

Envy

Fifth in a series on vices and virtues.

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Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? (Matthew 20:15).

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wicked Witch of the West shrivels up in the end. That's a great image for what the vices do. They make us smaller. They cause us to shrivel up. And no vice causes us to shrivel more than envy.

Envy is the resentment that comes from wanting what someone else has. It's an obsession with counting other people's blessings instead of our own.

Maybe it's somebody's wealth we envy. Lots of people envy wealth. That's why there used to be a show called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, but not one called *Lifestyles of the Poor and Obscure*. Or maybe it's her looks we envy. Scores of magazines and hundreds of commercials depend on the fact that the rest of us wish we looked half as good as those people on the covers or in the ads. Maybe you envy the guy who gets the girl, because she's with him and not with you. Maybe it's another person's success you envy, even a friend's good fortune. Gore Vidal said famously, "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies."

How sad is that, when even the good fortune of our friends can conjure up envy? How small is the heart that has no room to celebrate another person's happiness! And yet, how common is envy. A Danish proverb claims, "If envy were a fever all the world would be ill."

Envy is the twin of jealousy, though they're not quite the same. Envy resents what someone else has; jealousy is afraid of losing out – losing status, or someone else's affection. Shakespeare's *Othello* says beware of jealousy, "the green-eyed monster." Jealousy always has, or suspects, a rival; envy makes a rival of anyone who has what we want.

Envy and jealousy grow out of pride, and our deep self-centeredness. So one deadly sin begets another. If I'm the center of my world, then whatever draws

attention away from me annoys me; whatever deprives me of what I want frustrates me. I'm stuck in the Terrible Twos, whether I'm 32 or 52 or 72: my heart throws a tantrum when someone else prospers instead of me.

The Bible has lots of stories about envy. One of the most famous is the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph is his father's favorite, the son of his old age. Needless to say, just being Daddy's favorite is enough to make his older brothers mad. The Smothers Brothers built a comedy career on the line "Mom always liked you best," because there's no rivalry like sibling rivalry. Everyone who's ever had a brother or a sister knows about that.

Joseph is not only his father's favorite – he also has these annoying dreams. In one dream, he and his brothers are out binding sheaves of grain, and all the brothers' sheaves bow down to Joseph's. In another dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to Joseph – eleven being, not coincidentally, the number of his brothers. Now Joseph lacks the good sense to keep these dreams to himself. Instead, he tells his brothers all about them; and that, plus the Technicolor dreamcoat his father made for him alone, drives his brothers over the edge. Envy and jealousy take hold of them. They're all set to kill Joseph when one of the brothers balks, and so they sell him as a slave to travelers on the way to Egypt, just to get rid of their obnoxious sibling.

Envy and jealousy drive people to do terrible things, and some of the ugliest things happen within families. That's not as surprising as you might think. It's the people closest to us whose affection we want most, after all, and it's other people near us who often become our greatest rivals.

Almost anything can make people envious – even the grace of God. The biggest problem for religious people is not only why bad things happen to good people. For some, an even bigger problem is why good things happen to bad people.

"Do not envy sinners," the book of Proverbs says more than once. Why would anyone envy sinners? Because sometimes it looks as though sinners are having all the fun. Some of us are trying so hard to be good, trying to do what's right, but the people who don't seem to be trying at all look like they're doing just fine. What's the point of being good if the rewards come as readily to sinners as to the saints? Where's the reward for virtue if vice pays just as well?

That's one reason why religious folk can get so cranky. They're like the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. They've been the responsible ones,

staying home and taking care of things, and looking after Mom and Dad, while their no-account younger brother has been out wasting his inheritance on wine and women, fast cars and gambling. That's bad enough, but when he finally shows his face again, flat broke and looking for a favor, Dad goes running down the road to meet him with outstretched arms and throws a party to celebrate his return! Grace feels so unfair, when it looks like it's being wasted on those who don't deserve it.

That's the point of the story about the laborers in the vineyard too, isn't it? Some people work all day in the hot sun, some get hired midday, and some aren't hired till an hour before quitting time. The twist is, when the paymaster comes around, he gives every worker the same wage. The ones who worked just one hour get paid the same as those who worked all day. When most people hear that story, their reaction is that it's completely unfair. This is one of Jesus' least popular stories because everyone identifies with the laborers who worked all day. Why should those slackers get the same as us hard-working saints?

Of course, our reaction would be different if we identified with those who worked just one hour. If we heard the story that way, we'd say, "Wow, what a generous boss, to give me the same as all the others! I don't deserve it. What amazing grace!" But that's not our reaction. We tend to think we deserve every good thing, and we envy those who get the same reward for less effort – even if the reward turns out to be the grace of God, which is what the story is really about. So Jesus, who knows our heart, asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Now the miserable thing about envy is that it's all pain and no reward. At least the other vices come with some pleasure attached. Lust and gluttony and avarice all have their rewards in the short run, even if they're bad for the soul in the long run. But envy is all pain and no gain. Envy just makes us miserable over what we don't have without giving any pleasure in return. You'd think that after a while we'd ask ourselves the Dr. Phil question: "How's that working for you?" And the answer would be, "Not so well."

Envy may be the dumbest vice, but that doesn't make it any less common, does it? One reason people become Christian is that Christianity starts with the observation that we human beings are deeply messed up. Our souls are twisted, so that some of the behaviors that come most naturally to us make us, and everyone else, miserable. Envy is like that. It's a symptom of the sickness in our

soul, a reminder that we need a heart transplant if we're ever going to live in peace with ourselves and other people.

The solution to envy, and every other deadly sin, is that we need something besides our own self at the center of our lives. Thomas a Kempis, the 14th century spiritual master, told his students that "the love of yourself hurts you more than anything else in the world."¹ By love of self, he meant the self-centeredness that measures all things by our own appetites and feelings. "All self-seekers and self-lovers are bound in chains," Thomas said.² We are slaves of our own passions. In fact the word "passion" has the same root as "passive." Driven by our passions, we are slaves to our impulses, hardly free at all.

The only way to be free is to love something else more than we love ourselves. The way to be truly alive is to die to our old habits and self. "The more one dies to oneself, the more one begins to live in God," Thomas says.

We human beings were made to love. Dante, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, thought you could describe the whole of creation, and human nature, on the basis of who loves what, and how much. Envy, miserable as it is, reminds us that, unless we love something big enough to order our whole lives, we will not even love ourselves very well, let alone anyone else. Only God is big enough to be our deepest love; only God is good enough to order all our other loves.

If I love God, and my self-esteem comes from being loved by God, then I'm free from the obsessions that drive so much of what I do. I don't have to ask all the time, "How am I doing? Am I good enough? Do I measure up?" because my security rests in being loved and accepted by God.

And then I'm free to love other people too. I can be glad when my friend succeeds, because I don't have to compare myself to him. I can be grateful when someone else is wise, because I learn from her, and happy when somebody else is funny because he makes me laugh. I can read other people's books, and listen to their music, and marvel at their art, and they make my life richer because I enjoy their gifts instead of envying their talents.

¹Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 27.

²*ibid.*, III, 32.

The deadly sins like envy are deadly, not because God punishes us for having them, but because they kill us all by themselves. If something in me dies whenever a friend succeeds, I'm half dead already.

But if I lay my ego down, and learn to die to myself in the way that Jesus means, then I'm free to live for everything else. I can be grateful for the gifts God gives me directly, and for all the gifts God gives me indirectly, through what God has given others. A life like that, a life free of envy, would be a far richer and happier life. It would be something like a foretaste of heaven.