

THE BATTLE'S FIERCE, BUT THE VICTORY'S WON: THE UNIQUE TASKS AND
BLESSINGS OF THE COMPETITIVE CHRISTIAN

BY

NATHANAEL GOELZER

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PROF. STEVEN PAGELS, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	II
ABSTRACT	III
INTRODUCTION	1
BODY	4
Defining Competitiveness	4
Competitiveness as a Negative Attribute	7
Competitiveness as a Positive Attribute	11
RESPONSE	27
The Unique Tasks.....	28
The Unique Blessings.....	33
CONCLUSION	36
APPENDIX 1: GRACE IN ACTION FOUNDATION PYRAMID.....	37
APPENDIX 2: CLIFTON STRENGTHS BALCONIES AND BASEMENTS	38
APPENDIX 3: SMITH, JOHNSON, AND HILLER’S CHRISTIAN COMPETITION VIEWS	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	40

ABSTRACT

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis suggests that Satan and his evil angels can only mutilate and cannot create anything. Where does competitiveness come from? Is it a product of God's creation or of Satan's mutilation? Is competitiveness a symptom of sin that needs to be drowned with our old man, or is it a blessing from God?

This paper answers that question by exploring Scripture, studying Clifton Strengths, interviewing experts of CliftonStrengths, and researching both the positive and negative views of competitiveness. From this research, it is concluded that competitiveness is a blessing from God that Satan often mutilates to serve his purpose. This presents the competitive Christian with unique tasks that other Christians may not have, primarily an increased difficulty to think less of self. At the same time, the competitive Christian has unique blessings. Those blessings are increased motivation to run the race marked out for him or her and the tremendous joy of knowing that Christ's victory is theirs.

INTRODUCTION

A recurring theme runs throughout C.S. Lewis' classic *The Screwtape Letters*.¹ The disturbing and diabolical Screwtape complains to his naïve demon prodigy, Wormwood, about the disadvantages that they have in the fight against “the Enemy,” God. One disadvantage that Screwtape mentions repeatedly is the inability of hell and its “research department” to produce anything pleasing or anything that is in and of itself good.

When Screwtape discovers that Wormwood's patient, the human Wormwood is given the task to torment, has fallen in love with a faithful and God-fearing woman, Screwtape throws a fit. This fit is not directed at Wormwood for allowing this to happen but at God for “filling this world full of pleasures.” This is one of the many disadvantages that Screwtape, Wormwood, Slubgob and all the other grotesque servants of Satan find themselves subject to, “Everything has to be *twisted* before it's any use to us. We fight under cruel disadvantages. Nothing is naturally on our side.”² In a later letter to Wormwood, Screwtape gives an example of this twisting they must do:

Our Research Department has not yet discovered (though success is hourly expected) how to produce any virtue. This is a serious handicap. To be greatly and effectively wicked a man needs some virtue. What would Attila be without his courage, or Shylock without self-denial as regards the flesh? But as we cannot supply these qualities ourselves, we can only use them as supplied by the enemy, and this means leaving him a kind of foothold in those men whom, otherwise, we have made most securely our own. A very unsatisfactory arrangement, but, I trust, we shall one day learn to do better.³

1 CS Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters & Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1981)

2 Lewis, *Screwtape*, 83.

3 Lewis, *Screwtape*, 103.

Despite the demon's optimism, the Research Department of Hell has not yet learned to do better, and it is safe to say that it never will. Our God is the maker and preserver of all things. God alone has the power to create. Every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of the heavenly lights, and he never changes (Jas 1:17 NIV2011). God blesses us with every spiritual blessing through Christ (Eph 1:3). Taste and see that the Lord is good; all who take refuge in him are blessed (Ps 34:8,9)! Satan, on the other hand, only lies and devours (1 Pet 5:8). Satan doesn't create; he mutilates.

On this side of heaven, our ability to distinguish between creation and mutilation can be difficult. For thousands of years sin and Satan have eroded and corrupted much of God's original good creation. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this is competitiveness. Competition is present in almost every aspect of life. Yet there doesn't seem to be a clear understanding of competitiveness. In one area of life, it is praised and in the next it is condemned. In one setting it is encouraged and in the next it is discouraged.

Is competitiveness a creation or mutilation? Is competitiveness one of the pleasures that God has filled the world with, or a product of the twisting of demons like Screwtape and Wormwood? Is the competitive spirit of a person a virtue created by God that Satan mutilates? Is competitiveness a blessing God gives to a person and intends for it to be used for service in his Kingdom, or is competitiveness a product of Satan, Screwtape, and their Research Department?

There are four goals this paper strives to accomplish: first, to show that a person's competitiveness is a gift from God rather than a product of sin; second, to provide a fair assessment of Scripture's view of competitiveness; third, to provide a proper Christian perspective on competitiveness; finally, to encourage the competitive Christian as he/she

struggles with the unique tasks that accompany the unique blessings of this gift of competitiveness.

BODY

In my research, I set out to answer one central question: How is the Christian supposed to understand competitiveness, as a gift from God or a product of sin? As I researched, additional questions arose, such as: What is competitiveness? What does Scripture say about competitiveness? How do Christians view competition and competitiveness? How do non-Christians view competition and competitiveness? If competitiveness is a strength, why is it so often misunderstood and misused? What is the proper place for competitiveness in the Lutheran theology of sanctification?

The resources explored will be organized into groups by the questions they answered. The categories used for resources are as follows: 1. Defining Competition and Competitiveness: This category examines the resources that aided in defining competitiveness. 2. Competitiveness as a Negative Attribute: This category will lay out the sources that viewed competitiveness as not a gift or strength given to a person by God but instead as a potential side effect of the disease of sin that infects humanity. 3. Competitiveness as a Positive Attribute: In this category, resources, both secular and Christian, that view competitiveness as a strength will be explored. 4. Scripture's Teachings on Competitiveness: This category will view the portions of Scripture that address competitiveness.

Defining Competitiveness

The paper's primary focus is not only to define competition but to take competitiveness out of the secular fields where it often dwells and place it into the context of the Christian life. However, to properly achieve that task, one must discover how competitiveness is understood within those secular fields. This is not an easy task. In different contexts, the word's meaning

and use differs greatly. Economists argue that competition is necessary for a healthy and well-functioning economy.⁴ Businesses need to compete against other businesses for customers and laborers. This competition drives down prices and raises wages. The economic definition of “competitiveness” is almost always positive.

In another setting, like psychology, competition creates a tension between individuals. According to many psychologists, competition impacts personal relationships and can positively or negatively affect relationships.⁵ In sports, competitiveness is often considered the most significant attribute an athlete can have. Since winning is the greatest result an athlete can achieve, the will to win is naturally considered the primary attribute necessary for success.⁶ In science, competition often refers to the fight between species for survival, otherwise known as “natural selection.” The phrases, “dog-eat-dog,” and “survival-of-the-fittest” come from the Darwinian theory of evolution. Steven H. Homel writes, “‘Survival-of-the-fittest’ as espoused by Herbert Spencer, and even Charles Darwin to a great extent, means that he who competes and survives, wins.”⁷ Clearly, defining competition is complicated—the context matters.

