

“Envy - Feeling Bitter When Others Have It Better”

Many of you don't know this, but I have a little pet that travels with me every day, everywhere I go. This little pet of mine, doesn't say much, but every now and then, when I'm alone, it speaks to me.

This little pet, with its green eyes, looks at other peoples lives, it especially likes to look at my brother's life, and it compares my life to his. It reminds me that I don't live up to his life. It points out all the ways that I'm different and that I don't have what he has.

This little green-eyed pet, watches the world carefully, and It tells me everything that I don't have. It mentions all of my shortcomings. It reminds me of how much I don't have it together, how much I'm a loser, how much I'm not an adult. This little green-eyed pet that travels around with me is, of course, Envy. And it is a most unpleasant pet to have.

Envy

Envy is a pet that feeds on misery, and it is the only one of the Seven Sins that doesn't bring with it a little bit of pleasure. And yet, it's one that we fall into the clutches of very easily. “Envy suggests I look at those around me and consider their free time, their paycheck, their successes, their love life - and Envy says to me ‘The life you have is worthless. Do whatever it takes to escape it.’ This is the essence of envy. It rejects the good life God has given me, us, and obsesses over what God gives someone else.”¹

Socrates has been quoted as saying that “Envy is the ulcer of the soul.” In that, all it does is eat away at you and gives you pain, without any kind of pleasure.

Envy is a deadly sin because it leads us to say to God, “The life you've given me just isn't good enough...I need to have a different life with different perks.”²

¹ Cook, Jeff. Seven: The Deadly Sins and the Beatitudes. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2008. p. 52.

² Ibid. p. 55.

Cain and Abel

The story of Cain and Abel is the classic story of sibling rivalry gone wrong, but also a classic story of envy motivated murder. Cain and Abel are the children of the first people, Adam and Eve. One son, Cain becomes an agriculturalist, a farmer, the other son Abel, devotes his time to livestock, shepherding. When they both bring their offerings to God, Cain sees that God favours Abel's offering, and he becomes jealous, envious, and resentful. Cain sees his brother's blessing and wants it for himself. Cain can't see anything except what he doesn't have. As his envy grows, so too does his resentment. Leading Cain to eventually murder his younger brother. The first murder in the Bible. Because of this murder, God exiles Cain from his family.

Nowhere in this story of envy and jealousy does Cain find a moment of joy, a moment of happiness, a moment of pleasure. Cain's envy leads him through misery and ultimately to isolation and exile. And if we're not careful, our own envy can lead us on a very similar path.

Culturally Approved Envy

But here's the catch: our culture, our Western North American society, our economy, it's predicated on envy. When we see our neighbour with a nicer car than our own, we're motivated to look for a car ourselves, when our neighbour has a neat, new, nifty gadget, we're motivated to want one for ourselves, when we see friends take elaborate holidays and vacations to exotic places, we long to go to those same places. God help me when one of you mentions that you're travelling to Iceland, I know I'll be envious then.

But maybe I need to make this simpler, and bring it closer to home. When we see others, who have the freedom and abilities that we once had, it's hard to not want to be envious of that. If I only knew how much I would treasure quiet, free time after becoming a parent....When we see others who don't have the same responsibilities, maybe burdens, or ailments that we do, it's hard not to envy that kind of life. When we see others who are living carefree with joy and happiness, without mourning, grief, or stress it's hard to not envy that kind of life. And thus, the sickness of envy slowly seeps into our lives.

But it's not just a personal thing, organizations suffer from Envy too. I've seen it within the church. I've seen congregations look at other churches, and they have full worship services,

abundant programs, and a multitude of young families and children. I've seen churches get consumed in their envy of wanting to be like *that* church. They make all kinds of changes, they paint, they create programs, but really, nothing changes. Their Envy tells them that they want to be like that church, but the changes that need to be made are not the changes that they are willing to make. And thus the sickness of envy slowly seeps into the church, and they become hardened, not as loving; because their focus is on what they don't have, who they aren't, rather than embracing who God has called them to be.

Amadeus

The film *Amadeus* is a great example of how envy can consume and destroy us. The film chronicles the relationship between court composer Antonio Salieri and his famous rival, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. As the film progresses we see the toll that Salieri's envy of Mozart's musical genius takes on him, to the point where Salieri holds God responsible for giving him the short end of the stick and for helping others flourish. Salieri blames God to the point where he takes down his crucifix — the one before he prayed for the talent to become a great composer — and burns it in his fire, vowing to 'destroy Your incarnation' in Mozart. Salieri's envy consumes him.

Envy, the Enemy of Love

Envy is truly the enemy of Love, in that Envy's love is directed only at loving the bittering of oneself. We feel worse when others have it better, and when others fail, we feel better. Through Envy's green eyes, all that is seen are our own deficiencies and the abundance that others have been blessed with, which is, of course, not reality at all. Envy creates its own reality. One that is easy to become trapped within. It's a reality that slowly, over time, leads us into further and further isolation from our loved ones, our community, and our relationship with God. Envy ultimately, like Cain, leads us into our own individual exile.

