

# NO CONTEST

Overcoming a Competitive Spirit

MIKE HESS



Regular Baptist Books  
Arlington Heights, Illinois

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*No Contest: Overcoming a Competitive Spirit*

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In today's ministry climate, measuring and assigning success is too frequently determined by statistics: how many, how famous, how multifaceted. The apostle Paul candidly warns against such measures in 2 Corinthians 10:12, "They, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." Mike Hess has addressed this issue in *No Contest*. Without assaulting the larger, more-known ministries, or exalting the concept "small as spiritual," Mike presents Scriptural truths to encourage us to properly serve no matter the statistics. With an emphatic focus upon the need for humble, obedient service to the Lord, this book both encourages and exhorts us to a life of allegiance to our calling as ambassadors for Christ. I appreciate the reminders that the ultimate ambition of every slave of Christ is to faithfully please the One Who has called us and to Whom we will give account. There will be "No Contest" on that day!

—Dan Anderson,  
President, Appalachian Bible College

In this book, Mike Hess takes off his national representative hat and replaces it with his Biblical counselor hat. He graciously and insightfully leads the reader into heart examination, getting to the root of common but ugly pride. He writes this not as a lecturer, but as a fellow struggler, fighting alongside the reader in the battle for a Christlike perspective. This book is simultaneously authentic, encouraging, and convicting!

—Mike Augsburg  
Lead Pastor, Soteria Des Moines, West Des Moines, Iowa

There is no mistaking that we live in a hypercompetitive, dog-eat-dog world. With Biblical precision and the heart of a faithful pastor, Mike Hess tackles this reality with the Christian in mind. Drawing the perfect balance between exhortation and encouragement, Mike really knocks it out of the park with this timely book. As every good book does, *No Contest* will make you think both critically and introspectively. I plan to use it as a study with the men of GraceLife Church. I highly commend it to you.

—David Cunningham  
Lead Pastor, GraceLife Church, Annville, Pa.

*No Contest* has been in the making within Mike's heart for several decades, and he now expresses his thoughts with clarity and richness of experience and truth. Mike calls ministerial competitiveness what it is: sin. He crafts the compelling point that human competition has no place in the church in either the pew or the pulpit. The fruit of competition is devastating to the Body of Christ. It fails to produce love toward one another; and, most egregious, it reflects a Christian who is not satisfied with Christ. As Mike affirms, such inappropriate action will restrict the church

from going hard after Christ's Great Commission. The book sets the reader up for the final chapter, which is a necessary and practical exposition on the sovereignty of God. It gently but firmly calls each reader to carefully consider how he or she views God. *No Contest* is a brief, but poignant read that will bring each reader both conviction and encouragement.

—Daniel K. Davey,  
President, Virginia Beach Theological Seminary

Mike has captured and revealed one of the deepest discouragements in modern ministry, which is competitive comparison. While reading *No Contest*, I found myself sitting in my chair deep in contemplation, one sentence sticking in my head: "Let's be careful to guard our own hearts against ministerial jealousy and envy." What pastor has not pushed down thoughts of jealousy and envy? Mike has produced a book filled with deep self-examination and gentle admonishment that addresses the pastor's inner hopes, fears, and even lusts, calling us to guard our hearts and become ministers of encouragement.

—Paul L. Davis  
President, ABWE International

As a competitive trial lawyer, I was eager to read this book, but mostly to argue with a premise that competition is bad. Mike Hess does a masterful job laying out the Biblical case against unhealthy competition with a solid application of Scripture. He provides excellent practical and helpful tips for the reader's consideration. I highly recommend this book.

—Charles Hervas  
Managing Partner, Hervas, Condon & Bersani, Itasca, Ill.

Unity is given to Christians by the Spirit of God (Eph. 4:3). However, Christians all too often think of each other not as companions and co-laborers, but as rivals and adversaries. This constant comparison among ourselves (2 Cor. 10:12) is foolish, destructive, and contrary to God's desires for His children. With *No Contest*, Mike Hess identifies these tendencies toward competition and contempt for one another, and the solutions offered in the Word of God. Practical teaching and relatable examples make this work a timely reminder to guard against destructive, unwarranted criticism and to be known instead for our compassion and accommodation.

—Greg Linscott  
Senior Pastor, Brown Street Baptist Church, Alton, Ill.

In a self-centered world, Christians should endeavor to be more Christlike in loving others genuinely. Gospel-centered living is all about loving God and loving others. In this book, Mike

shows us Biblically how to steer away from today's norm of competing for glory, and instead, chase after the ambition of God's glory, which is loving others well. So, how can we focus on how to better encourage one another, with the "root of sincerely wanting God to bless others and rejoicing when He does"? I would encourage you to grab this book, and as you read through it, let God work in your heart.