Is there a theological definition of competition? After all, this is a theological paper. One author who attempts to provide a theological understanding of competition comes to an eye-

⁴ Heather Boushey and Helen Knudsen, “The Importance of Competition for the American Economy.” *The White House*, July 9, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2021/07/09/the-importance-of-competition-for-the-american-economy/>

⁵ Yvonne S. Smith, Sharon G. Johnson and Erik M. Hiller, “The God of the Games: Towards a Theology of Competition.” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, April 2012. <https://christianscholars.com/the-god-of-the-games-towards-a-theology-of-competition/>

⁶ “Competition in Sports.” *IResearchNet*. <https://psychology.iresearchnet.com/sports-psychology/team-building/competition-in-sport>

⁷ Steven H. Homel, *The Competition Obsession: A Philosophy of Non-Competitive Living* (San Diego, CA: ACS Pub. Co., 1980), 20.

opening conclusion, “To summarize the problem briefly: we found that business and economic scholars assumed competition, sociologists deplored it, sports psychologists adored it, and theologians ignored it.”⁸

Defining competitiveness is difficult, and because of that it’s often ignored. However, one group has developed a way to help define what a competitive person is, Gallup’s CliftonStrengths (CS) and other CS materials.⁹ According to the CS website, “34 CS themes explain your talent DNA.... Together, the themes explain a simple but profound element of human behavior: what’s *right* with people. Individually, each theme gives you a way to describe what you naturally do best or what you might need help from others to accomplish.”¹⁰

One of those thirty-four themes is Competition. CS places this theme under their “influencing” category, one of the four categories that all themes fall under.¹¹ Instead of defining competition, CS describes “the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors you are likely to experience if you have strong Competition,”¹² To “have strong Competition” is to say the Competition Theme ranks in the top 10 of your 34 themes.

Competition is rooted in comparison. When you look at the world, you are instinctively aware of other people's performance. Their performance is the ultimate yardstick. No matter how hard you tried, no matter how worthy your intentions, if you reached your goal but did not outperform your peers, the achievement feels hollow. Like all

⁸ Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

⁹ CliftonStrengths, formerly known as StrengthsFinder, is a personality test developed by Don Clifton. Clifton came up with 34 strengths, or themes, that every single person has. He then created a 177-question test that produces a hierarchy of those 34 themes for the test taker. This test has been in use for years by different organizations and companies. Gallup Institute owns the test and has developed it into what it is today. For more information on Don Clifton and his test see *StrengthsFinder and its Use Within WELS* by Caleb Klatt, 6-14.

¹⁰ “Competition,” (Gallup.com. Gallup Inc., May 26, 2022.)
<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252191/competition-theme.aspx>.

¹¹ The other categories are Executing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking.

¹² “Competition,” (Gallup.com. Gallup Inc., May 26, 2022.)
<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252191/competition-theme.aspx>.

competitors, you need other people. You need to compare. If you can compare, you can compete, and if you can compete, you can win. And when you win, there is no feeling quite like it. You like measurement because it facilitates comparisons. You like other competitors because they invigorate you. You like contests because they must produce a winner. You particularly like contests where you know you have the inside track to be the winner. Although you are gracious to your fellow competitors and even stoic in defeat, you don't compete for the fun of competing. You compete to win. Over time you will come to avoid contests where winning seems unlikely.¹³

CliftonStrengths' definition of competition is succinct and provides a helpful summary of the competitive attitude. With this understanding of the competitive person, one can begin to assess the strength and answer the question, is this competitive attitude something to encourage or discourage?

Competitiveness as a Negative Attribute

CS is part of a branch of psychology known as “positive psychology,” which explores how people can achieve greater happiness and increased satisfaction and meaning in life.¹⁴ By being aware of your strengths, CS believes you can achieve these goals. Therefore, CS believes that being competitive can be a positive attribute for a person when used correctly. However, this is not the consensus among all psychologists.

Two authors, Steven H. Homel and Alfie Kohn, have taken up arms against the beliefs that competition benefits society and competitiveness is a positive attribute. Homel introduces his book, *The Competition Obsession: A Philosophy of Non-Competitive Living*, “This book is for anyone who has had that aching feeling that competing is, at best, uncomfortable, and usually

¹³ “Competition,” (Gallup.com. Gallup Inc., May 26, 2022.)
<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252191/competition-theme.aspx>.

¹⁴ “Positive Psychology.” Harvard Health, (Harvard Health Publishing, 2022).
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/topics/positive-psychology>.

downright offensive. If you are one of those forbearing souls who has harbored a basic distaste for competition but have, out of self-defense, sublimated your feelings or have nearly talked yourself out of them, please read on: your initial response to competition was right—and I have written this book for you.”¹⁵

Homel begins his argument against competition by addressing the “dog-eat-dog” theory of Darwinian evolution. That is, it is better for the survival of a species to be competitive. He claims that adaptations based on competition with other individuals are less productive than “non-competitive adaptations,” when a species overcomes the physical elements by resourcefulness.¹⁶ Homel writes, “Modern biologists are starting to emphasize the importance of positive adaptation and de-emphasize the negative or competitive variety as the only method of natural selection. It has not always been so. Darwin was far from realizing the importance of positive natural selection (non-competitive).”¹⁷

Homel moves past the scientific argument against competition and continues his case by looking at competition sociologically, “The rise of western culture has brought with it an increase in competition, and, like a mosquito carrying malaria, competition has infected us with envy.”^{18,19} Homel thinks the worst of competition because it leads to envy amongst competitors, ultimately leading to hatred. “Competition is not a stimulus for improvement so much as a

15 Steven H. Homel, *The Competition Obsession: A Philosophy of Non-Competitive Living*, (San Diego, CAL: ACS Pub. Co., 1980), 1.

16 Homel, *Obsession*, 15.

17 Homel, *Obsession*, 19.

18 Homel, *Obsession*, 48.

19 It is important to note here Homel’s definition of competition, “Competition is the act or action of seeking to gain what another is seeking to gain at the same time.” Although he is not speaking of competitiveness as an attribute, like CliftonStrengths, Homel would disagree that competition should be viewed as a strength.

breeder of envy and hate.”²⁰ Homel concludes his argument against competition with a call to replace competition with improvement:

Please relax—I’m not going to ask you to break your tennis racket over your knee, burn your favorite copy of Vince Lombardi’s autobiography, or give up your theatre tickets to Julius Caesar. What I am going to do is ask you to recognize that the concept of personal improvement is not only more appealing than competing in the long run, but in the short run as well. Once you get the hang of it, you’ll find that your personal peace of mind and self-esteem will increase the very same day you start.²¹

Homel’s opinion of competition may seem extreme.²² However, his thoughts bring up a side of competition that can’t be neglected; the dark side of competitiveness is real.

Alfie Kohn, the author of *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, agrees with Homel’s assessment of competition. However, Kohn wisely distinguishes between “structural competition” and “internal competition.” Kohn explains the difference like this, “The former (structural) refers to a situation; the latter (intentional), to an attitude. Whereas structural competition has to do with the win/lose framework, which is external, intentional competition is internal; it concerns the desire on the part of an individual to be number one.”²³ Our concern is with the intentional competition, the attitude rather than the situation.

Kohn further defines this intentional competition, “Here we are simply talking about an individual’s competitiveness, his or her proclivity for besting others.”²⁴ This definition of competitiveness is similar to the CliftonStrengths definition. However, Kohn doesn’t view this

20 Homel, *Obsession*, 54.

21 Homel, *Obsession*, 167.

22 Homel advises completely cutting out from one’s life sports and games that involve competitors. However, he says that golf and marathon running are acceptable since they can be done solo.

23 Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition (Rev.ed.)*, (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 4.

24 Kohn, *No Contest*, 5.

competitive attitude as a strength like CS does. Like Homel, Kohn argues that competition and being competitive are taken for granted and accepted as “that’s just how it is.”²⁵ Kohn suggests that in group settings cooperation should be preferred over competition to achieve success.

