

“SEVEN SERIOUS SINS: ENVY.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

April 9, 2017, 10:30AM

Text for the Sermon: John 11:47-48; 12:9-19

Pharisees turn green over Jesus.

I didn't have to think very long about which of the seven serious sins should go with Palm Sunday. The chief priests and the Pharisees, all the religious leaders envied Jesus' popularity and power, His authority and influence. People were flocking to Him.

In the face of Jesus' greatest miracle, raising Lazarus after being dead for four days, their response was envy and jealousy and unbelief. Such is the power of sin in our hearts to resist clear evidence and turn us away from the truth and into evil.

Notice their motive. “If we don't stop Jesus He will disrupt everything, we will lose our place and our nation. If we don't bring Him down, He will bring us down.”

They disguised their sin by saying they were looking out for everyone's good, preserving the social and national order. Their love for the public good covered their hatred of Jesus.

We see how strong the sin of envy can be when they were compelled to act against someone who had done them no wrong. Lazarus had done nothing wrong to anyone. He was just living, but his very existence was enough to drive them into a frenzy of envy and hatred.

Three years of pent up frustration and envy are coming to a head. They are tired of being in Jesus' shadow, they despise Him. Everything He did was successful, good, praised. It galled them to see their enemy triumphing.

“Look, the world has gone after him.” Envy exaggerates. The religious leaders didn't just want what Jesus had, they didn't want Him to have it. They wanted Him dead.

Matthew 27:18 For [Pilate] knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.

Envy, bitter about someone's better.

So what are we talking about when we talk about the serious sin of envy? It has two aspects.

“Envy is a resentful desire for what someone else has or is” (Jared Wilson).

We can envy someone's good looks or their business success or their number of friends on Facebook. We can envy when a friend gets better grades, or makes first team, or gets a bigger scholarship, or takes first prize. Envy happens among farmers, teachers, business owners, soccer moms, pastors and church members.

Envy grows especially well in the soil of small towns, where everyone knows everyone. We grew up together, went to high school together, played on the same teams, work the same jobs.

Envy is that sideways glance, that looking over the fence or across the driveway.

I remember in high school listening to Janis Joplin singing:

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.

Envy can be about talents, abilities, gifts, blessings, character traits, families, positions, successes, accomplishments.

But there is a deeper, more malicious side to envy.

“Envy is a spirit of dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others as compared with our own” (Jonathan Edwards).

Envy is the sin that hates to see others happier or enjoying a greater advantage than us.

“Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are” (Frederick Buechner).

The Germans have a great word for this, *shaudenfreuda*, a malicious pleasure derived from another person's misfortune.

Shaudenfreuda is realizing the police lights in your rear view mirror aren't for you but someone else. Or you see a four-mile backup going the other direction and are happy it isn't you.

Shaudenfreuda is seen in the ancient Jewish tale of two rival shopkeepers. An angel visits one and offers to give him whatever he asks, but with the understanding that whatever it is, his rival will receive twice as much. The shopkeeper thinks for a moment and asks to be blind in one eye (Brian Hedges, *Hit List*, p. 37).

Like the other serious sins, envy has a host of cousins. Or as one put it, envy is a wolf that always come in a pack.

Along with envy comes comparison, criticizing, complaining, ingratitude, covetousness, rivalry, resentment, anger, bitterness, malice, hate, self-pity, self-centeredness.

Envy says somethings not fair. It starts young, “Her piece of cake is bigger.” “He got two.” “What about me?” Put two kids in a room full of toys and what happens. The second one wants to play with what the first one is playing with.

Many fights and bullying start from envy. “You think you are so pretty. You think you are so smart. You think you are so good. Dad always liked you better.”

Envy begins with making comparisons, then grows into resentment over who they are or what they have. From there envy evolves to wishing they weren't that way or didn't have what we want. If left to continue, envy's final step is the act of prohibiting them from having it, or the taking of what they have. And at the extreme, it ends in murder.

Envy is malevolent

Envy led to the first murder recorded in Scripture, when God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's. He wanted the blessing Abel had received from God. Cain despised Abel because he was good. The Pharisees despised Jesus because He was good. Envy is malevolent, mean and malicious.

Envy turns neighbors into rivals. Envy involves a negative feeling toward another person. It doesn't just want what they have, it doesn't want them to have it. I must increase, you must decrease. With envy it's always personal.

This is the sin that causes people to tear others down, minimize their accomplishment, impugn their motives, question their virtue or integrity, cut them down to size. If we can't pull ourselves up to their level and we will pull them down to ours.

Proverbs 27:4 Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before envy?

Envy is idolatrous.

Cain's actions were idolatrous as he usurped the place of God in exercising wrath and determining what was just and right.

Envy forgets that there is a God and that God determines what we have and are. Envy is dissatisfaction with God's plan and place for us.

Envy says my will should be done, that I know what is best and right for me, what I deserve. It says we are owed, we deserve this or that. It is a sense of entitlement. It says I want to control what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, and who gets what.

Envious people always want to know why them and not me, whether it's brains, beauty, or brawn; property, position or possessions.

Envy is dangerous disobedience to God's command to love. To love is to seek others' good and to rejoice when they get it. Envy destroys that. Envy says no to loving our neighbor.

The Envy Test.

Like the other serious sins envy is good at disguising itself. It is a chameleon, complementing one minute, criticizing the next; patting on the back and then stabbing in the back. It hides under a lot of different rocks. To flush it out takes some effort.

Again we should pray and ask God to show us if there be any envious way in our hearts. If we aren't killing it, it will be killing us. Our life and our joy depends on rooting out our besetting sins. So be willing to ask some hard questions and give honest answers.

