed out and then, run a hundred yards and quit.

The bottom line is that we are equipped like never before for running the race, but few of us are ever really running.

- Do not become preoccupied with the other runners! Do not look at them.

As a teenager, I was racing a motorcycle down a dirt road – and I was ahead of the other kid by a

comfortable distance. Man, was that fun! Sometime during that race, I turned around to see where he was and, at that moment, my front wheel hit a pothole. The handlebars of that bike turned and locked and I flew all the way to the other side of the road. I landed in a ditch with waist high weeds and grass, rolled over a few times, and got up – the loser of that race, but otherwise unharmed.

I have used that story on my wife to tell her that I ought to have a motorcycle and that God provides special protection for me whenever I ride one. She uses that story to tell me something else.

It is as if the writer of Hebrews is reminding us that the ones who give up in exhaustion are exhausted not because they are poor runners, or because they are ill equipped, but because they were not looking in the right direction.

That is what I meant earlier when I said, one of the greatest threats to your spiritual effectiveness and joy is yourself. *You* become weary and *you* lose heart!! Ultimately, *you lose!*

Jesus was saying, “Peter, don’t want what John has; don’t look at him, otherwise you lose!”

“The Window,” is the name of a story written by G. W. Target. It is a story about two seriously ill men who occupied the same hospital room. One man lay by a window and was propped up for an hour each day to drain fluid from his lungs. The other man spent his entire time on his back. The two men enjoyed each other’s company and talked for hours about all different types of subjects.

During the hour the one man sat up in his bed, he would describe all the things he saw to his bedfast roommate. Each day, great detail would be given to the activities going on outside. He described the park with its lovely lake and grand old trees. He would tell of children playing and lovers walking through the park outside the window. One day, a beautiful parade went by. Even though they could not hear the music, the man on his back could see it all in his mind as his roommate gave exquisite details.

But somehow, it did not seem quite fair. Although he enjoyed listening to his friend describe the sights, he began to crave the view of his comrade. *His desire for the bed by the window became a consuming thought.* It even kept him awake at night.

Then, in the darkness of one sleepless night, his roommate began to cough. He was choking on the fluid in his lungs and was desperately groping for the

button to call for help. The covetous roommate could have easily pushed his button to summon a nurse, but instead, he refused to help. The following morning the nurse discovered the man’s death. The standard procedure was carried out and the body was removed.

The surviving man then asked that his bed be switched, so that he could see out of the window. *At last, he would have what he felt he deserved.*

Painfully and slowly, he struggled to prop himself up for that first look at the park, the beautiful lake, the children playing. The window was his! But, to his horror and amazement, the window looked out to a small alley and across to another cement wall.

While you may not allow someone to physically die, how do you keep from destroying yourself; from hurting other people around you by your comparison, your jealousy, your rivalry.

The antidotes are found in the following the prescription:

- recognize that God made you for a unique purpose – just you;
- remember that God created other people for their unique purpose too;
- recognize that the object of your comparison is another simple, flawed, struggling fellow human being;
- realize that human comparison will always produce spiritual diseases that will shrink your heart and shrivel your soul; and,
- readjust your sights so that they are no longer earthly, but heavenly.

In other words, just as Jesus commanded Peter, so He commands you and me, “Peter, don’t meddle with John, you . . . you follow Me . . . and keep on following Me.”