

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

“Deadly Sins: Envy”

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Matthew 20:1-16

Imagine that you open a Christmas greeting that is a 2 page single spaced letter from your former neighbors. This letter details all of the blessings of their lives since they moved away. They are doing remarkably well, after touring Europe; they bought a second home in Switzerland. Their children are multi-lingual straight A students, who letter in sports, and one is headed for the Olympics. Of course they have been offered full scholarships to the colleges of their choice. The mother is an attorney, but in her spare time, she volunteers with Habitat for Humanity, Amnesty International, and tutors underprivileged children at her church, while the CEO father is considering a second career in politics, in order to “...give something back to the country which made him such a success.” Included is a picture of this beautiful, happy, successful family. You, on the other hand, have been fired from your job, suffer from clinical depression, and your son just got arrested for selling drugs at school.

You don't live very long on this earth before the good fortune and success of others can cause you dislike them and be unhappy with yourself. This is envy, which is defined as “...chagrin, mortification, discontent, or uneasiness over another's excellence or good fortune, often accompanied by the desire to possess equal advantages. Envy is the resentment of someone else for having what you do not. It is accompanied by feelings of inadequacy, unfairness and injustice. One psychologist has suggested that 80% of criticism of others has roots in envy.

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner said it well: “Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else be just as unsuccessful and miserable as you are.” (Wishful Thinking) Envy is usually ranked second on the list of the deadliest sins in the Christian tradition, right after pride. It is insidious, dangerous and insatiable. It has a sinister and consuming quality about it, because not only does it resent the success and good fortune of others, it rejoices over their failures and misfortunes. Socrates called envy “the ulcer of the soul.”

Envy is not subtle. It is not just wanting what others have, it is more aggressive than that. Envy says: “I want what you have, and I want you not to have it. If I cannot take it away from you, then I would like to spoil it. Envy originates in resentment, and can be hateful and even murderous, in its intensity. Envious people live in a perpetual state of competitive comparison, forever ranking themselves, focusing upon what others have and what they themselves lack.. Envy diminishes others, but most of all it diminishes us, because it makes us unappreciative of who we are and what God has given us.

The Greek word for envy is “phthonos.” In this word you see the root of the word ophthalmology, because the eye is a part of the definition. It literally means “evil eye.” We see people with things that we want, and we literally begin to readjust our eyesight to see the things we do not have. Envy begins in the eyes and moves into the heart and infects the whole body. The book of Proverbs says: “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.”

Yet, envy is universal and we see it throughout the Bible. In the story of Adam and Eve we read of how and their sons Cain and Abel both make a sacrifice to God. God liked Abel’s sacrifice more than Cain’s and so Cain killed Abel out of envy. The Ten Commandments could be divided into two sections. The first 5 deal with pride and the second 5 deal with envy. The commandments relating to envy are: You shall not steal, you shall not murder, nor shall you covet the possessions of your neighbor, bear false witness, or commit adultery. In one way or another they all have to do with lack of respect for others, which could be rooted in envy. In the New Testament we hear of King Herod, who hears about the birth of another King, born in Bethlehem. He is envious, and cannot compete with another King, so he orders that all of the baby boys under the age of 2 be murdered. Envy is dangerous and it can be deadly.

To illustrate the sin of envy, Jesus told a story about a wealthy estate manager, who goes out to hire workers for his vineyard. This in itself is unusual, because landowners did not usually hire their own workers, but this particular landowner does just that. He finds a crew to begin working early in the morning, agreeing to a fair wage that is the equivalent of a denarius, or the equivalent of \$20 a day. They all get right to work. Then, the landowner goes out at about 9 am and hires more laborers, telling them that they will receive a fair wage, but he is not specific. Then he goes out again at noon and 3 pm and even at 5 pm, hiring more workers at the end of the day. It appears that this is less about the work to be done, than it is about hiring people who have nothing else to do. When the time comes to settle up, every single laborer receives the same amount of money. Whether they had been working for 10 hours or 10 minutes, everyone is paid equally.

I don’t know about you, but if I had worked all day, I would find this infuriating. How fair is that to pay those who show up close to quitting time, the same as you, when you have been slaving in the hot for hours? It is a cruel slap in the face to those faithful laborers. When those who had been there all day complain about this gross injustice, the wealthy landowner says, “I have not been unfair. I paid you the amount we agreed upon. And I decided to do the same

thing for all the rest. I can do what I want with my money! Are you going to be stingy, just because I am generous?” Well, yes, if it is a matter of fairness and justice. The parable not only illustrates the crazy economic logic of God, but how God literally puts the last first. It is unsettling and illogical. The message here is really about envy: minding our own business and not begrudging the good fortune of others. That is a hard lesson to learn.

But this story is also about grace. Those who show up on the scene late are given a great gift that they really did not deserve. Grace is simply that: a remarkable undeserved gift we cannot earn or justify. This is how God treats all of us if we have the eyes to see. Grace is, always amazing, always pure gift.