On an individual level, Kohn argues that there is no such thing as competing with oneself. He writes that competition is like kissing, it implies interaction from outside.²⁶ Furthermore, competitiveness within a person, Kohn explains, does not lead to greater success. He cites multiple studies done by Robert L. Helmreich from the University of Texas. The first study found that competitiveness did not equate to success in the scientific field:

Helmreich ... decided to investigate the relationship between achievement, on the one hand, and such traits as the orientation toward work, mastery (preference for challenging tasks), and competitiveness, on the other. A sample of 103 male Ph.D. scientists were rated on these factors based on a questionnaire. Achievement, meanwhile, was defined in terms of the number of times their work was cited by colleagues. The result was that ‘the most citations were obtained by those high on the Work and Mastery but low on the Competitiveness scale.’²⁷

Helmreich wondered if this was a fluke, so he adjusted the criteria for success and conducted the same study with psychologists, businessmen, airline pilots, airline reservation agents, college students, and even fourth graders. In every case he found that competitiveness not only failed to equate with success, but it had a “deleterious effect” on performance and success.²⁸

These studies, as well as both Homel and Kohn’s writings, are helpful for understanding the negative side of competition and competitiveness. From these resources, it is clear to see that

25 Kohn using an interesting metaphor to explain the lack of awareness that Americans have when it comes to competition. He writes, “‘A fish does not reflect on the nature of water,’ Walker Percy once remarked, ‘he cannot imagine its absence, so he cannot consider its presence.’” (1)

26 Kohn, *No Contest*, 6.

27 Kohn, *No contest*, 52.

28 Kohn, *No contest*, 53.

in our culture a tension exists when it comes to competitiveness. Its existence is undeniable, but its benefits are disputed. According to Homel and Kohn, there ought to be no dispute. Homel would concur with Kohn, “I believe the case against competition is so compelling that parenthetical qualifications to the effect that competing can sometimes be constructive would be incongruous and unwarranted...²⁹ The evidence shows that the ideal amount of competition in any environment—for mental health, quality of relationships, interest in what we're doing, and quality of performance—is none at all.”³⁰

Competitiveness as a Positive Attribute

Despite arguments put forward against competitiveness by authors like Homel and Kohn, others consider competitiveness a strength of a person and useful in life. The primary resources for this section are provided by the Gallup company, the producer of the Clifton Strengths (CS) test. Along with the Gallup CS Test, the Gallup company provides multiple resources for test takers to maximize their test results. Not only do they produce a book that contains explanations of the strengths, but they also produce podcasts and online articles that dive deeper into the strengths. In addition, Gallup has created a course to train people in becoming licensed CliftonStrength coaches who can provide personal support in utilizing one’s strengths.

Don Clifton created a list of thirty-four different attributes. He believed that all thirty-four of these attributes were “what’s *right* with people.”³¹ Rather than arguing for the positivity of

²⁹ Kohn, *No contest*, 10.

³⁰ Boushey and Knudsen, “The Importance of Competition for the American Economy.”

³¹ “Competition,” (Gallup.com. Gallup Inc., May 26, 2022.)
<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252191/competition-theme.aspx>.

competition or competitiveness, CS simply acknowledges that people are competitive and argues that the competitive person can use his or her attribute of Competition³² to excel in life.

Therefore, the resources provided by Gallup define, discuss, and analyze the competitive person rather than competitiveness itself. For example, Maika Liebbrandt, a co-host of the *Gallup Theme Thursday* podcast, describes a person with high Competition. When it comes to the Gallup description of the competitive person, a few characteristics stand out.

If you've got high Competition, it means that you measure progress against [the] performance of others... You also might notice a curiosity in your mind...or an awareness of how am I being ranked? And how does that compare to other people? You also might have a real knack for keeping and understanding score. I think there's also an awareness of other performers. You might even remember the performance rankings in your life, because you are so tuned in to...the forward motion of the idea of life kind of as a game.³³

Competition and comparison go hand in hand, “Competition is rooted in comparison. When you look at the world, you are instinctively aware of other people's performance. ... Like all competitors, you need other people. You need to compare.”³⁴ Often, comparing oneself to others is seen as a bad habit and a sign of a lack of self-confidence. Liebbrandt suggests that for the competitive person, this is not so. Instead, the act of comparing is what best drives and motivates the competitive person to achieve greatness. She argues that the comparison aspect is what makes “Competition beautiful.”³⁵

32 When the Gallup CS's theme is referred to, “competition” will be capitalized.

33 Jim Collison and Maika Leibbrandt. “Competition: Highlights from Your CliftonStrengths 34,” (Gallup Inc, August 13, 2019). <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/266339/competition-highlights-cliftonstrengths.aspx>.

34 “Competition,” (Gallup.com. Gallup Inc., May 26, 2022.) <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252191/competition-theme.aspx>.

35 Collison and Maika Leibbrandt. “Competition: Highlights.”

Another characteristic of the highly competitive person is that they excel in motivating and encouraging others around them. According to Liebbrandt, if you are a competitor, then seeing others compete gives you joy. Since the competitive person knows the struggle that other competitive people go through and understands their strong desire to win, “you (the person with high Competition) connect this idea of being a champion to being something truly meaningful. You get, I think, replenished, you get a joy and an energy when you win or when you see other people win.”³⁶

In another podcast episode, Liebbrandt shares an anecdote about a competitive friend of hers to illustrate the idea that competitors are great encouragers:

They also, I think, are great noticers and supporters of others in the ring. ...I remember talking to one of my colleagues to prepare for Competition. ...One of her favorite things to do is to show up to sporting events that she doesn't play, but her friends do, because she still feels that same catharsis of getting to cheer somebody on by seeing the effort that they're putting into taking that competition so seriously. And she's the first person to reach out and give you a high five. So, it's important to realize that Competition is always seeing and speaking the language of competing, so they're in it, and they're going to be great supporters if you give them the chance to be that.³⁷

This thought from Liebbrandt contradicts the ideas of Kohn and Homel, who argue that competitiveness can only create conflict. Along with Liebbrandt, sports psychologist Pippa Grange believes that the competitive person does not only focus on his or her own success, but also the success of others. She says, “We have narrowed our understanding of competition too far toward dominance, conquest, better-than-the-other-guy. Each of these goals serves the ego

³⁶ Collison and Maika Leibbrandt. “Competition: Highlights.”

³⁷ Collison and Maika Leibbrandt. “Competition: Highlights.”

alone... competition is necessarily about 'we', not 'I.' It always involves other people. It's what I call 'winning deep.' There is no less striving or passion, it's just done together; in common."³⁸

In addition to the study of Gallup materials, interviews were conducted with experts in CliftonStrengths. The first expert interviewed was Rich Gurgel. Gurgel is uniquely qualified to comment on the Competition strength. Not only is he an expert in CS, but he also has decades of pastoral ministry experience. During our phone interview, we spoke extensively about competition and how it relates to the Christian life. Gurgel made it clear that he views competitiveness as a gift from God. He equated competitiveness with a zeal to excel, "Competitiveness says, 'I want to excel. I want to take whatever gifts and talents God has given me, and I want to do really well. I'm not going for a loss or a tie. I'm going for a win.' ...To want to excel for the glory of God is an awesome thing."³⁹

Overall, Gurgel spoke positively about the Competition theme of CS. He did, however, make it clear that although Competition is a gift from God, "I can take any gift from God and turn it into a curse."⁴⁰ He recognized the capability of the sinful man to twist God's blessings. Second, Gurgel admitted that maybe "competition" was not the right word CS could have chosen for this theme. Gurgel wondered, "The concept, I think, is much greater than maybe 'competition' suggests."⁴¹ Gurgel wished to avoid the baggage that comes with the term

38 John Briley, "Yes, You Can Be Too Competitive. Here's Why, and How to Stop." (The Washington Post. WP Company, September 8, 2022). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/11/01/too-competitive-tips/>.