“Contentment - Loving What's Right in Front of You”

So how does one put this little green eyed pet called Envy in it's proper place. If, as author Jeff Cook suggests, Envy is telling God the life you've given me just isn't good enough, what's the other side of the coin?

Envy is an inability to see the forest for the trees. We focus so much on what's not there that we forget about what's right in front of us. So, in place of Envy, I suggest, like I told the children, that we learn to cultivate contentment in our own lives. In some respects, contentment is another variation of understanding and embracing enough. But the way I see it, contentment is looking at what God has given us from a posture of appreciation and gratitude, taking survey of what we have, and recognizing that it is a gift from God, not from ourselves.

This is a practice I regularly have to do, it's one of the ways that I keep my little green-eyed pet, little. If I didn't regularly practice contentment, I'm afraid that my little green-eyed pet, might turn into a green-eyed monster. I need to regularly remind myself that I have enough, more than enough; and really, in the grand scheme of things, I want for nothing. But it wasn't always this way.

Personal Perspectives

Several years ago, for Lent, I gave up Facebook. I signed out, for what I had hoped, at that time, would be permanently. I was noticing that at home I was miserable. Spending hours on facebook, I quickly realized how that particular form of social media, was feeding my little green-eyed pet. At that stage of my life, being a bachelor, each engagement announcement, each birth announcement, each vacation picture, was helping that little pet grow into a green-eyed monster. And I knew I had to let it go. I had to let go of not only seeing everyone else's highlights but also let go of comparing myself to them. Simply because I couldn't see how good I had it because I was constantly comparing myself to others. And, through the luxury of hindsight, I had it pretty good, I just had a hard time seeing it at the time; thus the curse of Envy.

Contentment, for me, is not settling for where we are and what we have, it is, instead, a form of appreciation. Recognizing how good I do have it. So, if Envy is feeling bitter about what you don't have and blaming God for it, then contentment is appreciating what you do have and thanking God for it.

If I were to look back on my life through the lens of Envy, I could find no shortage of folks to be envious of. But when I stop and look at my own life carefully. When I look through the lens of contentment, I see that there's plenty to be thankful for.

Many of the things that I longed for years ago have come to fruition. I own a home, I have a partner, and by God's good grace, we have a healthy and happy daughter. I'm living closer to family than I've lived since moving out twenty years ago. I'm growing a circle of friends, peers and colleagues, or as my friends would say, I have my people. I am settled in my sense of self and my identity. I have hobbies which bring me joy and satisfaction. I've travelled to places I've never imagined I'd visit. I have climbed out of debt, save for a mortgage, and I've made investments; God willing, retirement is a viable option in the future.

And, when I look at things that way, I'm quite content, and it's hard not to thank God for the opportunities and experiences that I've had thus far in my life; that have led me to this place. Where Envy would point out all the shortcomings, Contentment compels me to gratefulness.

And I suspect that if each of us were to take a moment, I'm sure we could each find at least one thing to be appreciative of.

The Workers

This is part of the lesson in the parable that was read for us. Workers are hired at the beginning of the day at a certain wage. Upon seeing that there's more work to be done, more workers are hired at midday for the same wage. Seeing that more work still needed to be done, more workers are hired near the end of the day for the same wage. At the end of the work day, all are paid, but those hired in the morning are envious of those hired at the end of the day. "It's not fair!" they complain, "We worked more than they did, and they get the same pay." To which the landowner replies, "I'm doing you no wrong, I paid you what we had contracted. Take what you earned and leave."

The early morning workers were not content with seeing others receive their contracted wages. They were clearly envious. As such, they were sent away. And I can't help but wonder what happens after this story. I like to imagine that after a hard work day there was a feast, or at the very least refreshments offered to the workers. But those who started in the morning, on the

first shift, because of their Envy, miss out. And I wonder, had the early morning workers been content that all were receiving the wages that they had contracted for, might they have been included in the post-work day celebrations?

Contentment is not just self serving, it's not just inward looking, it's also outward looking too. When we're content with ourselves and our own situations, we can celebrate with others in their given situations; there's room for empathy and there's room for joy.. There is room in our hearts to see God at work in our neighbours' lives and to share in their joys and successes.

Conclusion

I want to come back to the quote from Socrates and suggest that if Envy is the ulcer of the soul, then contentment is the nourishment of the soul. Contentment allows our souls to be sustained; it allows love to grow, not just for ourselves, but for God and for our neighbour. Contentment allows us to celebrate, with true joy, our neighbour's accomplishments. Contentment allows us to thank God for all that we have, all that we are. Contentment recognizes that all things come from God. Contentment allows us to look at ourselves and be thankful for our experiences and our opportunities.

Contentment directs our love to its proper place. Towards God's goodness, and towards our neighbour. By loving ourselves where we are, we are free to love our neighbour and God as ourselves. That's the deep power of contentment.

Amen