

## “THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS”

### ENVY

Today in our look at the seven deadly sins, we come to sin #2 – ENVY. In the winter of 1994, the big news in my life is that Sharla and I were engaged, and I made several trips up to Portland to see her before our wedding in March. The big news in Portland, and what everyone in Portland was talking about, and what was on the front page of newspapers around the world was Tonya Harding. Tonya Harding grew up in a poor, dysfunctional home in Portland, was not a good student, and viewed herself as an outcast. But one thing she could do is skate, and had become one of the top two ice skaters in the county. The only one standing in her way of winning the US National competition and going to the '94 Olympics was Nancy Kerrigan.

Nancy Kerrigan was the polar opposite of Tonya Harding. She grew up in a stable, middle-class family with loving parents, was a good student, and was polished and pretty. On the day before the US Nationals, a man rushed up to Nancy Kerrigan and hit her just above her kneecap with a baton – putting her out of the competition. Suspicion was immediately cast on Tonya Harding, and after a few weeks of denying any involvement in the attack, she was implicated in an elaborate plot to take out her rival so that she would have a clear pathway to the Olympics.

At the root of this attack was envy. Nancy Kerrigan had what Tonya Harding wanted, and her envy spilled out for all the world to see. Most envy, however, stays hidden deep in the heart and leaks out in subtle ways that we're often not aware of.

Our goal in this series is to understand and overcome the destructive, secret sins that entangle us and keep us from living a free and productive life for God's glory. Along with the sin of pride – which we looked at last week – envy is one of the most pervasive and deadliest of the seven sins. Envy begins very early in life when we begin to notice differences between ourselves and others and we begin to compare. “He has more toys than me, he is better at soccer than me, she has a better family situation than me, she's more well-liked and popular than me. I want that – I want what they have.”

Envy is universal – it's found in kids and it's found in adults – it's found in rich people and poor people – it's found in every culture and country – it's a universal virus. This morning we want to talk about three things: what envy is, how envy destroys our lives, and how we can eradicate it from our lives.

A simple definition of envy is “to want what belongs to someone else.” Envy leads to the dual emotions of resentment and discontent. I resent that someone has what I don't have, and I'm not content with what I have. We can envy just about anything... I can envy someone's possessions – their house, their wealth, or their truck. I can envy someone's position or promotion. I can envy someone's achievement or success. I can envy someone's good fortune – they get all the breaks. I can envy someone's good health or good marriage or good kids.

Two words in the Bible are closely associated with envy. One is *jealousy*. Envy is the reaction to not having what someone else has; jealousy is the reaction you have to the threat of losing what you have to someone else. The other word is *coveting* – spelled out in the tenth commandment – thou shalt not covet. It could just as easily use the word “envy” – you shall not envy your neighbors wife or house or land or crops or anything else that someone has.

There are several powerful examples of envy in the Bible, beginning with Cain being envious of Abel after God accepted Abel's offering and not his own. God said, "Be careful, Cain, sin is lurking at your door. Beware, the green-eyed monster of envy is seeking to control you." And it did, and he killed Abel.

Jacob married two sisters – Leah and Rachel – which was a deadly sin in itself – and both sisters, as you can imagine, were jealous of the other. Leah was jealous of Rachel because she was more beautiful and more loved by Jacob. "Why can't I have her looks, and why can't Jacob love me just as much? Rachel, in turn, was envious of Leah because Leah was able to conceive and have children, and Rachel was not. "Why does God grant her children and not me?"

Joseph's brothers seethed with envy when their father gave Joseph the coat of many colors, signifying that Joseph was Jacob's favorite. In anger, they plotted to kill Joseph, but decided to make some money and sold him into slavery.

One of the most powerful examples of envy is King Saul. After David killed Goliath, Saul and David returned home from battle, and the women of Israel celebrated them. They sang, "Saul has killed his thousands," and Saul beamed with pride. But then the ladies sang, "David has killed his tens of thousands." Ut-oh. From that moment on an evil spirit took over Saul and he sought to kill David.

The gospels say two different times that envy caused the Jewish religious leaders to arrest Jesus and turn Him over to Pilate to be crucified. They were envious of Jesus' popularity with the people and felt threatened that He was going to take away their power and control. "He must be eliminated."

Before we talk about how to deal with envy, it's important to what envy does to our lives. Three things... The first thing it does is **it denies my uniqueness**. Passages like Psalm 139 says that God creates each of us in our mother's womb as completely unique. There is no one else on earth exactly like you. No one has the same fingerprint you have, or the same unique DNA. No one has your exact personality, life experiences, abilities, and quirks that you do. God made you to be you. Envy wants to be somebody else. Envy wants a different life than the one God planned for me.