—Dianne Scallon  
Author, *Against the Tide*

Like a friend bold enough to point out you've got a piece of broccoli stuck between your teeth, Mike Hess graciously exposes the problem many have in the oftentimes unrealized but prevalent problem of comparing ourselves to others. Thanks, Mike, for holding the mirror of God's Word in front of my face and in doing so helping me see things I at times did not want to see but needed to see. Reading this book will not only help you examine your own heart in our unhealthy tendency to compare ourselves with others, but it will also feed your soul well by helping you learn afresh what it looks like to love others and be satisfied in Christ alone.

—Don Shirk  
Senior Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Batavia, NY

*No Contest* strikes at the heart of what creates conflict among church members, family members, and friends. With insight into human nature, Mike Hess realistically addresses the faulty metrics we use to measure ourselves and others, and shows us the Biblical markers of maturity and success we should be pursuing. *No Contest* is written in an engaging and practical style and filled with Biblical truth. It will be a valuable resource for individual growth, group studies, and discipleship and counseling settings. I highly recommend it!

—Dean Taylor  
Professor of pastoral training, Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary

The best books are both helpful and hopeful. Mike Hess has done a service to those in local church ministry by shining a Scriptural light on how the culture's success syndrome embedded itself in Christian ministry. However, diagnosing the malady is ineffective without offering a Biblical remedy. Hope is rekindled when disordered affections are challenged by gospel truth. Knowledge, insight, and courage are mandatory to describe our spiritual battles. It also takes wisdom to wield the Sword of the Spirit effectively. His book exemplifies both. What a great resource for contemporary churches.

—Sherry VanHooser  
Former Women's Ministry Director, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Pleasant, Iowa



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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mom, who never gave up on her youngest son,  
who had intense academic struggles—especially with reading.

Never would she have dreamed that he would write a book.

I wish she could see this day.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I gave thanks to my great God Who has changed me and continues to change me to become more like His Son. I pray that this book will help many to that end.

To my precious wife, Christina, for encouraging me to write more and for helping me see how having a competitive heart has hindered my own growth in grace. I love you!

To the director of Regular Baptist Press, David Gunn, for his encouragement and patience as I worked on the manuscript. His helpful input and counsel have been tremendous. I'm grateful to be serving with him.

To the editing and marketing staff of Regular Baptist Press, whose input has made this a better book. Their labors of service behind the scenes serve the Body of Christ well. I'm thankful for their patience.

To the two churches that I've been privileged to pastor—First Baptist Church of Roxana, Illinois, and Calvary Baptist Church of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. I have no words to describe how indebted I am to them. Much of this book was the result of what I learned the hard way through pastoring.

To the GARBC for giving me the undeserved privilege of serving as its national representative. I love our fellowship of churches, our doctrinal heritage, our doctrinal unity, and our commitment to "Making Disciples through Healthy Local Churches."

Others who played an influential role in this book are my numerous pastoral mentors; the men who serve on the Council of Eighteen; Sherry VanHooser, who helped me with my use of grammar during my years in Mt. Pleasant; Chris Brauns for his wise counsel; Dave Cunningham for encouraging me to step out and write this book; Baptist Bible Seminary for the fantastic education I received there; Wayne Vanderweir, who has been a constant mentor and encourager; and the several coffee shops in the northwest suburbs of Chicago that allowed me to enjoy their great coffee as I labored on this book.

Soli Deo Gloria!



# FOREWORD

By definition a foreword is a personal introduction to a book. One of its purposes is to be a marketing tool for its author. Yet in chapter 5 of this book, you'll read, "It's truly amazing how much we can accomplish for God's glory when we couldn't care less who notices or who gets the applause. That's real freedom—freedom from the enslavement of constantly fishing for the approval of others."

I can assure you of this: Mike Hess did not write this book "fishing for the approval" of anyone. How do I know?

God gave me the privilege of meeting Mike at the 2010 Conference of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (formerly NANC). Our introduction was one of those awkward ones, made by a mutual friend who was convinced we should know each other. Mike was a pastor engaged in training others in Biblical counseling, while I was a missionary and the executive director of Overseas Instruction in Counseling, an international ministry for training in Biblical counseling. I was convinced that Mike should invite me to his Biblical counseling-friendly church to share OIC's vision and process of training pastors in Biblical sufficiency-based soul care in nations around the world. He was *not* convinced.

Nevertheless, Mike took a chance on his new acquaintance, allowing me to speak with his church about our ministry. The rest, as they say, is history. Mike and I became close personal friends (it helps that we are both avid fans of the Chicago Cubs!), his church adopted my wife and me as missionaries, and I supervised the final phase of his Biblical counseling certification process.

