

“Sinners and Saints: Envy”

Genesis 37:1-4, 23-28 • Philippians 4:4-13

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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If you watch much TV or listen to the radio, you know that perhaps one of the most annoying things in the world is advertising jingles. They are usually terrible songs trying to get you to buy their product or service. And nobody would keep using these jingles except for one thing. They work. They work because they get stuck in your head. Well, the most successful jingle ever went like this: “You deserve a break today at...McDonald’s.” You *deserve* it. Lots of advertising these days uses the pitch that you deserve something, whether it’s a luxury car or a vacation, a particular beer or shoe inserts. The message behind the ad is that you deserve what other people have.

Last week we began a new series on the Seven Deadly Sins and we looked at the problem of pride. The problem with pride is that it basically involves you making yourself and your desires more important than others and more important than God. The sin of pride is essentially the sin of idolatry. It’s disordered love. You may remember that I said pride is also the root of the other sins. This morning we are going to look at the sin of envy or jealousy and hopefully see how to correct it in our lives.

The seven deadly sins aren’t considered deadly because they are unforgivable. They are deadly because they are subtle and we don’t realize what they’re doing to us. They slowly lead us away from Jesus. They are not sinful behaviors but rather reflect a sinful heart. And so it’s easy for us to hide these sins until we are consumed by them. That’s why envy or jealousy is perhaps one of the most insidious of the sins. You can be envious for a long time without showing it. But the whole time it’s strangling your relationship with Christ.

Envy is defined as a feeling of discontent or resentful longing with regard to another's advantages, success, or possessions. In the Ten Commandments God says we are not to covet or desire what our neighbor has, including his

house, his wife, his animals, or anything else. But envy is much more than just wanting what someone else has. It involves discontent or resentment that someone else has something you don’t. Envy is about comparison and the feeling that you *deserve* to have the same or better than someone else. As one author put it, “envy, at its core, is about self-disappointment.” In other words, envy is what results when I compare my life to someone else’s with the idea that I deserve that kind of life, I want to be that kind of person. Envy is really about wanting to be someone that you are not.

In 1991 in Channelview, Texas, Wanda Holloway wanted more than anything for her 13-year-old daughter Shanna to be a cheerleader at her junior high. When Shanna didn’t make the team, Wanda became jealous of the girl who was selected instead. So she tried to hire someone to murder the mother of the other girl, hoping that in her grief she would quit the team.

Joseph was his father’s favorite. He was much younger than his other brothers and they had different mothers. As we heard earlier, “when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.” The situation was made worse because Joseph had a dream that his brothers would bow down and serve him. And of course, being seventeen, Joseph made sure he told his brothers about the dream. Then he had another dream and he told them about that one, too. As a result, verse 11 says that his brothers were jealous of him. They were envious that their father loved Joseph more. They resented him and when the opportunity presented itself they decided to get rid of the boy.

One of the strange things about envy is that it is the only one of the seven deadly sins that gives no pleasure at all, not even a little bit. The other ones often give you at least a small

amount of pleasure, even if only for a short time. But envy is completely negative. Envy or jealousy makes you feel that if you can't have what the other person has, then you don't want them to have it, either. But that doesn't provide you any benefit or enjoyment.

The only thing that will help you is to have the corresponding virtue that is opposite envy. So what is it that can help you to overcome envy? I think the answer is in chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Philippians. He writes, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be *content*. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound." The biblical virtue that can overcome our natural tendency to envy is contentment.

Contentment is defined as a state of satisfaction. It's being satisfied with what you have but more importantly with who you are. Just like envy, contentment is something inside you. It's a heart issue. Paul writes to his young assistant Timothy and says, "godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." But it's not just material possessions that we should be content with. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul writes, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." In other words, you need to learn to be content with God's plan for your life.

The big question, then, is how we learn to be content. I don't think you can just make it happen by wishing. I'll go so far as to say you probably won't become content by just praying. What Christians have found through the years is that godliness takes training and that training takes the form of different disciplines or practices. The practice that will help you grow in contentment is gratitude or thanksgiving.

Verse 6 of our reading from Philippians says, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God." The idea is that every day you take time to thank God for his blessings in your life. Instead of thinking about what you *don't* have, think about what you *do* have. The key is to recognize that everything you have is a gift from God. When you give up the idea of "mine," and recognize that everything in the world belongs to God and that He has entrusted some of it to you to carry out His mission, you get a very different view of "stuff." You learn that you can loosen your grip on money and possessions. You learn that you can trust God to provide what you need. That doesn't mean you don't need to work. Your time and talents are gifts that God has given you to provide for your needs.

As you think about the gifts God has given you there's one that will top the list. Paul tells the Philippians, and us, "I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." God has given you the best gift ever – eternal life in Christ Jesus! You didn't earn it, you couldn't earn it. God chose you and forgave you and gave you new life simply because it somehow brings him glory. Knowing that, Paul says, is the secret to being content. And being grateful to God for that gift is the secret to overcoming envy.

Amen.