39 Rich Gurgel, interview by author. Phone call, October 27, 2022.

40 Gurgel Interview.

41 Gurgel Interview.

“competition.” He suggested that the strength of Competition is, more broadly speaking, “a unique drive or eagerness to excel.”⁴²

One organization that agrees with Gurgel and uses CS to encourage and create cultures of excellence in churches and schools is Grace in Action (GIA).⁴³ I interviewed two members of the Grace in Action team to explore their understanding of the Competition theme.

The first interviewee was Steve Granberg, who is currently serving as the Ministry Leadership Partner at GIA. Before his position at GIA, Granberg served as a WELS teacher, and most recently, he served as principal at Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton, Wisconsin. Mr. Granberg spoke positively of the Competition theme. He agreed with Gurgel that competitiveness is a gift from God. Granberg mentioned that GIA uses the foundations pyramid seen in Appendix 1.⁴⁴ This pyramid explains that to get the most out of your CS themes, “you must be healthy spiritually, emotionally, and physically.”⁴⁵ Throughout the interview, Granberg emphasized the need for a competitive person to have a proper foundation in life. Granberg acknowledged that the best foundation is built on the Word of God.⁴⁶

The other member of GIA interviewed was Don Sutton. After years of faithful service as a WELS pastor, Sutton has recently retired from the ministry and is now serving as the CEO of GIA. Sutton explained how he had had a front-row seat to the Competition theme. His daughter

42 Gurgel Interview.

43 Grace in Action is an organization founded in 2011 by WELS lay leaders and business professionals. Their goal is to provide leadership training for WELS ministries. One of their main tactics is to use CS to assess the skills and themes of the staff and faculty serving in these WELS ministries.

44 Steve Granberg, email sent to author. December 7, 2022.

45 Steve Granberg, interview by author. Zoom call, September 29, 2022

46 Granberg Interview.

has high Competition, and Sutton said that her drive to achieve excellence and complete tasks is extremely high. He credited this high drive, in part, to her high Competition theme. However, he did mention the struggles for the person with high Competition. Sutton shared with me the CS “balconies and basements” found in Appendix 2.⁴⁷

These balconies and basements came up often in all three of my interviews. Although Competition is recognized as a strength by both CS and GIA, both organizations acknowledge that there are dark sides, or “basements,” that accompany the bright side, or “balcony,” of the strength. According to CS, the basements of Competition are, “sore loser, not a team player, puts down others, self-centered, and confrontational.”⁴⁸ When asked about the basement of Competition, Gurgel said, “There’s a single deceit of the Great Deceiver: If the day was good, that is to my credit, and if the day was bad, I must have messed up. Why are my wins wins and my losses losses? It’s a bit arrogant either way. The focus is on the self. “I” is far too involved. That may be a particular challenge for someone with competitiveness.”⁴⁹ According to Sutton and Granberg, these basements can be more easily and more often avoided when the foundation of the competitive person is firmly built on the Gospel, and his or her motivation is found in glorifying God instead of self.⁵⁰

The interviews provided new perspectives on competitiveness that the other sources were unable to produce. These three men were able to place the Competition theme in the contest of God’s Word and the Christian life. This led to a balanced understanding of the attribute. The

47 Don Sutton, email sent to the author. October 26, 2022.

48 Don Sutton, email.

49 Gurgel Interview.

50 Interviews with Granberg and Sutton.

three interviewees all agreed that competitiveness is a gift of God. They agreed that it could be extremely useful in achieving success, encouraging others, striving towards sanctified living, and glorifying God. However, they all acknowledged the unique dangers that exist for the competitive person. Sutton and Granberg focused on the balconies and basements. They encouraged proper motivation. Gurgel put it this way, “All Christians must die and rise anew every day, but because of your gift of Competition and because of the basements that come along with that gift, there may be a particular way that you need to be aware of dying and rising every day.”⁵¹

Scripture’s Teachings on Competitiveness

The primary resource for this section is an article written by Yvonne S. Smith, Sharon G. Johnson and Erik M. Hiller, entitled, “The God of the Games: Towards a Theology of Competition.”⁵² These three researches attempted to answer the question, “Does Yahweh approve of competition?”⁵³ Although this article examines the act of competition rather than competitiveness, it is useful for exploring Scripture and contemporary Christian perspectives on the topic.

To answer the question, Smith and Johnson first examined the teachings on competition of Christian theologians.⁵⁴ They found that, in general, there are four camps that Christians find

51 Gurgel Interview.

52 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

53 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

54 It appears that Hiller did not participate in this research for the article, but only Smith and Johnson.

themselves in when it comes to competition, seen in Appendix 3.⁵⁵ According to Smith and Johnson, one opinion of Christian theologians is that God condemns competition, “Christlikeness and competitive desires are inherently opposed and irreconcilable.”⁵⁶

The second view of competition the researchers found is that Christ reforms competition, “Christ comes to the competitor as a transformer. Christians should seek to reclaim competition for His glory.”⁵⁷

The third opinion of competition held by Christians, according to the article, is Christ and competition are in partnership. The partnership looks like this: “Christians who argue for this perspective feel that God has created competition to be good, that it drives excellence in both personal and community development. Thus, Christianity and competition are mutually supportive—competition helps us grow spiritually, physically, socially, and economically.”⁵⁸

Finally, the fourth understanding of competition is that Christ and competition are in paradox. In other words, “The Bible does not specifically embrace competition, nor does it condemn it outright; however, it does repeatedly caution the Christian about it. Competition is an uneasy condition that needs to be subordinated to God’s priorities and principles. However, to the degree that competition provides a platform for a Christian’s witness, it may prove to be helpful.”⁵⁹

55 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

56 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

57 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

58 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

59 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

After the researchers examined the different ways Christians understand competition, they turned to Scripture. For clarity, they outlined their research process.

Our first step in moving towards a theology of competition was to search the Scripture. We began the study by doing a search of a Bible and commentary database using a variety of words that have to do with competition: “competition,” “compete,” “strive” (as in a contest or in court), “plead” (as in pleading a case), “contend,” “fight,” “game,” and “contest.” When we found different Hebrew or Greek words for these English words, we searched each word. Using a database, we consulted eight translations and paraphrases of the Bible, four commentaries, four Bible dictionaries, Naves, Vines, Strongs, Youngs, and selected commentary from Martin Luther, John Owen, John Calvin, John Wesley, John Bunyan, and Andrew Murray. We also consulted the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia in hard copy.⁶⁰

The authors’ thorough search of the Scriptures produced interesting results. They came to three different conclusions about what Scripture says concerning competition: “First, on balance, competition is neither moral nor immoral per se but is a neutral force that can be turned to good or evil. The second conclusion is that Christians need to be careful about the goals of competition. The third conclusion is that Christians need to be careful about their attitudes and motivations when competing.”⁶¹

To support these conclusions, the article references many passages. Not surprisingly, the first portion of Scripture cited is the Fall of Adam and Eve. According to the article, theologians who say that competition is evil in God’s eyes quickly point to the Garden. These writers argue that Eve sinned because, out of a competitive spirit, she wanted to be more like God, as wise as God, and equal to him. However, Smith, Johnson, and Hiller propose that there is a difference between sinful motives and goals and competition.⁶²

60 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

61 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

62 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

Other arguments against competition are formed around the account of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Some propose this sibling rivalry is the “first recorded act of competitive rivalry.”⁶³ Once again, Smith, Johnson, and Hiller make a compelling argument for why competition itself is not what this account is condemning, “The writer of Hebrews, commenting about this incident, said that Abel made his offering through faith and that was why God accepted it (Heb 11:4). It was not rivalry that created evil in the situation; it was the motives and attitudes of the rivals that created the evil.”⁶⁴ According to the article, there is no scriptural support for understanding competition as evil.