Throughout the many, many hours we spent together on that project, we discussed much more than his counseling cases—our lives, our families, and various aspects of pastoral ministry, especially preaching. And I discovered that Mike is a man with a great heart for the church. For his own church, the one he was pastoring at that time? Of

course. But also for the church more broadly, especially for the churches of the association of which his church was a part. This resonated with me, because I had been a pastor for thirty-two years before launching OIC and had enjoyed serving on local and regional leadership councils of that same group during my early years in the pastorate.

God honored Mike's heart for the church by allowing him to be chosen to lead that fellowship of churches, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. In that role, as a kind of pastor-counselor to pastors, Mike has traveled extensively and met with thousands of pastors both within and outside that group. It was from hundreds of associational and local church meetings and through a myriad of personal conversations with pastors and other church leaders that this book was born. It is the overflow of a heart filled with concern for that which God has on His heart, the Bride of Christ, the church.

What will you find in these pages? You'll find solid Biblical instruction from a pastor's heart. You'll find insightful commentary from a widely traveled leader. And you'll find practical instruction that will help you avoid—or recover from—living to please people rather than God.

Read. Reflect. Repent? And then respond in faith to the lavish grace of our loving Lord to accomplish His purposes through your life and ministry for His glory!

For the cause of Christ among the nations,

Dr. Wayne A. Vanderwier, Director-at-Large  
Overseas Instruction in Counseling  
[DiscoverOIC.org](http://DiscoverOIC.org)

# INTRODUCTION

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it” (1 Cor. 9:24).

**T**he famous Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi is credited with saying, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” Whether the quote was original to Lombardi (which is often disputed), it captures well the competitive American mindset. Competition is a multibillion-dollar business, both here in America and around the globe. It appears that competition is integrated into every sphere of life.

So we see competition everywhere—between businesses, siblings, countries, political candidates, sports teams, students, colleges, parents, diets, and TV stations; in social media accounts, workout gyms, sports betting; and, sadly, even among Christians, churches, and church leaders. Something about competition plays into our inherent pride. One thing is certain—no one had to teach us to love winning or to hate losing.

But what if the gospel presents to you a different kind of social ethic? What if being competitive with your neighbor is keeping you from loving and serving your neighbor? Is there room for a competitive spirit in the hearts of those who follow a Savior, Who said words like these: “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?” (Matt. 16:24-26)? And these, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12)? Or these, “Whoever wants to be first among you will be slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:44-45, CSB)?

While doing research for this book, I came across several articles detailing the great lengths parents go to in order to ensure their children will be the next Mickey Mantle, Tiger Woods, Serena Williams, or Michael Phelps. One parent admitted that he has already spent well over six digits in trying to ensure his son's pathway to PGA stardom. While that's a lot of money for any parent to spend on a child's dream of athletic stardom, it's even more astounding when you consider that the child is only thirteen.<sup>1</sup>

Before we dig into the meat of this book, let's do some uncomfortable heart probing. I'll start by asking, Are you a competitive person? I'm not asking whether you enjoy seeing your team win. Or if you root for your kids and grandkids at their T-ball and soccer games. I don't think rooting for your favorite sports teams and celebrating their victories makes us sinfully competitive. Much of what we enjoy with sports can and should be an appreciation of common grace.<sup>2</sup> For it requires sincerely wanting God to bless others and rejoicing when He does. I am, however, referring to the un-Christlike attitude that desires to exalt ourselves at the expense of others.

So ask yourself these hard questions to see if this book would be relevant for you:

- Are you cynical, tending to explain away the success of others as illegitimate or shallow?
- How do you react when a neighbor, family member, or coworker purchases something you can't afford?
- Do you tend to think that other people should not have certain positions or that you would do a better job?
- How do you typically respond when someone you trained or mentored surpasses you in influence or reputation?
- Is it common for you to compare yourself, possessions, income level, looks, children, job, title, or education with others?
- Do you tend to gloat or to grieve when someone else fails?
- Do those who know you characterize you as a joyful cheerleader and encourager?
- Does it bother you when someone you consider less qualified than you seems to be more blessed than you?
- Is it a habit of yours to one-up others who tell how God is blessing them or others?
- Do you tend to malign the character of those who are able to purchase things or

do things that you can't afford now?

- What do you consider to be the Christian's ultimate prize?
- Has comparing yourself to others damaged relationships with your family, friends, other Christians, or your Savior?

Let's be honest here. Who hasn't been impressed with a neighbor's perfectly manicured lawn? What pastor hasn't sat and listened to another preacher and thought, "Man, I wish I could preach like that"? There's not a parent alive who hasn't compared his child's behavior on that child's worst days to a neighbor's kid on that child's best days. Who hasn't cringed at the thought of being passed over by an inferior candidate for a promotion at work?

