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By Don Overcash

Jesus Ended the Comparison Game

Only eight years old but already playing the game. Come Valentine's Day, our classroom fixated on the small paper bags hanging from each desk. The goal was simple: collect the most Valentine cards. Winning meant popularity — and, at least for a moment, acceptance. I didn't realize it then, but I was learning one of life's oldest and most exhausting lessons: our worth feels tied to how we stack up against others.

It's a game every person plays, often without knowing it. We wake up, compare ourselves with someone else, and silently tally the score. If we come out ahead, we feel worthy. If we fall behind, we work harder. The game never ends, and the scoreboard never satisfies.

This drive to earn value through comparison is built into the human condition. It stands at the center of every man-made religion or moral system that places human effort on the throne of "earned it." The game is always about performance, and no clear victory is ever in sight.

This, in fact, is the default operating system of human religion — and human psychology. It feels intuitively correct: worth should match performance, love must be deserved, and grace, if it exists at all, must be rationed by merit.

Jesus shattered that assumption on a Galilean hillside.

In the Sermon on the Mount, He did not lower the bar to make obedience more achievable. He raised it beyond reach. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not murder,' but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother is subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21–22). "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,' but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27–28). The law doesn't stop at hands and deeds — it penetrates motives, thoughts, imagination. The standard is not better behavior; the standard is perfection (Matthew 5:48).

Why would Jesus preach this? Because He wasn't revising the rules; He was dismantling the game. The entire system of earning worth through comparison assumes that someone can, in principle, win. Jesus showed that we cannot. The scales will never balance. The scoreboard will never settle in our favor. And if that's true, then either we are condemned, or salvation must come from somewhere else entirely.

It does come from somewhere else entirely.

Years later I finally understood: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Paul’s words were surgical. Salvation doesn’t turn on the scale or the scoreboard — it is grace received through faith. And grace, by definition, cannot be earned. The moment worth depends on performance, it ceases to be grace. It becomes wages. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

The person who lives by the logic of the scale measures each day by what they gained or lost. The one who has received grace wakes up already declared righteous — not because of what they have done, but because of what Christ has done in their place. The comparison game loses its power because worth is no longer at stake.

This doesn’t make Christians passive or morally indifferent. The same Paul who wrote Ephesians 2:8–9 also wrote Ephesians 2:10: “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” But those works flow from standing, not toward it. Love freely given becomes the motive — not fear of a scale tipping the wrong way.

Every religion created by humanity, and every human heart, reaches for a scale. The gospel declares that the scale has already been settled — not in our favor by our effort, but in our favor by Another’s sacrifice. We don’t perform for acceptance; we act from it.

You can stop keeping score. Jesus abolished the scoreboards — and the freedom that follows is the truest victory any heart will ever know.

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