But envy does not see grace. Envy meddles in the business of others, without considering their humanity, need and vulnerability. That is why envy is so dangerous; it de-humanizes other people, never giving them the benefit of the doubt. It is too easy to stand at a distance and assume that other people have better lives, better homes, better children, and better relationships, better everything. But scratch the surface and you will learn that nothing is ever as it appears to be. Eventually you learn that others do not have storybook lives, for every human being on earth struggles and suffers much more than we can ever know.

Last week when I talked about pride I said that during this sermon series on the deadly sins I would not only depress you with the sins, but that I would lift up a corresponding virtue. So today I want to say that there is something good about envy. Envy can serve as an impetus to action.

For instance, I love to ski—it is a great escape for me when I can be outdoors and not think about anything other than staying vertical. But I have always envied my husband, who used to be a ski instructor, for the fact that he can ski any run anywhere. Nothing frightens him; he can do a triple back diamond mountain like it was nothing. I have always envied his lack of fear and speed. But this envy has been a great motivator for me—to work on my technique to try to keep up with him. And after watching the alpine events in the Olympics I am even more motivated to become a better skier. Sometimes envy can motivate us to develop those areas of our lives where we want to improve and get better.

But even then it is easy to get seduced by the sinfulness of envy all over again, to let our competitive spirit get out of control. I find myself thinking, “I envy other skiers, but what I really want is for them to envy me!”

We buy clothes, homes, cars, furniture, big screen TVs, hoping other people

will take notice. We want others to think well of us, to look up to us, even envy us. Mark Twain said, “A person will do many things to be loved. But a person will do anything to be envied.” Interesting.

A study was conducted by the National Institute of Neurological Sciences looking at brain activity when people admitted that they were feeling envious. The study found that when these participants admitted to envy, they actually felt physical pain. And the more they envied, the more the pain nodes in their brain would activate. When the participants were asked to imagine something bad happening to the people they envied, the pleasure centers in their brains were activated. So envy is deadly because it causes us to desperately want what we do not have, to endlessly compare ourselves to others, to secretly hope others will fail where we succeed. But the worst thing envy does is to minimize and undermine our own blessings. When we are envious of others we become blind to our lives, gifts, relationships, possessions. Envy rejects the life God has given us because we are too busy desiring something else.

But once again, our faith offers a powerful antidote. In writing to the Galatian church, Paul is describing freedom, the freedom a person discovers when they find Jesus Christ and are given a different way of looking at the world. He reminds the Galatians that the entire law is fulfilled in this teaching: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” And then he tells them about the sins which separate us from God: impurity, idolatry, hatred, strife, jealousy, anger, adultery, selfishness, envy, drunkenness and the like. After listing those sins which isolate us, divide us, and make us miserable, Paul goes on to share good news, powerful antidotes for these things. Paul echoes what Jesus taught, that if you long for a relationship with God, and a life that really matters, you will be blessed with the Spirit of God, which brings freedom, contentment, peace of mind. And not only that, you will be blessed with certain spiritual gifts, which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. This is freedom at its very best.

So, the next time you look at someone’s life and feel envious of their beauty, happiness, wealth, talent, or whatever, try to hold them in a different light. See them as a fragile, precious child of God with unknown heartaches and challenges. Pray for them. Serve them. As our kindness and compassion increase, envy will decrease and our problems will become more manageable.

Richard Carlson, in his book Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff ... and It’s All Small Stuff, challenges us to look at our struggles in a new light. Rather than push away the feelings, he advises embracing them. He says, “Mentally, hold the problem near to your heart. Ask yourself what valuable lesson or lessons might

this problem teach you. Could it be teaching you to be more careful or patient? Does it have anything to do with greed, envy, or forgiveness? Whatever problems you are dealing with, they could be thought of in a softer way that includes a genuine desire to learn from them?”

Re-framing things is always helpful, and in the case of envy gratitude for what we have reduces the emphasis upon what we lack. Gratitude helps you move beyond covetousness to a place of contentment. You will find that you just don't have room in your heart to envy others; because you are so busy giving thanks for all that God has done for you.

Of course this takes work and practice. Gratitude, love and service to others are the perfect antidotes to envy. Rest every day in the amazing grace of God, and you will feel increasingly blessed.

I want to close the sermon today by sharing more wisdom from Frederick Buechner. In a haunting passage from The Magnificent Defeat he eloquently describes a love that has no room for envy:

“The love for equals is a human thing ... friend for friend, sister for sister. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing ... the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, and the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing ... to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, the love of the powerless for the powerful. The world is bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy ... love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer.

This is God's love. It conquers the world.”

I invite you now to take a moment now to go deep inside of yourself and reflect upon the ways envy has grown in your heart, and ask God to replace it with love.

Let us pray: Gracious God, who loves us more than we can imagine:

Bless this mysterious world, and everyone in it. And help us to appreciate all that we have and not to focus upon what we lack. Forgive us when we compare ourselves to others, when we desire what we do not have, when we hope others will envy us, and for wanting others to fail. Remind us that everyone is fighting a hard battle and they need our compassion and support. Thank you, generous God for your amazing grace, generosity and goodness. Amen.