My goal in writing this book is not to condemn the competitive person who makes it a habit of comparing himself or herself to others. My aim is to point us to a more satisfying standard—the standard of contentment in Christ. In other words, God offers us something better. More satisfying. More joyous. More lasting than a temporary victory or the pride of one-upping another person.

Two inevitable fruits come from being ultracompetitive with others:

1. We fail to love them (Gal. 5:13).
2. We fail to be satisfied in Christ alone (John 6:35).

Challenging one another to be more like Christ is not the problem. The problem is when we conjure up human standards based on what we see in others instead of the standard that God lays out in His Word. As you journey along in this book, you'll learn that competing with and comparing yourself to others is not about what's happening outside of you. Rather, it's an issue of what's going on in the deepest recesses of your heart.

My hope is that this book will be a help in pointing you to the satisfying contentment found in Christ. There's a better and lasting prize found in the One Who died and rose again to deliver us from the emptiness of a life focused on self (2 Cor. 5:15).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adam Shell, "Why families stretch their budgets for high-priced youth sports," *USA Today* (Sept. 5, 2007), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/09/05/why-families-stretch-their-budgets-high-priced-youth-sports/571945001/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Common grace* is a term that theologians use to describe God's kindness extended to all people through His general providence; for example, His provision of sunshine and rain for everyone.





## WHY SO COMPETITIVE?

“Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

I remember it like it was yesterday. A classmate in Mrs. Carpenter’s sixth grade class walked in and turned every head toward his feet. He was the first one in the class (possibly the whole school) to own a pair of first edition Nike Air Jordans. They were a sight to behold. The stylish black-on-red, genuine leather shoes were exactly what then-rookie guard Michael Jordan wore for the Chicago Bulls. We were absolutely mesmerized. I think all the boys in the class stared at those shoes all day. We couldn’t believe it. He was wearing a pair of \$60 shoes that could make you run faster, jump higher, hit your free throws, and play stellar defense.

At no other time in my life have my own shoes seemed so inferior. A new standard had been set. One that would be hard to compete with. Sure, my shoes were name brand and nice. But they weren’t Jordans. I could only dream of what it was like to own

“the best.” And this kid had them. I remember going home that night and, like a skillful trial lawyer, making the case to my parents for why I “needed” those shoes. It didn’t work. At least not for about two years, when I finally got a pair for Christmas. But at that point, owning Jordans had lost its luster. Most of my friends already had them.

Over thirty years later, I still find myself competing with others in an unhealthy way. Sure, the older we get, the better we become at being inconspicuous about it. But the battle is still real.

You would think that the childish jealousy of competing with what others have would diminish when we reach adulthood. But in my experience, it worsens the older we get. The temptation to compare ourselves to and compete with others is more prevalent than ever. Our competitive culture feeds this tendency relentlessly. Everywhere we look, we’re told that we’re not enough, don’t have enough, and need what the guy on the commercial has. Then there’s social media, which bombards us with temptations to compare and compete on a moment by moment basis.

As you scroll through your Facebook News Feed, you might be tempted to compare or compete with those who get a job promotion while you’re consistently turned down after interviews. Children being born as you and your spouse struggle with infertility. Beautiful homes being bought as you struggle to pay the rent in a small apartment. You’ve seen what seem to be perfectly happy marriages—full of smiles, anniversaries, expensive dates, and costly vacations—right after you and your spouse had an intense spat. Pictures from Disney World, when you can only afford a staycation. You see people killing it at the gym and their impressive “before and after” pics as you take another bite of your after-dinner dessert.

But let’s consider for a moment, is this how God intended for His children to live: constantly thinking that the way to satisfaction is by having as much as or more than what others have? What’s bringing this competitive spirit on, and what is it doing to our growth in grace? Two bad apples grow from the tree of competition: First, the competitive person looks at people as obstacles instead of opportunities to love and serve (Gal. 5:13; John 13:34-35; 15:12; Rom. 12:10; Heb. 10:24). Second, the competitive person fails to find satisfaction and contentment in Christ alone (Ps. 73:25-26; Phil. 3:10).

Both of these attitudes will set us up for spiritual failure and fruitlessness—failure in loving those whom God has sovereignly placed in our spheres of influence, and failure

to find satisfaction in the only One Who can truly meet every longing of our hearts. But before we get to the *fruit* of the problem, let's get to the *root* of why we tend to look at people as competition or obstacles instead of opportunities to love and serve.