On the other hand, according to the article, Scripture does not contain passages that support competition and approve it as something good. The Apostle Paul and his sports metaphors are often brought up in support of a positive scriptural view of competition. The authors provide an interesting comment regarding Paul’s “sports talk.”

...some argue that Paul’s metaphors comparing the Christian life to a race for a prize (I Corinthians 9) or the writer of Hebrews talking about a wrestling contest (Hebrews 12) show that competition creates or enhances the blessings of God. However, the biblical use of sports metaphors to describe the Christian life does not necessarily mean that God blesses competition. Paul used many metaphors in his writing: the human body, marriage, a soldier’s armor. Christ also used many metaphors: farmers sowing seed, businessmen buying land, women baking bread. The fact that Paul talks about soldiers, or Christ about farmers, does not imply that God is partial to the military or agricultural sectors. Paul’s use of sports metaphors does not imply that God is partial to athletics either.⁶⁵

In summation, the researchers found that competition in Scripture is “a neutral construct, part of the human condition that can be turned towards either good or evil, depending on the goals and motivations of the persons involved. The individual’s use of competition... makes it good or

63 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

64 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

65 Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

bad.”⁶⁶ This observation is consistent with the understanding and opinion of competition that Gurgel and the men from GIA hold. These Scriptural findings also align with the CS Competition theme. You could say that Scripture displays the balconies and basements of competition.

Clifton Strengths, as well as the interviewees emphasized the importance of proper goals and motivations for the competitor. The goal of a Christian in every area of life, inside or outside of competition, is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart... And love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Love is what God wants us to strive towards in all things. Smith, Johnson, and Hiller say that the ultimate goal of the Christian is God himself.

He desires his people to make Him the ultimate goal in life. Throughout Scripture, the saints have responded to this. “Who do I have in Heaven but you?” asks David. “I desire you more than anything on earth” (Ps 73:25). Moses “esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb 11:26). “Those things which were advantage to me, I esteemed loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord,” declares Paul (Philippians 3:7,8).⁶⁷

Gurgel commented that the competitor often has an issue with being self-centered. The CS basements agree with this assessment. The words Jesus spoke to his disciples in Mark 10 are helpful when trying to keep oneself humble.

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of 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 10:42–45)

⁶⁶ Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

⁶⁷ Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

Based off these sources and passages from Scripture, God’s Word seems to be “value-neutral”⁶⁸ towards competition and competitiveness. This is evident in Paul’s use of competition metaphors.

When Paul uses competitive language, he is speaking of the life of a Christian and the struggle that is ever present. He doesn’t explicitly say that competitiveness is a virtue, nor does he condemn it as evil. However, he does use competitive language to describe the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians, Paul encourages his hearers to live like a runner runs a race.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor 9:24–27).

How does a runner run a race? He prepares and trains consistently and strictly for the race. He makes sure that he knows the rules of the race and the course he must run. He competes. A runner either competes with other runners or with himself. Paul says that he is not running aimlessly, and that he is not shadow boxing, or beating the air. No, there is something he is fighting. This is a real race with a starting line, a finish line, and winners and losers. There is an opponent. Who is Paul competing against in his race and his boxing match? Here Paul is competing with himself and his own sinful nature.

Again, in Philippians Paul uses competitive language.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:12–14).

⁶⁸ Smith, Johnson, Hiller, “God of the Games.”

Paul presses on toward the prize. Paul strains toward what is ahead. This pressing and straining surely strike a chord with the competitive person. What is competing but pressing, straining, contending (Col 1:29), fighting (1 Tim 1:18, 6:12, 2 Tim 4:7), standing firm and giving yourself fully (1 Cor 15:58)? Repeatedly, Paul's descriptions of the Christian's struggle between living for self and living for God are filled with competition pictures and competitive terminology.

Just like the three experts interviewed, Paul clearly understands the necessity of having a proper and sure foundation before competing. Throughout Paul's letters, he encourages sanctified living in his people by first pointing them to their justification in Christ. Steve Granberg said that an essential part of the foundation of the Christian competitor is his identity. Every Christian, but perhaps especially the competitive Christian, needs to always have his true identity in mind.⁶⁹ The Christian is a redeemed child of God who has been saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). This is the reality of the Christian life. Win or lose in life, this does not change.

Paul again uses competitive language when he describes the identity of a Christian, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). When Paul encourages the Corinthian congregation to "stand firm" and "give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord," he does so only after he established their identity as victors over sin, death, and Satan, "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57–58)!

Continuing up the GIA pyramid after Identity we find, "Wellness: Spiritual, Emotional and Physical Health." Don Sutton described a healthy spiritual life as "being in the Word

⁶⁹ Granberg Interview.

consistently and having an active prayer life.”⁷⁰ In the race of life, Paul encourages “strict training.” Paul understands the need for discipline when it comes to having a healthy spiritual life. In the battle against “the devil’s schemes” and “the spiritual forces of evil,” Paul tells us to put on the “full armor of God.”

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:10-17).

Paul continues by encouraging prayer in every situation, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (Eph 6:18)

According to GIA, the final part of the foundation needed for a proper use of the Competition strength is “Fruit: Rejoice in the fruit the Gospel produces as you serve others.”⁷¹ According to Granberg, it is essential for Christians to recognize where their strengths come from and that the source of all their success is God who has given us faith that produces fruit. For the competitive Christian this is especially important to remember when a “balcony experience is being had.”⁷² For all Christians, but maybe more so for the competitive person, it can be easy to view success as a product of one's hard work and determination.

70 Sutton Interview.

71 Appendix 1 and 2

72 Granberg Interview.

Paul recognized this danger. Therefore, even when he encouraged his readers to strive to live lives pleasing to God, he made sure to emphasize that without the grace of God, this task would be impossible. Before Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians with the “armor of God” section, he gives a harsh yet beautiful description of the Christian before and after God’s grace.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 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. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:1–10)

The only hope a Christian has in the fight against the sinful flesh and Satan is found in Christ. In fact, the only reason the Christian is in this war against the “ruler of the kingdom of the air,” “the cravings of our flesh,” and “its desires and thoughts” is because Christ has brought us to “be with him in the heavenly realms.” If not for this rebirth and resurrection in Christ Jesus, we would still be enemies of God, fighting against his will. The competitive Christian has no reason to take credit for his victories.

Paul understands the competitive Christian. Gurgel has a theory for why Paul uses competition imagery and competitive language so often in his letters, “I hate to read CS into the Bible...but you see something very similar to what CS means by competitiveness in Paul.”⁷³ Gurgel is suggesting that if Paul would have taken the CS test, it wouldn’t surprise him if Paul rated high in the Competition theme.

⁷³ Gurgel Interview.

Summary of Research

In my research, I sought to define competitiveness. I discovered negative views of competition, as well as positive ones. I also searched the Scriptures to understand what God's Word says about competitiveness.

