

“Seven” – Part 7, Envy
August 1, 2010
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There was a guy named Mike and he was the coolest cat in all of Jr. High. He was everything I wanted to be. He was quarterback on the football team, good-looking, self-assured, no braces, not a preacher’s kid, and his coolness factor was way high. This was way before the Michael Jordan/Nike commercials, “I wanna be like Mike”. Well, I didn’t want to be like Mike, I wanted to be Mike!

We have all found ourselves making comparisons to someone else, noticing something about them we wish we were or that we had whether that is their physical traits, their skill set, their position or job, their house or ride. That’s envy. And today we’re going to talk about it. Is it always bad to be envious? Is there a “good side” to envy. What is the difference between envy and jealousy? What does envy look like in my life and why is it so dangerous?

Today is the wrap up for the series “Seven”, about the seven deadly sins, a list created by 4th century monks and formalized by Pope Gregory in the 6th century about the kinds of sins that trap us and prevent us from living the life that really is life. We’ve been going through this list to identify them in our life and find freedom from them through the grace of Jesus. Over the past several weeks, we’ve looked at lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, wrath, and pride. And today, as we begin I’d like to ask you to take out your message note and study guide..

As we’ve noted in every other of the deadly sins, there is a root or side of this vice that is also good. There is a healthy and an unhealthy aspect to this list. And the same is true with envy. If someone says, “I really envy your ability to keep your cool in confrontation” or “I envy the way you can see around all the sides to an issue”, that’s not sinful envy. It’s really more of admiration, the desire to emulate or aspire to the maturity or skill you see in someone else

This is a very good thing in life. I know that God places people in my life to help me grow. I gain a desire to stretch myself and learn and grow from great role models. The idea around mentorships, whether they are formal or informal, is that we see in someone else something we want to have in our life; patience, a good marriage, wisdom, faith, and that inspires us to grow. So all envy is not bad. But how do we know when we move from healthy form to sinful envy that brings brokenness and discontent to our soul?

Let’s start with a definition of what envy is. The root of the word “envy” has to do with the way that we see things. Etymology may not be your thing, it is not usually mine either, but I gained some insight from my search and thought it might be better for you to see it than for me to just talk about it.

the English word envy

derived from the French word [envie](#)

-der. from the Latin word [invidia](#) (hate, hatred, dislike)

-der. from the Latin word [invidus](#) (hateful, ill disposed, hostile)

-der. from the Latin word [invidere](#) (envy, regard with envy, ill will)

-using the Latin prefix [in-](#) (suffix for no)

-der. from the Late Latin word [videre](#) (see, look at; consider)

I want you to notice just a couple of things. Look at the range of scale between the words “dislike” to “ill-will” to “hostile” to “hatred”. Envy covers a wide gamut of emotions. It can begin with dislike and grow to deeper feelings of hatred. And this can happen quickly and we find ourselves trapped.

The second thing to notice is the last couple of breakouts. At it’s very root, envy has to do with vision, with perspective. To be envious is to see, but yet not see, not consider with perspective or depth. Here’s how this works. We see something (material thing or character

trait or whatever) and we perceive that we don't have it and so in our comparison think we are not equal to or are not as valuable as they are, and so our life is less than or unequal and that moves to insignificant or unimportant. And we are blinded to the truth. We see falsehoods as truths. "Their life is better than mine". "They have everything, I have nothing". This is really double blindness because on the one hand it assumes there are no hardships or trials in their life, and on the other hand it blinds us to the blessings in our own life..denies us the ability to see the very things that make our lives rich.

Envy attacks us where we are weak...where we feel we are lacking! And it begins with the eyes, but it moves to our hearts. **Proverbs 14:30 (NIV)** reflects this idea that envy grows deeper and like a disease it takes over. **A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.** Maybe you've heard the phrase that someone is "green with envy". That phrase is a reference to illness, to being sick and turning pale green like you're about to die, because that is the effect envy has. Socrates called envy the "ulcer of the soul" and Shakespeare made reference to envy in the Merchant of Venice, calling it "green eyed jealousy", meaning that envy sickens our vision and makes us believe falsehoods; like we will be happier and content when we have more than they do; we will be content when our mental comparisons add up in our favor; we will be happy when they lose their things.

Maybe you can relate to the man who has a good life, and can count many blessings; family, work, is able to see that he has a good life. Then he goes to his high school reunion and finds classmates who have achieved greater things in life, have more stuff in life, greater success and the prizes and notoriety to go with it. He leaves the reunion thinking life isn't so good. Nothing has changed in his life except his perspective. Envy leads him not to consider his life as a blessing anymore. Envy blinds him. It starts with the eyes and moves to the heart and it breeds discontent and misery, then ill-will.

Envy reaches its ugliest in us when we not only want what someone has, we want them not to have it anymore. This is why envy or coveting is the subject of one of the ten commandments. The commandment teaches us not to covet our neighbor, or any of their things, like their spouse, their farm, their livelihood. We are warned about this because God knows once we give in to the falsehood that their life is so much better and we can't be content, we are only a few steps away from secretly celebrating disaster that could take it all away from them. It's true. You've found yourself going beyond the thought, "I wish I had a job like his" to "I wish I had his job". It's just that subtle switch when discontent in you breeds ill-will to someone else. That's why envy is so dangerous.

So how do you spot envy in your life? I want to quickly give you some symptoms and a side effect to help you identify where envy is your life.

Symptoms of envy

Comparing you to someone else. When you see yourself comparing your life to someone else's life and it is not from the motive of inspiration or emulation, then green-eyed envy is about to distort your sense of truth. Childhood development experts say that by the age of 7 children are beginning to make these comparisons. We all do. And this is a repeat, but when we do, we become blind to the blessings in our own life and that breeds spiritual discontent.