The premise of this book is that Scripture is a supernatural, God-breathed book (2 Tim. 3:16). That means all Scripture—the things that are easy to believe and those that are difficult to believe—is true. This is what theologians often call “verbal plenary inspiration,” which means that all the Bible is equally true and equally breathed out by God. Not only is the Bible true, but the principles of Scripture are relevant to all of life (2 Pet. 1:3). When these characteristics of the Bible are tied together, the natural conclusion is that the Bible is also sufficient—totally sufficient—to teach us what we need to know God (2 Tim. 3:15–17) and to please Him. In other words, the sufficiency of Scripture means that we do not need any more special or specific revelation from God to know Him or to please Him. Everything we need is found within the pages of the completed canon of Scripture.

Most people reading this book probably agree with that premise. So why even bring it up? For many, the Bible functions as an answer book, like an answer to trivia questions, where memory verses are used as “proof texts.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, the Bible does give specific and truthful answers to the important questions of life, such as How did I get here? What is the purpose of life? Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? What happens after I die? But think of the Bible as a book that provides not only true answers to life's most profound questions, but also the diagnosis. It answers why things are the way they are. In other words, Scripture is the best source to address why we're so competitive.

## JESUS VS. THE PHARISEES

If asked what it means to be like Jesus, many would begin on the outside: what they do, what they don't do, whom they associate with, what they do with their money, or whom they've shared the gospel with. These things are important. But they're not where radical change happens. What happens when we try to fix a problem from the outside instead of dealing with the internal issue? We end up with twenty-first-century Pharisees. Dealing with our struggles like the Pharisees did is like trying to fix a car's transmission by giving it a new paint job. Sure, it looks great on the outside. But the inside is still dysfunctional and inoperative.

In Matthew 15:1-20 Jesus had an exchange with one of the most competitive groups in the Ancient Near East: the Pharisees. They were religious, well-trained, zealous, dogmatic, deeply respected, and on the lookout for anyone who disagreed with their man-centered interpretation of the law. If someone today follows the Pharisees' religious principles, that person becomes nothing more than a spiritual robot, programmed to follow certain rules that magnify outward conformity while remaining unchanged on the inside. This has all the makings of hypocrisy and spiritual disaster.

In Jesus' showdown with the Pharisees, they called Him and His disciples out for not following their ritual of handwashing. Jesus used it as an opportunity to unveil the source of every sinful inclination and action: the heart. He said, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone" (Matt. 15:18-20).

Consider for a moment how Jesus helped people with their problems. He didn't start by dealing with the outside.

- In Jesus' famous Sermon the Mount, He taught that adultery is not just a sinful relationship with someone who is not one's spouse. It's about lustful intent in the heart (Matt. 5:8, 28).
- According to Jesus, our ultimate treasure is not found in a bank account or a home's equity; our true treasure is tied to the affections of the heart (Matt. 6:21).
- Jesus didn't just tell His followers to clean up their language. He told them to first deal with the issue of where their words were conceived, that is, the heart (Luke 6:45).
- Of all the things Solomon told his son to guard, it was his heart "above all else." For it's from the heart that the "springs" of life go out (Prov. 4:23, CSB).
- James points out that the real source of conflict between believers is not primarily personality and possessions, but inward wars of selfish, misplaced desires that come from within (James 4:1-4).
- In David's contrite prayer of confession after committing adultery and plotting to

have the husband of his mistress killed, he did not pray that God would remove all the attractive women from his life. Instead, he honed in on where the real battle lay and wrote a prayer that has daily relevance in each of our lives: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10).

I think you get the point. Being a competitive person who finds satisfaction in one-upping others instead of finding satisfaction in what God has ordained for our lives is an inward issue, not an outward one.

## THE “HEART” OF THE MATTER

What exactly is the Bible referring to when it talks about the heart? Pastor and author John Street gives a helpful explanation:

For Jesus, the heart’s chief function is to think, intend, and lust. Therefore, it is important to conclude that the Biblical view of the heart is different from society’s emotional/romantic view. It involves intentions, lusts, cravings, purposes, plans, and thoughts. Out of the outgrowth of these, your heart then determines your behavior. In truth, your heart directs everything you think and do. Whatever is the worship focus of your heart will ultimately determine your entire life. Moreover, your worship focus will determine what your greatest passion is. It will affect all your plans, all your intentions, all your cravings. This, in turn, will affect the choices you make in life. . . . Your passions will consume your thinking, determine your plans, form your intentions, master your cravings, and focus your purpose.<sup>2</sup>

My good friend and mentor Wayne Vanderwier would constantly pound this home for me during my formative years as a pastor: “The problem is not the problem. The heart is the problem.” That doesn’t mean that our problems are not real and do not have real consequences, but that these problems and struggles have a deeper source—the affections of our hearts.

