

The Seven Deadly Sins: Envy

In the name of him who was crucified for our sins, dear friends in Christ: The Jewish leadership condemned him to die for blasphemy; specifically for claiming to be the Son of God. But they knew that charge wouldn't stick in a secular Roman court; so before Pilate they accused him of insurrection and treason. But as we heard a few moments ago, Pilate knew that what really lie behind their accusations – accusations that he knew to be false – was their *envy* of Jesus. So I'll submit to you that the sin of *envy* was more than any other the immediate cause of our Lord's death. And I think that's remarkable because of the seven deadly sins, it's probably the one that's the least understood. In general, we understand wrath and lust and greed and the others; but there's a lot of confusion that surrounds the sin of envy.

Not the least of which is the color it gets assigned. I mean, we've all heard of people turning purple with rage or white with fear; they're said to be blue if they're sad (or if they're not breathing); and if they're out in the sun for an extended period they're likely to turn either brown (if they're lucky) or red (if they're not). And these make perfect sense. But why is it that people are said to turn *green* with envy? What's up with that? I did some research; but all of the proposed answers seemed pretty unlikely. One suggestion was that green is the color of money – and *it is* in the present-day United States. The trouble is that the expression is much older – from long before there was such a thing as paper money or the United States. So it's something of a mystery why green is the color associated with envy. My best guess is that it has something to do with the Irish. Green's their color, right? And the way I've got it figured, living as they do in Ireland, a cold, wet, miserable, little island where the contentious inhabitants can't get along with anyone, not even each other, and where they have nothing but potatoes and cabbage to eat, they have good reason to be envious of the rest of the world. That's my theory, anyway; and I'm sticking to it until I hear a better idea.

On a more serious note, envy is often confused with jealousy; that is, people tend to use the word *jealous* when what they really mean is *envious*. They're not the same thing. Properly understood, jealousy is the fear or wariness of being supplanted. And sometimes it's entirely appropriate to be jealous. The Lord himself says that he is a jealous God. It angers him when his people give to idols the honor and worship due to him alone. Similarly, a husband or wife is supposed to be jealous of their spouse's love and affection. Jealousy goes wrong when it's overdone, like when a husband won't even let his wife go out in public for fear that she might speak to another man; or when it's misplaced, as when someone feels that they're entitled to something, say an honor or level of respect, that they're not. Either way, if you're jealous, you're protecting what you perceive to be (rightly or wrongly) your own exclusive turf.

Envy, on the other hand, has to do with what belongs to the other guy. And it's more than simple greed, which is the desire to acquire ever more, or covetousness, which is the sinful desire to possess what doesn't or shouldn't belong to you. In both of these, the main focus of the sin is on the object of desire, whatever it happens to be. With envy, while what's desired plays a part, the main focus is on the person who possesses it. It's not just "I want what you have", even more important to one who envies is, "I don't want *you* to have it".

With this in mind, envy is rightly described as a sense of sadness, anger, or frustration upon seeing someone else's good fortune. It's the resentment you feel when something good happens to another person. And it's not limited to things like money and property; you could

also be envious with respect to someone else's job, their spouse, family, appearance, talents and abilities, recognition and fame, their accomplishments. But whatever the object of envy, when you think of the person who's got it the sense of it is: "*You* don't deserve it. It isn't right that *you* have it. It's not fair. If there were any justice in the world, that would belong to me; or that bit of good fortune you experienced would have happened to me".

And so we see that envy is what lies behind so much of sibling rivalry, and the fierce competition at the local high school to be known as the most popular guy or girl. It's that sullen feeling you get when your irritating neighbor, the one who's always trying to show you up, pulls into his driveway with a classic sports car – the kind you've always admired but would never think to spend the money on; or when a colleague at work gets the promotion you were hoping for; or when someone else edges you out in the contest you worked so hard to win. Around here I've noticed the way farmers look at each other's fields – always comparing them to their own. Is their corn higher? Are their beans filled out more? Are there bare spots? How are the weeds? Some of this I know is how farmers gage themselves to see how they're doing; but some of it is "How come *he* gets all the luck?" And no, pastors are not immune from envy; instead of comparing fields we compare churches and congregations. Envy is everywhere. It's so woven into the fabric of our beings that we hardly notice it. And part of it is a judgmental spirit of superiority that looks at others and says, "You are less worthy of what you've got than I am. That's why I deserve it and you don't."

So closely related to envy that it's really the other side of the same coin is the pleasure you experience upon seeing others lose, fail, or suffer somehow. The Germans have a special word for it. It's *schadenfreude*, which literally translates into English as "bad joy". It's delight derived from the misfortune of others. And like I said, it's essentially an extension of envy. I mean, if seeing someone prosper makes you sad it only makes sense that you'll be happy when they fail. It may even be that you're hoping misfortune will befall others – especially those of whom you are envious. Ha! Then they'll get what they deserve.

And I think this is why wise King Solomon informs us that envy, left unchecked and unrepented, rots the bones. It's figurative language, of course; but the idea of it is that the person with envy has a corruption so deep inside that it twists, cripples, and decays the soul. We go from frustration, to resentment, to actually wishing ill on others. The best illustration of this I can think of for this is from the motion picture *Amadeus*. If you haven't seen it, I urge you to. First because it's a good film; but second because it showcases so well the soul rotting destruction to which envy can lead. It's a story of the famous composer Mozart told from the perspective of another senior composer named Salieri. Salieri is an accomplished composer in his own right; but he recognizes that the up and coming Mozart has a *real* gift – more talent in the tip of his little finger than Salieri will ever have in his whole frame. And part of the story is that no one else seems to notice just yet. Most people have yet to appreciate Mozart's genius. Salieri is a good enough musician to understand how vastly superior Mozart's music is to his own. And it drives him insane with envy, which leads him to deceitful scheming, theft, murder, attempted suicide, and ultimately to reject the very grace of God.

Why? Because in his judgment God has not been fair. He didn't do things right. If the Lord had done things properly, he would not have wasted that incomparable gift on a flighty scalawag like Mozart; he would have given it to me. And it's here that the root of envy is revealed. At its core it is nothing less than blasphemy of the very worst sort. When we envy, we sit in judgment of God. We tell him that he isn't running the universe right – that we don't trust his plan for this world and for our lives. When you envy, you're saying that you could do a better job of distributing God's gifts to the world (mainly because you'd be getting more of them).

With envy, instead of thanking the Lord for the gifts he does give, we curse him for the ones that he didn't give to us and also for those that he gave to whom we believe to be the wrong people. Small wonder, then, that envy makes the list of the seven deadly sins.

And even more reason why we should diligently search it out in our hearts and repent of it. And receiving again the sure word of forgiveness which Christ our Lord purchased for us with his own blood, let's consider him who suffered so much to bring God's blessings to us. The self sacrificial kindness he displayed is the very opposite of envy. He took upon himself the evil we deserved so that we could have all things – all of God's eternal blessings – that we most certainly do not deserve. He did it, we are told, for the joy that was set before him – the joy of seeing us redeemed and made heirs with him of God's kingdom. So too we ought to rejoice when good things happen to other people, and be glad of the blessings they receive. And we ought to commiserate with them in their troubles and misfortunes, shedding sympathetic tears, and doing what is in our power to deliver them, even as Christ delivered us from the fate we so richly deserved. So doing, we will show ourselves to be children of our heavenly Father, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

May our merciful God and Father therefore give us thankful hearts that are content with the gifts that he in his wisdom gives. And may he enable us with his grace to show such Christ-like love for one another. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!