

Envy and Kindness
Genesis 4:1 – 16; John 3:22 – 30
Sunday, March 17, 2019

Last week we began a sermon series that will lead us through the season of Lent focusing on the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Heavenly Virtues. These are ideas that have been part of the Christian tradition for over 1500 years, this list of conditions or sins that can draw us away from loving God and our neighbor, and an accompanying list of virtues that can draw us into a deeper relationship *with* God and our neighbor. As we talked about last week, Lent is not just a season in which we give up eating chocolate or social media for 40 days, because social media and eating chocolate are not in and of themselves *sins*. But they can be *symptoms of sin* that point to deeper issues within us that are in need of healing.

So as we make our way through this season of Lent and seek to be intentional about cleansing our lives of sin that we might find new life in Christ, the sermons each week are going to focus on one of these seven sins and its accompanying virtue. The hope is that this can help us identify those deeper issues in our lives that we need to turn away *from* and give us a virtue, something to turn *to*. And we started last week by looking at *pride* and *humility*. Pride, as we said, is putting the self at the center – thinking, acting, believing, and living as if we do not need God. It is saying, “All that I *have*, all that I *am* is by my own power and ability.” Humility is recognizing our dependency on God; that all that we *have*, all that we *are* is a *gift*, the grace of God in our lives.

Today, we are going to look at the sin of *envy* and the virtue of *kindness*.

I remember around 15 years ago, I was working with a church out in Limerick. It was a new church plant in a booming suburban area. They had just built a building and moved in, after

worshipping for the first few years in an elementary school gymnasium. This church had grown from literally *nothing* to around 120 people worshipping and practicing their faith together in just a few years. It was a growing, thriving church. But at the same time, right around the corner from the church that *we* had built, there was *another* church worshipping in a different elementary school gym. This was a non-denominational evangelical church, that had started right around the same time as us, and for a while we had shared rented office space together. So it was only natural that we compared ourselves to each other. *How many people do they have in worship? How is their youth group doing?* Things like that.

The thing was, *that* church was growing a lot faster than *our* church. And that's *fine*. They were reaching people that we weren't reaching, with an understanding of faith that we weren't providing. But *we* were reaching people *they* weren't reaching, providing an understanding of faith that *they* weren't providing. We were each doing our own thing, the way we were called to do it, and we were *both* thriving. They just had more people than we did.

The *problem* was, the pastor of our church just couldn't get over the fact that *they* were growing faster. Every Sunday morning, he would have to drive by *their* church on the way to *our* church, and he would see their parking lot overflowing with cars. And he took that as a personal reflection on him. *What are we doing wrong – what am I doing wrong – that we aren't growing like them?* And he started to *resent* them. *Oh, they're just presenting this simplistic, surface understanding of faith that's easy for people to accept, and that's why everyone wants to go there. But we're taking people deeper, and it's harder, so we're doing it the right way.* He couldn't get over it. He was constantly comparing *his* church to *that* one. And after a while, he not only resented *their* church, but he started to resent *his own*. *Why aren't we growing like*

that? What's wrong with us? If only people would give more or do more.... And it wasn't much longer before he left.

Envy can be defined, very simply, as *wanting* what someone else *has*. Whether it's a *possession* or a level of *success* that they have achieved, it is seeing someone else do well and instead of being *happy* for them, we are *upset* because *I want that, I should have that*. It is being unhappy over the good fortune of someone else, because *you* want that same good fortune. One author writes that "envy is consumed with the idea that everyone and everything outside the self threatens to diminish the self...The proud man wants to usurp the Lord's rightful power [while] the envious man wants there to be no Lord at all."¹

Now, we might think, "If I just *want* what someone else has, what's the harm in that?" But the problem with envy is what it can cause us to *do*. If you want something badly enough, it can cause you to *steal* to get it. Or you can *cheat* to get it. It can lead you to *resent* or even *hate* other people. Look at that pastor that I was talking about earlier. First he resented that other church for their success, then he came to resent his *own* church for not achieving that same success. Theologian Thomas Aquinas talks about this and says that the struggle aroused by envy has three stages: first, the envious person attempts to lower another person's reputation; second, the envious person receives either joy at another's misfortune (if they *succeed* in defaming the other person) or grief at another's prosperity (if they *fail* to succeed in defaming them); and the third stage is hatred, because "sorrow causes hatred."² *If your success has made me feel bad about myself, then I will hate you for that*. And in the worst cases, envy can cause us to *hurt* others or even *kill* them.