If we’re going to move from competition to contentment, we will need to define and diagnose things differently. Any unbelieving atheist could modify someone’s behavior. But that’s not what leads to lasting change. We could find a lot of “behavioral” help in support groups. But only the gospel changes both what we do and why we do it.

So, in response to Jesus' and Scripture's clear teaching (and they never contradict each other), our issue is not what's going on outside of us, but inside, deep within the recesses of our hearts. *We're competitive because somewhere in our hearts we're not loving God supremely, loving others sacrificially, or finding our satisfaction in our all-satisfying God.*

Our natural tendency is to first deal with the outward person. To prioritize washing the outside to make it look clean while the inside remains unchanged. But the gospel—the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection for sinners—transforms a person from the inside first, which then leads to outward transformation. In other words, transformation of the heart leads to outward formation of Christian character.

## BIBLICAL TRUTH AND OUR EXPECTATIONS

Of all the things that my parents instilled in me, the thing that sticks out the most is the need to be early to everything. Never be late. In fact, if you're fifteen minutes early, consider yourself late. I can still remember my stepdad giving me rides to six a.m. basketball practice and arriving at 5:30. We would often arrive before the custodian. Most of the time this habit has served me well. So, if I'm late, I usually don't handle it well.

A few years ago, while I was attending a Biblical counseling conference in Southern California, this habit of being on time was put to the test. A cascade of events led to my plane arriving late, which forced me to drive right in the teeth of rush hour traffic on Interstate 5. Everything on the trip to that point seemed to be a disaster. My plane had been late. Traffic was horrific. And I was about to be miserably late to a conference I had looked forward to for several months. If there had been a test to see how Christlike my response would be, I would have scored a big fat F.

An hour later, I walked into the auditorium and caught the tail end of a sermon being preached by David Powlison. I walked in with a bad attitude. I was tired, late, hungry, and kind of just wanted to get to bed. Then Dr. Powlison said something profound, which I have repeated countless times for myself and while trying to help others process the God-ordained trials of life: "Life will always happen the way the Bible says it will happen."

I knew this statement was true; no one had to convince me of the theological truth behind it. Yet at the time, my cold and calloused heart desperately needed to be reminded of it. The events of my day, along with the unmet expectation of being on

time to a conference, were the natural results of living in a sinful and fallen world—one that is filled with disappointment, grief, sorrow, and sin. Just as the Bible explains it (Gen. 3:13–19; John 16:33; Rom. 8:21–23). But more importantly, according to Jesus, these events unveiled what was already in my heart.

My main problem that day was not traffic. Nor was it the flight delays. Sure, missing dinner made me hungry. But each of those circumstances revealed something: my heart had unrealistic expectations. And when expectations fail to match the reality of Biblical truth, we should expect to live with constant disappointment and discontent.

All of us tie our hearts to some form of hope and expectation (Ps. 20:7; 62:5). We expect our friends to have a certain level of commitment and loyalty. Christians expect churches to be Biblically faithful. As citizens of different countries, we're expected to abide by certain laws. Husbands and wives naturally expect undying fidelity from each other. Children expect parents to faithfully provide their physical and emotional necessities.

We get in trouble, though, when we pin promises on God that He never made. The mature Christian will wisely distinguish between God's actual promises and our human expectations. The sooner we get our hearts aligned with the Biblical promises of God, the sooner our expectations will be based on truth. The more we plant our expectations on God's promises in Scripture, the less we'll be disappointed when others seem to be doing better than we are.

That is why it's crucial to understand the reason we get disappointed when others succeed. Why do we cringe when we hear of another person succeeding where we seemingly fail? Why do we find it so difficult to "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15)? Why is there this seething animosity inside toward those whom God has chosen to bless? We need look no further than the control center of our spiritual life—our hearts.

## AN MRI OF A COMPETITIVE HEART

Several years ago, after months of severe pain, I gave in and had back surgery. I was shocked when my neurosurgeon offered to show me the video of my surgery. He said it would give me incredible "insights as to what really happens during a back

surgery.” My response was a polite, “Thanks, but no thanks,” while deep inside I was thinking, “Gross! I can’t even stand the sight of blood.”

But what if we could see the inner workings of our hearts when we compete with others instead of loving and serving them? What’s really at play? Why are our hearts so bent on trying to one-up the other person? Let’s consider six inward workings of the heart when we see others as competition instead of loving and serving them.

1. *In our hearts we’re aiming at the wrong standard.* So what if our abs are more ripped than our neighbor’s? What if we finally end up making more money than our siblings or friends? What’s wrong with trying to get more “likes” or “friends” on Facebook than the people we see on our News Feed? The real problem with a heart that desires to compete is that it’s pursuing the wrong standard. If we’re ever going to relentlessly pursue Christlikeness, we have to answer this question with Biblical precision: What is God’s goal, aim, or standard for me?

