It is so easy to see faults in others, but so difficult to see those same faults in ourselves. The excuses we don't want to accept from others trying to hide their weaknesses come easily from our own lips about our own inadequacies. Here is a short parable to illustrate the point.

The course

I have a friend who was injured a while back. I won't go so far as to say he was proud - well, yes, I guess he was. He was genuinely hurt though. He couldn't help that he was hurt, he just was. It wasn't like he asked to have his life turned upside down by an injury that limited his mobility. He wasn't always a hypocrite either, but he sure became one easily enough.

We used to play a game that required us to run through the woods and shoot at sets of targets. The game was based on speed and accuracy. He took great pleasure in rubbing it in that he was both faster and more accurate with the bow than I was. I admit, he was good. He had a good eye, and he was fleet of foot.

Our competition sometimes included others, but usually it was between the two of us. We had been playing in the local woods since we were children. Any season of the year was fair game. Each season offered its own specific challenges because of the changing

decor of the woods. Sometimes even the paths changed as trees fell and new trees grew in new configurations. Nature provided us with a never ending supply of game maps in which to play.

Everything changed when he became injured. It wasn't really severe. He tweaked his back so it became painful to twist. This also affected his ability to run comfortably through the woods, since doing so required jumping over logs and ducking under branches and jumping over ravines. It was, after all, a contest of speed, as well as accuracy.

It started with his sudden pickiness about the course. He wouldn't really talk about his pain or the nature of his injury, but I figured it was the reason behind his insistence that we change the path of the game. The new path had far fewer obstacles, and more direct shots at the targets. He made all kinds of excuses as to why this was "better" than the old course, but we both knew we were making accommodations so he could save face. Mind you neither of us said anything about it out loud. I just agreed that the old course was a little too hard for me, and that with the newer course, perhaps I would now have a better chance of besting him.

Subconsciously I was disappointed that he was making excuses and not owning up to the fact that he just couldn't handle the course any more. For once I felt superior, since I had no difficulty with the old course, and the new course required me to actually hold back on my own abilities in order to let him appear to be better than me. His pride would not have allowed for anything less, and I felt so bad about his injury that I couldn't bring myself to take advantage of him on the course.

We continued to play the game for the next couple of seasons, him making excuses for his lagging performance, and me accepting them as factual so he could supposedly feel better about himself. Unfortunately, my own sense of superiority began to get the better of me. I wondered what I was doing out here pandering to this crippled man's vanity. I was now clearly better than he was. It felt good to know that I didn't have to come in second place all the time if I didn't want to. I could have beaten him easily at any time. But I didn't want to embarrass him or make him feel "less" by physically demonstrating how far his performance had been degraded by his impaired condition.

Fair is fair

That is when it happened. I was lifting something in the yard, and wasn't lifting with my legs. I strained my back something fierce. I hobbled about for weeks, trying to pretend that I was fine. When it came time for the next game with my friend, I found that I was pretty grateful for the easier course, though I still put in the occasional dig about wanting to go back to the old course. I found myself making excuses for myself. My hands were stiff for some reason. I probably needed a new pair of shoes as the ones I had on had been causing me to trip a lot lately. My complaints seemed to focus on anything but the fact that my back kept spasming when I tried to jump a ravine or duck under a branch.

Eventually, my friend and I found that life just seemed to get in the way of our long-held tradition of playing our game. Occasionally we would get together and reminisce about our adventures together, arguing over who was really the better marksman or who really was the fastest on a particular course. But we never returned to the game we loved, and never openly said why we had stopped playing it.

For a long time I focused on how shameful my friend's behavior was. He was clearly injured, but would not admit it to save himself. But I eventually realized that I had done as much lying as he had. I went along with his stories, not out of pure compassion, but out of my own personal vanity. I had "accommodated" his needs, even though they were real needs. And when I injured myself, I had made as many excuses as he had. My pride was no less than his was. I was just as unwilling to admit my own pain and deficiencies on the course. I was just as unwilling to rely on my friendship with him for the support I needed in my own physical distress. Nor was I willing to openly bring up either of our needs. I suppose I wasn't sure if he would still want to be my friend if he truly knew I needed help or if he thought I believed him to be a cripple. But then I sensed he needed help, and I made no effort to help him.

Lesson learned

I now often recognize that in the game of life I find myself coming up short. The Lord is there, waiting for me to tell him that I hurt. He accommodates me because I am injured, but he doesn't rub my nose in my inabilities and shortcomings. He supports me and helps me. He waits for me to realize that I need to stop making excuses and rely on his superior abilities to help me through my course in life. Unlike me, the Lord doesn't gloat when I am injured. He weeps for me, but he never gloats. He waits patiently for me to bring my pain to him so he can help me heal.

My friend and I wasted years in pain, unwilling to talk about what hurt, unwilling to admit we weren't up to the task any longer. With the Lord I don't have to play those games. I can take my emotional and spiritual injuries to him without fear of rejection, and in him I find rest from the pain that I used to have to live with. With the Lord I can be honest. With the Lord I can find rest.

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The Parable of a Hypocrite