The writings of Kohn and Homel showed the dangers that are unique to competitive people. Furthermore, the studies that these authors quoted suggested that it is not just an opinion but a fact that competitiveness can sometimes be detrimental to a person.

The experts from Gallup recognized the great advantage that the high Competition person could have. They called those highs of Competition "balconies." Still, they acknowledged the difficulties, or "basements," that can often accompany the blessings of competitiveness. The experts interviewed all agreed that competitiveness is a gift from God that can be used to do great things for God's kingdom. They all emphasized the need for a solid foundation in God's Word and his grace, something common for all Christians. They also emphasized the special need for a competitive person to have proper motivation and goals in all that they strive to achieve.

Finally, it was clear that God is value-neutral towards competition and competitiveness. Nowhere in Scripture does God suggest that competing is evil, but nowhere does he endorse competing as pleasing to him. This does not mean that God's Word ignores the subject altogether. God does warn against sinful pride and selfish motivations that competitiveness can often produce. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul utilizes competitive language and competition metaphors to encourage his readers as they strive towards the finish line of life.

RESPONSE

When C.S. Lewis described what research and study led to the creation of his *Screwtape Letters*, he said, “Some have paid me an undeserved compliment by supposing that my letters were the ripe fruit of many years’ study in moral and ascetic theology. They forget that there is an equally reliable though less creditable way of learning how temptation works.”⁷⁴

Much of my education in competition has also been conducted in “the less credible way of learning.”⁷⁵ Truthfully, much of that education took place in Competition’s basement. I’ve struggled most of my life to crawl out of the basement of competition. As a Christian who knew the fruits of the Spirit and the golden rule from early on, I wrestled with trying to understand how my competitiveness could be compatible with such truths of Scripture. I wondered, “if my competitiveness leads to thoughts, words, and actions like these, then I must get rid of this competitiveness altogether. How can this be used to glorify God in whatever I do?”

Eventually, I took the CS test. The results of my test surprised me. It was not surprising to see the Competition theme in my top five, but it was surprising to learn that, according to the test creators, competitiveness is considered a strength. This was my impetus for researching this topic and writing this paper. How can competitiveness be a strength? How can something that I’ve tried to suppress be used to serve my Creator and Savior?

The research affirmed many of the lessons I learned through the “less credible way” of understanding competitiveness. The basements of competition are real. There is a dark side to this strength. The research of psychology and study of Scripture affirmed that there are special

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Screwtape*, 10.

⁷⁵ Competition is number four in my top five CS themes.

challenges for the competitive Christian. The task of dying and rising each day to Christ is not unique, but the way a competitive Christian must do it is.⁷⁶

However, my research revealed a positive side of competition to me. The interviews I conducted led me to realize that Competition can be a strength given by God. The inspired writings of the Apostle Paul brought to light the way competitiveness can be used to glorify God. In the world of competition, there exists a bright side along with a dark side. In the architecture of competition, there are balconies along with basements. In the life of a competitive Christian, there are unique blessings that go along with unique tasks.

The Unique Tasks

The sinner who receives faith from Christ enjoys tremendous blessings. Peace is theirs through the forgiveness of sins. Hope is theirs through the promise of eternal life in heaven. Certainty is theirs through the promises found in the inspired Scriptures. The list could go on. Besides these blessings, at conversion the Christian is enlisted into a war. Luther uses competitive language to describe this war that is unique to the Christian, “Believers always have trial enough; they must wage war constantly. Those who are without faith and the Spirit do not feel this; or they give in, run away, and follow evil lust ... Before he believed, he went his way as he pleased. But now that the Spirit has come and works to make him pure, the battle begins. Then the devil, the world, and the flesh assault the faith.”⁷⁷ Yes, the Christian lives in faith, but he still lives in the flesh.⁷⁸

76 Gurgel Interview.

77 Althaus, Paul. *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972), 20.

78 Althaus, *Ethics*, 20.

Yes, the Christian eagerly awaits eternal peace in heaven, but in the meantime, on this earth, he will be hated (Luke 17:14). Yes, Satan has been defeated by Christ, but the prince of this world has come down to us and is filled with fury because he knows his time is short (Rev 12:12).

This is what separates the Christian from the rest of society. No longer does the believer give in to his desires and cravings of the flesh. Instead, he fights against them. In a sense, all Christians need to be competitive. The Spirit moves the Christian to compete against his flesh. Luther describes the “side-effects” of coming to faith, “There is a Spirit of restlessness amid the greatest calm, that is, in God’s grace and peace. A Christian cannot be still or idle. He constantly strives and struggles with all his might, as one who has no other object in life than to disseminate God’s honor and glory among the people.”⁷⁹ The Christian can’t help but strive for God and against sin.

This is the mark of every believer, but this war and this striving are carried out differently from person to person. Gurgel explained that for the competitive person the struggle against sin, Satan, and this world looks different from the struggle of someone who is not competitive.⁸⁰ Satan is wise and personalizes his attacks. How he pricks my conscience and exposes my weaknesses will differ from how he does the same to you. So how does this battle look for the competitive Christian? What is the unique task given to Christians with high Competition?

One of the basements of the Competition strength is “self-centered.” It became clear in my research that this basement is the deepest and widest basement of Competition. In the writings of Homel and Kohn, in my interviews with Gurgel and the consultants from GIA, as well as in the Gallup podcasts and articles, this basement continued to be the primary basement

⁷⁹ Althaus, *Ethics*, 12–13.

⁸⁰ Gurgel Interview.

mentioned. Gurgel put it this way, “For the competitive person, ‘self’ is often too involved, and they fail to let God be God.”⁸¹

Remember, the competitor is obsessed with keeping score. According to Zach Carlsen, “people with this [Competition] strength are constantly asking, ‘How am I doing?’ They are always keeping track and have a deep need to know how they compare and where they rank relative to the rest.”⁸² The competitor is addicted to winning and is in constant fear of losing. This can be used to motivate the person and lead to great achievement. However, this constant scorekeeping often leads to the basement of self-centeredness.

Satan loves to drive the competitor to this basement in two different ways. When troubles arise in a competitive person’s life, it is natural for the person to check the scoreboard of life in his head. When the competitor suffers and fails in life, he turns to the mental scoreboard and wonders, “How am I doing?” What he finds is a losing score. Steve Granberg put this self-centeredness this way, “When a competitive person fails, or something goes not according to his plans in life, he gets down on himself. He says, ‘This is my fault. I need to do better.’”⁸³ The competitive Christian can often view suffering as a direct product of his own failures or actions. The focus is on self. Furthermore, during the constant scoreboard checking the competitor begins to derive his sense of identity from what he does and not from what Christ has done for him. Paul Wendland shows where this leads a person, “So if we derive our sense of who we are from the expectations and verdicts of those around us, aren’t we just running into a wall of despair?

81 Gurgel Interview.

82 Zach Carlsen, “Competition: The Truth about Competition,” (Zach Carlsen Coaching, April 11, 2019). <https://zachcarlsen.com/blog/2019/3/18/competition-the-truth-about-competition>.

83 Granberg Interview.

Worse than this is the bite of conscience when we realize how much we do is inspired by sinful ego and self-will.”⁸⁴

Luther has much to say on the topic of sinful pride and suffering. Luther, as a theologian of the cross, is not afraid to call a thing what it is. He sees suffering and attributes it to God. Suffering to Luther is “the hand of God laying heavy upon us.”⁸⁵ Although it may feel like God is far off and distant, in times of trial God is closer than ever. This is not a time to look inward, but a time to look heavenward. According to Wendland, “any trial is just another opportunity for God to demonstrate his most uncommon love in us, and provide us with an exodus, no less (1 Cor 10:13).”⁸⁶ In addition, Luther sees suffering as a work of God to rid the human of any pride or existence of self-righteousness in his heart.