(some from Jared Wilson, *Seven Deadly Sins*)

Do you have negative feelings toward certain persons or groups without a reasonable cause?

Do you have a negative feeling toward certain people you know who marry or buy a house or have kids before you?

Are you prone to judging people because of their appearances?

Do you sometimes feel threatened by people with similar looks, gifts, jobs, or callings as you?

Do you often "size up" other people in a room, measuring how they compare with you according to appearance, stature, or position in the community?

Is it difficult for you to enjoy the success or joy of others?

How do you feel about someone who receives praise, or a promotion, or some benefit?

Do you tend to "stew" on the idea that some people have blessings you don't think they deserve?

Are you nagged by a constant feeling of discontentment?

Do you have tension or conflict with a sibling or close friend?

Have you ever wanted to steal or ruin something that wasn't yours?

Have you ever done or said something hoping to arouse envy in others?

Are you very competitive or hate to lose?

Do you play the if only game? If only if only my kid was smarter or a better athlete, if only my spouse wasn't sick, if only I didn't have these bills, if only I had a better job or the corner office, if only I had someone else's marriage or health or body or life.

How to kill the green-eyed monster.

Have you noticed something good about each one of these deadly serious sins? As hard as it may be to listen to how each one of these sins infects our souls, there is a cure for every one of them. Thank God, I am able to hold out great hope to all of us. *Here are four cures.*

Kill comparison.

Comparison kills joy. So kill comparison. Where there is no comparison, there is no envy.

Change your perspective. Look at what you have, look at what God has given you and how He has blessed you. What do you have to be thankful for?

Most of the world is worse off than we are. Our first world problems are nothing compared to third world problems. But this is only a first step and not enough to completely kill envy.

Cultivate contentment with thanksgiving.

The enemy of envy is contentment. Want what you have and being thankful for what you have. Envy keeps us from seeing the undeserved kindness of God, it blinds us to the good we already have.

Proverbs 14:30 A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.

Develop the habit of giving thanks not just at every meal but every cup of coffee, with every new assignment or task, with every opportunity or event.

If your heart overflows with gratitude to God for all His kindness, there is no room in that heart for envy. See God as sufficient and see His sufficiency in everything.

What do you have that you have not received? Nothing.

What do you have that you deserved? Nothing.

Remember this is true for everyone. Don't begrudge or despise what God has done for others.

Along with gratitude for our own blessings cultivate gratitude for other's blessings. Don't stop at being thankful for His blessing to you, be thankful for His blessings to others,

Celebrate other's successes.

The enemy of envy is kindness. Admire and appreciate, complement and praise others, joyfully, freely, in a way that says you see the hand of God in their life and it is cause for worship.

Can you imagine the freedom that comes from being able to enjoy all the blessings God gives to your friends, neighbors, family and church members?

I had a good friend in OKC who was a Baptist pastor. We met together with a few other pastors once a month. I envied him. Not because he had a bigger or better church or because he was a better preacher. I envied the way he was free of envy. He could share his struggles in ministry, he could talk about defeats in his life, and he could just as freely praise other pastor's successes and victories and strengths. He rejoiced when other pastor's churches were thriving and growing. Most pastors aren't like that. He had a good heart and I respected him for it.

There is a remarkable example of this in the OT. After David killed Goliath, King Saul brought him into the palace. But as David's success increased so did Saul's envy which soon turned to resentment and wrath and murderous intent.

But the one who should really have been envious was Saul's son Jonathan who was next in line for the throne. Jonathan had every reason to envy and compete and hate, but instead he recognized God's hand on David and God's blessings of David. Jonathan chose to love and admire David and even becomes his advocate and supporter against his father.

How do we choose to respond to another person's success and blessing, like Saul or Jonathan? Are you a critic or a fan?

Preach the Gospel to yourself, treasure Christ.

I Peter 2:1-3 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

What is the Gospel? We are sinners who need to repent, so honestly confess your sin of envy. Put away envy, call it what it really is, every time it rears its ugly head. Repentance is a holy violence against the enemy of envy.

Believe in the forgiveness of Christ for your sin that He purchased on the cross. Only by blood is envy killed.

It's ironic to consider it was out of envy the people of Jesus' day killed Him, and it was His crucifixion that makes it possible for us to kill envy.

Trust in the power of the Spirit to turn from envy and to turn to contentment, gratitude, thanksgiving. As you freely receive the grace of Christ, so freely extend the grace of Christ.

Let grace be what defines you. I am what I am by the grace of God and I have what I have by the grace of God. What more do I need? Let grace set your heart free from envy.

God's love and grace say you already have His favor, there is nothing to prove, nothing more to gain. You are as loved and accepted as you possibly can be and nothing can change it. Nobody's success or status can affect you. God's love for you and acceptance of you is not contingent on how well you do or what you do, or how you measure up to someone else.

What does anyone else have that is better than what you already have in Christ?

Nourish your soul on the milk of God's goodness given to us in Christ. Treasure Christ as your best treasure. If you have Christ you have enough, you have the best you can receive. Hope and pray and wish this for everyone else. Make Christ your heart's greatest desire.

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Christ withholds no good thing from us. He gave his own blood, He sacrificed His own life. He invites us to sit on His throne with Him. He makes us partakers in His inheritance and His glory.

I Peter 2:3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Have you tasted the Gospel, that the Lord is good, He has been good to you and to me. His goodness to me is different than His goodness to you, but that is cause for worship and thanks, not envy and comparison. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Treasure Him and His goodness.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you that because of your great grace we don't have to define ourselves by what we can do or what we have. Because of your great love we are free to love others. Because you have generously given us all things, we are free for fear or worry or doubt about things. Set before us the example of Jesus who humbled Himself on the cross to set us free from all our sin and striving.