The apostle Paul provided some helpful insight to this in 2 Corinthians 5:9: “So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” The first standard is to determine what is pleasing to God or what God delights in. The second is to pursue the likeness of our Savior. This means that above all other pursuits, we seek to reflect the attitudes, responses, kindness, boldness, purity, obedience, humility, servant-heart, and love of Jesus (Phil. 3:8–14). Those who are pursuing Christlikeness are too preoccupied with growing in grace to compete with their neighbors.

2. *In our hearts we struggle with pride.* My friend Stuart Scott has an excellent and convicting definition of pride: “When someone is proud they are focused on self. This is a form of self-worship. A person is prideful who believes that they, in and of themselves, are or should be the source of what is good, right and worthy of praise. . . . Pride is competitive toward others, and especially toward God. Pride wants to be on top.”<sup>3</sup> Scripture is replete with warnings about pride, for example Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (NASB). Prideful people want to berate others instead of lifting them. The proud person wants to look better than others instead of wanting to serve others better. Pride constantly looks for ways to “win” against others so it can exalt self. Pride makes us think we should always have more than what our neighbor has. Pride makes us think we should be noticed more. The proud heart wants to be served instead of looking for ways to serve others. The weeds

of pride grow in competitive hearts. When hearts are filled with pride, we'll inevitably desire to compete with others instead of loving and serving them.

3. *In our hearts we question God's wisdom.* Charles Ryrie wrote, "The wisdom of God tells us that God will bring about the best possible results, by the best possible means, for the most possible people, for the longest possible time."<sup>4</sup> Romans 11:33 teaches us that the wisdom of God is beyond human comprehension. But it also teaches us that God can be trusted. We do not know better than God. To call into question how or why God blesses others is to call God's wisdom into question. Trusting God's wisdom, not questioning it, is God's pathway to peace and contentment. In His wisdom, God has us exactly where He wants us. This includes the people, circumstances, and trials we're experiencing. So we need to be careful about allowing our hearts to convince us that we deserve better. Biblical wisdom keeps this truth in front: By God's grace, I always have it better than I deserve.

4. *In our hearts we rebel against God's sovereign rule.* There's certainly no shortage of debates about God's sovereignty. But this rich doctrine should be more about something we delight in than something we argue about. As we read through the Bible, that God is sovereign screams from the pages. Saying "God is sovereign" simply means that God is in complete control of all things (Ps. 145:3; Isa. 46:9-10). Since God is sovereign, we know that He's in control when it seems like others are succeeding more than us. This means that if God did not want that other person to have what he has, he wouldn't have it. But God's sovereignty also teaches us that everything we have right now is what God has seen fit to give us. Our attitude must be, "If it pleases God to give this to me, then it must please me."

5. *In our hearts we fail to believe that God is truly good.* It's important to know that God is indeed good, but it's also important to know how we know that God is good. So we need to be careful about determining or defining God's goodness by our circumstances. Just as the old children's song says, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," we can sing, "God is good, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It wouldn't make much sense to say, "God is good, this I know, for my circumstances tell me so." God is good.

But what does it mean to say that God is good? We must allow the Bible to drive

and dictate how we think about this. Take about twenty minutes to meditate on the following verses from Scripture that speak to God's goodness and how it plays out in our everyday lives. Let the verses sink deep into your heart. And let them be the foundation for how you define and determine that God is good: Exodus 34:6; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 23:6; 25:8; 33:5; 34:8; 100:4-5; 107:8-9; 143:10. If you're convinced that God is good, then it won't matter what others have or what you don't have, because you belong to the highest good in the universe—God Himself through faith in His Son, Jesus.

*6. In our hearts we fail to be satisfied in Christ alone.* How much satisfaction does it give us to have more than our neighbors? Wouldn't it be great to have the kind of satisfaction that lasts forever? To have the kind of satisfaction that no human relationship could ever give? When we compete with others, we're longing for a satisfaction that will leave us utterly unsatisfied. God made us to be satisfied in Him alone. As the fourth-century theologian Augustine famously said, "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Contentment and fullness of joy are found in the presence of our all-satisfying God (Ps. 16:11). We can't compete in the presence of God's fullness. We can only find satisfaction in His character. God never intended for us to find ultimate satisfaction in the people or things around us. Eventually they all disappoint and fall short of our expectations.

## THE GOSPEL CHANGES BOTH THE WHY AND THE WHAT

Most Christians are good at explaining what needs to change. Many new Christians are immediately given a long list of what to do and what not to do. The lists can typically be broken down this way:

What to do:

- Get baptized.
- Read your Bible.
- Pray.
- Share the gospel with unbelievers.
- Be faithful to public gatherings of believers in your local church.