...Suffering is the result of divine action in reducing works and merits to naught...“Other virtues may be perfect by doing; but faith, hope, and love, only by suffering, by suffering I say, that is, by being passive under the divine operation” (WA 5.176.1); “The soul is taken hold of [by the pure Word of God] and does not take hold of anything itself; that is, it is stripped of its own garments, of its shoes, of all its possessions, and of all its imaginations, and is taken away by the Word ... into the wilderness ... to invisible things, into the vineyard, and into the marriage chamber. But this leading, this taking away, and this stripping miserably tortures [the soul]. For it is a hard path to walk in, and a straight and narrow way, to leave all visible things to which we have been accustomed; this, indeed, is to die, and to descend into hell” (WA 5.176.16-24).⁸⁷

Gerhard Forde explains why we suffer, “He [God] is out to do it all.... We suffer because we don’t like it. We don’t like to be put out of control. It means that we are rendered totally passive

84 Paul Wendland, “How God Grows Christians,” (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File), 8.

85 Wendland, “God Grows,” 9.

86 Wendland, “God Grows,” 9.

87 Quoted in Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross, Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 86-87.

by the divine operation through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.”⁸⁸ For the competitive person, the word “passive” makes their ears hurt. It makes their skin crawl to be still. The competitor is all about being active. The task is to be passive and let God be God.

The opposite tactic used by the father of lies to drive the competitor to the basement of self-centeredness is to convince him that his competitiveness is the reason for his success in life. Satan wants the competitor to think that his striving, fighting, running, and self-discipline are what won the prize. He wants the striving Christian to think he could somehow “‘take heaven by storm’ through an unusual measure of self-discipline.”⁸⁹ The self is too involved, and the gospel is forced out. Once again, it is necessary for the Christian to be a theologian of the cross and call a thing what it is. Wendland reminds the prideful Christian of the reality of our sinfulness.

Pride reveals itself in a smug self-satisfaction, a “no flies on me” attitude, in which we show that we’re blind to the real situation: “I know your deed, that you are neither hot nor cold...so I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (Re 3:15–18). How insipid to Christ are the works of the smug and the self-satisfied, and how near he is to judgement!⁹⁰

The Apostle Paul, the likely high competition Christian himself, recognized this danger too, “I consider them (all things) garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Phil 3:8–9).

This is the unique task of the competitive Christian, to forget oneself and to focus on the gospel and on knowing Christ. Each Christian lives in the flesh and in this broken world. Each

88 Forde, *Theologian of the Cross*, 87.

89 Althaus, *Ethics*, 22.

90 Wendland, “God Grows,” 6.

Christian is at war with Satan and his lies. But not every Christian conducts this war in an arena with fans constantly watching and a scoreboard constantly ticking. This is the unique challenge of the competitive Christian, to block out the opinions and expectations of the spectators and self, to realize that there is only one spectator, God. This is the unique task given to the competitive Christian. The competitor needs to realize, with Paul, that he, on his own, is the biggest loser and the worst of sinners. Yet, at the same time, the task is to cling to the truth that the score on the scoreboard is always a winning score because of the victory given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God (1 Cor 15:57)!

The Unique Blessings

So often, the competitive person thinks that it all depends on his ability, that somewhere in himself lies the difference between success and failure in life. But what if that trap of Satan could be avoided? What if the competitor forgets himself? What if his focus truly is on Christ and Christ alone? Could he still be as fierce a competitor as when his focus was on his own success? Yes. The competitive person has the unique ability to find the motivation necessary to succeed in any situation. When that motivation is found in the gospel truth that the Word became flesh and gave up his life as a ransom for many, then you find a competitor for Christ.

The grace of God unlocks the skills and attributes of men that have been put in chains by sin. According to Forde, when the burden of the law and sin is removed by God's grace, the man becomes what God intended him to be.

When by grace man is relieved of the burden of climbing to heaven, he gets this earth back as a gift. Another way of putting it, perhaps is this: We do not, strictly speaking, need grace because we are "weak." God has given us plenty of strength by virtue of creation. What we lost in the fall was not strength as such but faith. Loss of faith leads to a misuse and distortion of human powers through pride and spiritual pretension. Grace is

the act of God which destroys pride and pretension and releases the true powers of creation. Creation becomes creation again. Man is made new; he is reborn. That is what Luther meant by remarkable statements like the following from the table talk: ‘We are just beginning to recapture the knowledge of the creatures which we lost through Adam’s fall. We have a deeper insight into the created world than we had under the Papacy. Erasmus doesn’t understand how the fruit grows in the womb. He doesn’t know about marriage. But by the grace of God, we are beginning to understand God’s great works and his goodness in the study of a single flower.’ Grace places man back in creation and releases once again the powers lost in the fall. Far be it, then, for the Christian to despise human efforts, to despise human art and literature, human cultural and social endeavor. A practice all too common in the churches. Grace does not compete with nature, it reveals it for what it is supposed to be; God’s good creation in which we should rejoice and be glad! The attitude which despises human creation and human endeavor comes from the theology of the ladder—the theology of the old Adam—from which the grace of God releases us. He makes all things new.⁹¹

The competitive Christian, through faith, has been given the proper motivation to glorify God in all he does.

Luther adds that even when there seems to be no possible source of motivation for the Christian, faith provides it.

Let everyone become a falcon and soar above distress. Let everyone know most assuredly and not doubt that God does not send him this distress to destroy him, as we shall see in verse eighteen. He wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God’s person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil. Were there only peace and no trials, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians. Trouble and distress constrain us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself, and much more necessary and useful than all the possessions and honor in the world. We read: “I called upon the Lord.” You must learn to call. Do not sit by yourself or lie on a couch, hanging and shaking your head. Do not destroy yourself with your own thoughts by worrying. Do not strive and struggle to free yourself, and do not brood on your wretchedness, suffering, and misery. Say to yourself: “Come on, you lazy bum; down on your knees, and lift your eyes and hands toward heaven!” Read a psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him.⁹²

⁹¹ Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MIN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972).

⁹² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Selected Psalms III*, vol 14. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 60.

I wonder where Competition would rank in Luther's strength if he took the CS test. Yes, the faith of a Christian creates a competitor out of even the least competitive people. Christians are not satisfied with being "lazy bums." The wonders of the grace of God motivate and drive the Christian not to "be better" or "try harder," but to get on bended knee and be passive in the hands of an almighty and all-loving God. Furthermore, for the one who has been blessed with the gift of competitiveness apart from faith, how much more motivated will he be when faith is added? This is the unique blessing given to the competitive Christian. The competitive Christian is motivated to be still and know God (Ps 46:10).

In addition to the ability to find proper motivation, the competitive Christian has the blessing of victory. Victory is the blessing of all Christians. "For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory (Ps 149:4)." However, this blessing and promise of victory strikes the heart of a competitor in a special way. Failure is the ultimate fear of the competitor. For the competitor without faith, this fear is warranted. Without Christ failure is inevitable (Matt 19:26). With Christ the fear of failure is an irrational one (1 Cor 15:57). "So, sing with joy, afflicted one; the battles fierce, but the vict'ry's won! God shall supply all that you need; yes, as your days your strength shall be."⁹³ This refrain can make the eyes of all Christians swell with tears of joy, but for the competitor it produces a peace that he searches for constantly. For the one who measures his life with wins and losses this is not just a hymn refrain. It is an anthem, a battle cry. When this shout of victory is sung, it causes his weary bones to rejoice. It renews his spirit. It sustains him in his next battle. It restores to him the joy of salvation that Christ won for him.