¹ <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/what-dante-can-teach-us-about-envy>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins

Cain and Abel were brothers. Cain was a farmer, and Abel was a shepherd. They both brought offerings to the Lord – Cain an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel an offering of sheep. For some reason, it doesn't say why, the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but not for Cain and his. Abel received the blessing of the Lord, and Cain did not. Cain becomes angry, takes his brother Abel out into the field, and kills him. He was so envious of the success of his brother and the blessing that *he* received, that he viewed his brother as a threat to his own well-being that needed to be eliminated.

It's like Yoda says, "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering." And it is precisely that *fear* – fear that I am not *good* enough or will not *have* enough – that leads to *envy*.

And look what God says to Cain right before he kills his brother. God sees that Cain is angry and says to him, "Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Envy is like a door that, if we open it up, all kinds of other problems will come in. But we must master it. How do we do that?

John the Baptist had been baptizing people in the Jordan River. He even baptized *Jesus*, but now, John's disciples say, Jesus is over there on the other side of the river, and *he* is baptizing people, and everyone is going to *him*! They are envious of the success that Jesus is achieving. They think all those people should be coming to John and to them, and so Jesus is seen as a *threat* to their ministry. It's like the other church that's going faster.

John says to them, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven," and then he starts talking about brides and grooms and weddings. And what he says is essentially

this: the best man at a wedding doesn't get upset because his friend is getting married...he *rejoices* for him! John is saying, "Jesus is the groom, and I am just the best man. This is *his* party, and I am rejoicing for him!"

If *envy* is wanting what someone else *has*, *kindness* is wanting someone else to *have*. If *envy* is being upset over what this other person has achieved, *kindness* is *rejoicing* over what this other person has achieved. If *envy* is wanting good for *yourself*, *kindness* is wanting good for this other person. Kindness is not just "being nice" to someone. Aristotle describes kindness as "helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper, but for that of the person helped." Kindness does not view the success or blessing of others as a *threat*, it views it as a cause for celebration, because we're all in this together, and there's enough blessing to go around.

Envy says, "I want what you have for myself." But John says, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven." It's all a gift by the goodness and grace of God, and the faithful response to the goodness and grace of God, no matter who receives it, is *celebration*. You might want this thing that you see someone else has, but no one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. So maybe God knows that you don't *need* that thing right now; that it wouldn't be *good* for you right now. Maybe God has *something else* for you that you *can't* see yet.

It's like John is saying to his disciples, "Focus on what you are called to do, and God will give you everything you need." Like God says to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" We resist envy by practicing kindness, and we practice kindness toward others when we actively work for their blessing and wellbeing, simply for the sake of their blessing and wellbeing, and

when we recognize that we are all in this together, that there is enough goodness and blessing in the world for us all.

There *is* a *good* kind of envy, though. Author Barbara Brown Taylor has a new book coming out called *Holy Envy*. In it, she writes about teaching a college class on world religions, and as a part of that class, she would take students on trips to mosques and synagogues and Buddhist and Hindu temples in an effort to help them better understand how other religions worship. She writes, “I would walk in [to these different places] and immediately find something to fall in love with. The beauty of the space, the tenor of the discourse, the teacher for the evening, the hospitality we were offered. I ended up being just bowled over by the beauty and kindness that I encountered every place I went.”

That is not saying, “I want what you have” from a place of envy. It is saying, “I want what you have” from a recognition and celebration of the goodness that God has given. A recognition that what is given from heaven, no matter who it is given to, is beautiful and wonderful and worth celebrating. *That is holy envy*. What you have is so good and beautiful and wonderful and such a gift from God that I cannot help but want that same goodness and beauty in my own life.

It is *easy* to look at other *people* and other *churches* and other *religions* and see them as a *threat* to our wellbeing simply because they are different. We saw that acted upon just the other day in New Zealand. But kindness doesn't view anyone else's blessing or success or existence as a threat. It recognizes that every good gift comes from God, and in God there is enough blessing for all of us. And *that is worth celebrating*.