Desire that someone envies you. We can get this twisted kind of fulfillment through making others think our life is better than theirs. We want them to envy us because that idea builds us up. So to make this happen, we will do two opposite things. We will find ways to brag or boast or make sure others see the good things, the successes, the enviable parts of our lives

and we will hide or keep secret or out of sight those parts of our lives we don't want others to see.

For example, we might want someone to envy our marriage, so in public we portray that the relationship is better than it really is. I'm not saying that we need to air all our dirty laundry, but there is a difference between pretending we have a healthy relationship and having an authentically healthy marriage. So if you find that you are constructing some aspect of your life so others think your life is better than it is, then pay attention...envy has taken root. Mark Twain once said, "A man will do some things to get himself loved, but he will do all things to be envied."

And Twain's quote sounds similar to warning we get in **James 3:16 TNIV...**

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

I want you to fail. This is when resentment builds up and we find ways of complaining or gossiping to chip away at someone's character. We're not always looking for their total demise, but some way to bring them down to size. How do we do this? We find the chink in the armor and chip away.

- He's a great basketball player, but he can't shoot free-throws.
- She's a pretty girl, except for that nose.
- That's a beautiful lawn, but it's not like he has anything else to do.
- Nice guy, but he can be annoying sometimes.

A psychologist's study argues that 80% of our criticisms have their root in envy. That is, it's about putting yourself in a superior, enviable position. So if you find yourself being pretty critical of someone in particular or everyone in general, then check your heart. Maybe the issue is in your heart more than it is in them.

Why is envy so deadly? The side effect of envy is what it says to God. It basically says "God my life isn't good enough!" "I want a different life", "I want their life". We lose vision of the gift of our own life. We lose sight of the value of our own blessings and opportunities to share our faith. We discount the measure of God's love for us and we tell him "It isn't enough!" We are like the ungrateful, spoiled child.

I remember years ago, I was just coming out of a 4 year long failed attempt to launch a new church and had been reappointed to a county seat church. It was my first year there and it was a tough year of making some critical strategic changes. I could see lots of possibilities and potential, but before we were going to get to new life, we still had some struggles to endure. It was about this time that things here at Saint Paul's were really starting to take off. Aaron called and he was so excited. "Mark, it's happening! It's really happening!" He talked about the growth and excitement and energy and ministry. I tried to sound as convincing as I could when I told him that I was proud of him and excited for him and "way to go" and all that. But I hung up the phone that day and envy was my friend for a while..."God, why can't I have a ministry like that. God why can't I have that ministry."

Now I have you all thinking that I have some subversive plot going on to take over Saint Paul's....while Aaron is on vacation...hummm. I recognized my envy right away, but it lingered for a while. I didn't like myself...because part of wanting my ministry to look like Aaron's was secretly wishing his looked more like mine. Ouch! I knew that unless I gave that up and turned it over to God, I was never going to be free fulfill my ministry, my purpose. I was always going to wish I were someone else. And part of my overcoming that envy was to confess it...both to God and to Aaron. Through the grace of God, I got out of the trap of envy. I could stop comparing. I was free to enjoy ministry again and could actually celebrate successes of my friends in ministry without the tinge of envy.

Just this past week, we made a quick trip to Southeast Missouri to the memorial service for my aunt Dee. Dee is a spunky woman of small stature but a gigantic presence. She had the ability to make everyone feel special. Over the last 4 – 5 years, she has battled lung cancer and the removal of one lung, then the onset of ALS and the return of cancer in the remaining lung. At 69 years young, one could argue that she had a claim to complain about her plight, even envy those with better health.

Her faith and her trust in God gave Dee the ability to avoid the pitfalls of self-pity, despair and envy in her final years. God's grace empowered her to be free, even through physical hardship. Her relationship with God enabled her to see each day as a blessing and live her life to the fullest. Because of God's grace, her disease did not have the power to defeat or define her.

Throughout this entire series, we have talked about how these seven deadly sins are traps. Once we step into one of them, it's hard to find our way out. We know that, but still we give them power to derail our lives from living out our true mission and purpose. They draw us away from the life that is life. So today it doesn't really matter which of these seven or how many of them have a hold on you; lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, wrath, pride, envy. Today is a day when you can ask God to set you free! Whichever of these traps has a hold on you, because of God's grace it cannot defeat you and it doesn't have to define you anymore! Here's the truth. Jesus loves you because he loves you. We don't deserve that love, we cannot earn that love. It's not measured out on a scale of who's better or worse. It is a gift, given fully and freely to anyone who wants to accept his grace and forgiveness and begin to live in freedom. If you are alive and in this world, this gift is given for you to receive...and if at any point in the last seven weeks you have found yourself saying, "that's me...that's what I do.", then today is about the ultimate antidote to your sin...it's about claiming the freedom God offers us.

Here's the promise as John puts it in his letter to the churches

1 John :8-9 (TNIV)

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And a great place and time for you to receive this gift is as you meet with Jesus in our service of communion. This is a time when we remember and give thanks for his love, demonstrated through his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. What Jesus most wants to share with us is life...life free from the traps of sin; life filled with purpose and meaning; life exploding with grace and hope and love.

It doesn't matter if you've taken communion all your life or if today is your first time. The gift is the same...Grace, Forgiveness and new life. What I'd like to ask you to do today as you come to meet with Jesus and receive communion is to bring something intangible with you that you will leave with him. Bring whatever it is that is keeping you from experiencing freedom and let it go....give it away and receive peace and love in it's place.