What not to do:

- Use foul language.
- Have sex outside of marriage.
- Covet or compare yourself with others.

At first glance, all of these seem like no-brainers. In fact, I believe any Christian who takes the Bible and pleasing God seriously would give a hearty *amen* to this list. But remember that both the *what* and the *why* are important to God.

Look at these lists again when you insert Biblical/God-honoring motives:

- Get baptized so you can make your faith public and publicly identify with the gospel (Matt. 28:19-20).
- Read your Bible. Scripture is how God speaks to us today for the purpose of making us more like Christ, by giving us wisdom, hope, knowledge, and principles for daily life (Heb. 4:12; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:15-16; John 17:17).
- Pray, not so you can check off some kind of box or brag, but to draw strength from God in your time of need (Heb. 4:15-16).
- Give at least 10 percent of your income to your local church. While the tithe is not explicitly commanded in the New Testament, we are encouraged to abound with generosity (2 Cor. 8; 9).
- Share the gospel with unbelievers. Our Savior's mandate for those of us living in the Church Age is to "make disciples" (Matt. 28:19-20).
- Be faithful to public gatherings of believers in your local church for the purpose of being fed, growing, encouraging, observing the ordinances, and being accountable (Heb. 10:23-25).

When I came to know the Lord at the age of seventeen, I was immediately surrounded by Christians who knew well how to explain the "what." What I should avoid. What I shouldn't wear. The kind of music I shouldn't listen to. What forms of media to avoid. And if I avoided these things, I would be considered "a good Christian." To speak candidly, I got pretty proficient at making the outside look good. But what looks good on the outside doesn't necessarily indicate pure motives on the inside.

It wasn't until I pastored and began dealing intensely with people's relational and

personal struggles that I began to understand a believer's main issue is not outward conformity. Changing the outside is much easier than transforming the inside. But if all we do is change the outside while leaving the inward person unchanged, we end up with twenty-first-century Pharisees. Here's a lesson I learned the hard way: Changing a person's outside is humanly possible, but transforming the heart is something only God can do through the power of the gospel.

So let's ask the question again that I asked at the beginning of the chapter, Why are we so competitive? The answer is that the problem is not the problem; the problem is in our hearts. Therefore, we must have a relationship with someone who has the power to transform our hearts. Jesus came to this earth to be our all-satisfying Savior. In our hearts, we can truly be satisfied in Him alone. When we learn why we're so competitive, we can go from competing with others to instead loving and serving them instead.

*I will glory in my Redeemer  
My life He bought, my love He owns  
I have no longings for another  
I'm satisfied in Him alone.<sup>5</sup>*

**PRAYER:** Gracious and all satisfying Heavenly Father, Your Word teaches us over and over again that You are infinitely good and wise. Please transform our hearts to go from seeing others as a threat or an obstacle to seeing them as people to love and serve for Your glory. May You help us understand that all of our struggles with sin are at the heart level. Please keep us from the temptation of thinking that we can change the outside while ignoring the inside. We echo the words of King David and ask that You would "create in [us] a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within [us]." We ask that You reveal to us unconfessed sin. Please give us hearts to love and serve, replacing hearts that long to compete with the people You've placed in our lives. Help us to rejoice when You bless others. And may we never lose sight of the fact that You are always good to undeserving sinners like us. We pray this all in the glorious name of Christ. Amen.



1. In what specific areas of life do you find yourself competing with others?
2. How has being overly competitive damaged your relationships with your spouse, children, parents, other believers, or church members?
3. What are the two main fruits that result from being competitive with others?
4. Take some time to write down or discuss why the heart is the starting point for any discussion on our struggles with sin.
5. List several dangers of making our behavior more of an external issue than a heart issue.
6. In what specific ways does the gospel change both the *what* and the *why* of our behavior?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term *proof text* refers to using arbitrary, out-of-context Bible verses to prove a point that the text doesn't actually support. An example of this would be to use 1 John 4:8, which says, "God is love," to show that God approves or condones everyone's behavior while ignoring that Scripture also teaches that God is just and holy. His attributes never contradict each other. Instead, they perfectly complement one another.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Street, *Passions of the Heart: Biblical Counsel for Stubborn Sexual Sins* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019), 32–33.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective*, rev. ed. (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002), 177–78.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Ryrie, Unpublished Class Notes (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982), cited in Chip Ingram, *The Real God: How He Longs for You to See Him* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Publishing, 2004), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Lyrics from "I Will Glory in My Redeemer." Music and words by Steve & Vikki Cook. © 2000 Sovereign Grace Worship (ASCAP).