⁹³ Constance Dever, *Afflicted Saint, to Christ Draw Near*, Found in Christian Worship 2021, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021) 867.

CONCLUSION

Competitiveness and competition are complex subjects. Defining the terms is difficult, considering the different ways they are used in different contexts. However, companies like Gallup StrengthFinders and Grace in Action provide insight on the competitive person and his personality.

This is a world of competition. There are very few areas of life that are not impacted by competition. Therefore, this topic ought to be addressed and discussed more often and more in-depth, particularly in light of Scripture.

Competitiveness is found in Scripture. However, Scripture neither endorses nor condemns competitiveness. As with everything in God's creation, the fall into sin has corrupted competitiveness in mankind. God creates, but Satan mutilates. Satan has, at times, used competition to do his work since. However, God has and will use competitiveness to carry out his will.

Finally, the competitive Christian has been given a unique task and a unique blessing in his struggle against sin, this world, and the devil. The unique tasks are to think less of himself and recognize that he is always winning because of Christ's victory given to him in baptism. The unique blessings are that the competitive Christian is especially motivated to compete for Christ because of the faith given to him and the assurance of victory in Christ.

APPENDIX 1: GRACE IN ACTION FOUNDATION PYRAMID

- Remember who you are
- Grow in – and address challenges/threats to – health and resiliency
- Rejoice in the fruit the Gospel produces as you serve others
- **Leverage what makes you, you**



APPENDIX 2: CLIFTON STRENGTHS BALCONIES AND BASEMENTS

Competition (Influencing)

People strong in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.

Balcony Descriptors: driven, motivated, No. 1, measurement-oriented, winner.

Basement Descriptors: sore loser, not a team player, puts down others, self-centered, confrontational.

Connectedness (Relationship Building)

People strong in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.

Balcony Descriptors: spiritual, “doesn’t sweat small stuff”, strong faith, always looking at big picture, helps others see purpose.

Basement Descriptors: passive, naïve, too idealistic, wishy-washy.

Consistency (Executing)

People strong in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.

Balcony Descriptors: just, problem-solver, policy-maker.

Basement Descriptors: “by the book”, inflexible, unwilling to customize, unwilling to individualize.

Context (Strategic Thinking)

People strong in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.

Balcony Descriptors: robust historical frame of reference, learns lessons from past, knows how things came to be, leverage knowledge of the past.

Basement Descriptors: slow to move, slow to react to change, closed-minded, lives in the past.

Deliberative (Executing)

People strong in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.

Balcony Descriptors: good judgment, identifies risk, makes solid decisions, plans for the unexpected.

Basement Descriptors: standoffish, aloof, cautious, slow, introverted, slow to act.

Developer (Relationship Building)

People strong in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

Balcony Descriptors: grows talent in others, teacher, coach, mentor, enjoys helping others succeed, invests in others.

Basement Descriptors: not a strong personal contributor, too much time on low-potential people, spectator, passive observer.

Discipline (Executing)

People strong in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.

Balcony Descriptors: highly productive, highly accurate, ability to structure, breaks down complex, great planner, efficient.

Basement Descriptors: overbearing, rigid, mechanized, can’t handle change.

Empathy (Relationship Building)

People strong in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others’ lives or situations.

Balcony Descriptors: creates trust, brings healing, knows just what to say, customizes approach to others.

Basement Descriptors: “soft”, moody, over-involved.

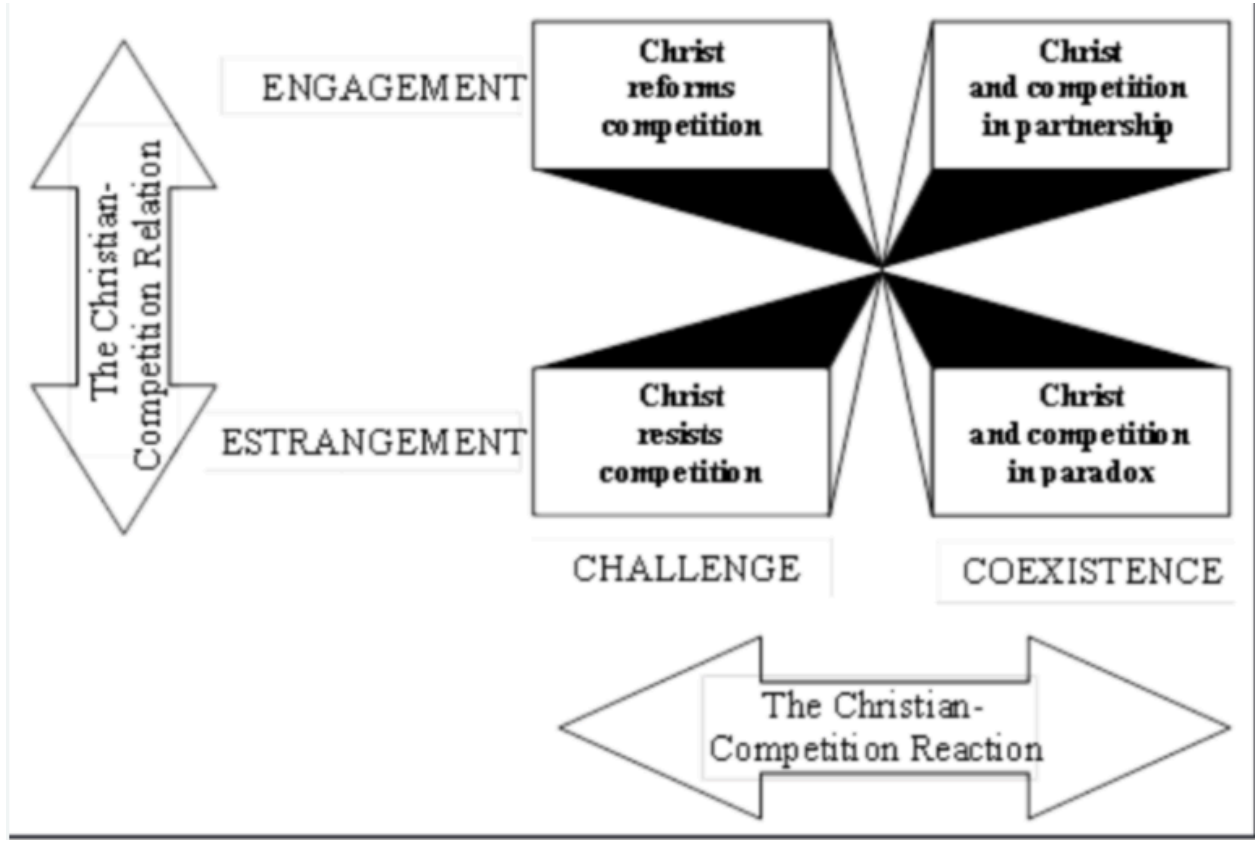
Focus (Executing)

People strong in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, and then act.

Balcony Descriptors: point person, purposeful, laser-like precision, identifies important areas quickly, goal setter/goal getter.

Basement Descriptors: Absorbed, tough to relax, intense, stressed.

APPENDIX 3: SMITH, JOHNSON, AND HILLER'S CHRISTIAN COMPETITION VIEWS



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