Psalm 139:13-16 says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

God knit you together in your mother's womb to be you. The problem is that we find all kinds of flaws with the way God made us, and we envy others who have what we lack. Envy is really an insult to God. "God, why didn't you give me a better body – I'm too short or too tall, my nose or my eyes or my ears or my legs are too this or too that. Look at that other person – they're perfect. Or why did you make me so quiet or so loud? Why did you give me one talent, and him five talents? Why did I grow up in the family I did? Why do I suffer health issues when others seem to glide along with no problems?"

When we say these things, we're really saying, "God, I think you messed up – you made a mistake." In Romans 9:20 Paul says, But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" God has a unique plan and purpose for you, and the more you accept how He made you – and accept His life story for you – your envy will decrease and your contentment will increase.

Envy not only denies my uniqueness, but secondly, **it wastes my time and energy**. We only have so much time to serve God and fulfill His purpose for us on earth. I can't focus on who God made me to be if I'm focused on trying to be somebody else, or trying to have what somebody else has. In Luke 9:62 Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Constantly looking and comparing myself to someone else distracts me from serving God.

Solomon observed this in Ecclesiastes 4:4... "And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Solomon says, "Think of all the time and energy and effort you put into trying to be someone else or have what someone else has." He says – and mark this down – "It's all just chasing the wind." Every time you're tempted to be envious, just say, "It's chasing after the wind." That's all it is – just chasing the wind and never catching it. It's a total waste of time and effort.

Solomon goes on in verse 8 to make another observation... There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless – a miserable business! Here's a picture of a man who spends his whole life chasing after what others have. He not only doesn't get it, but robs himself of life's enjoyment.

Envy has been called the "joyless sin," because other sins like gluttony or lust make us feel good for a moment, but envy never satisfies. Proverbs 14:30 says, "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." There's no pay-off with the sin of envy. It only makes you sad and miserable. It's a waste of valuable time and energy, and it keeps you from serving God and being what He wants you to be.

Third, **envy leads to other sins**. James highlights this point in James 3:16... "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." Envy is the gateway to every evil practice. Envious people lie, envious people steal, envious people gossip and spread rumors, envious people slander the name and reputation of others. Envious people can even end up murdering someone. Cain killed Abel because of envy. The Jewish leaders killed Jesus because of envy. There was a famous case in Texas a few years back where a mom put out a hit job on a high school cheerleader who was in competition with her daughter.

Envy is a fountainhead for all kinds of sins, including what the Germans call schadenfreude (sha-den-froy-da). Schadenfreude is the pleasure derived from the misfortune of others – when people in power or people we don't like are "knocked down a peg" and are "put in their place." Proverbs 24:17 says, "Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice." This is a particularly malicious sin because you're not only envious of what others have, but you don't want them to have it either, and you secretly rejoice when misfortune strikes them. Envy is a terrible, malicious sin that denies my uniqueness, wastes my time and energy, and leads to a host of other ugly thoughts and deeds.

So how do I root envy out of my life? There's a story in Matthew 20 Jesus tells about a group of workers in a vineyard, and the story provides four specific ways for us to eradicate envy... Verses 1-15...

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.”

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.”

But he answered one of them, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

This parable is filled with all kinds of truth that we talked about in our recent series on Matthew, but I want to focus on the envy part... “Why are you envious that I am generous to others?” The first way to eradicate envy is to **never compare yourself to anyone else**. That’s what these workers were doing... “What did you get paid? What did he get paid?” Comparison is the root of envy. If you can stop comparing, you can stop envy.

Comparing is one of our favorite sports. I wish I had their gifts or their house or their children. We compare everything. There are sports talk shows on 24 hours a day and almost all of the talk is about comparison and rankings. This team is better than that team, this quarterback is not nearly as good as this quarterback. Athletes are compared and contrasted down to the smallest detail. Everywhere you turn there are comparisons made between actors, singers, bands, presidents, and preachers. Rather than appreciate the uniqueness of each person, there is endless comparison.

The guys who worked all day in the vineyard noticed that the guys who had only worked an hour got paid the same amount. Notice what they were focused on – their focus was not on serving the owner of the vineyard, but on the other workers. It shouldn’t matter what anyone else got paid – if you settled for a dollar, you should be happy to get a dollar. It doesn’t matter what the other guy gets paid – you only keep your focus on God.

The Bible says it’s foolish to compare. 2 Corinthians 10:12 says, “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.” It’s foolish to compare, because you run into one of two problems – you either find someone who has more than you or somebody who has less. When you find somebody who has less than you, you get full of pride. When you find somebody that has more than you, you get full of envy. Whenever you compare, you’re either going to have envy or pride, and they’re both deadly. God says, “Do not do it.”

Galatians 6:4 says, “Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.” When you get to heaven God is not going to say, “Why weren’t you more like him or her?” He’s going to say, “Why did you waste so much time and energy trying to be someone else? I made you completely unique – one of a kind – to fulfill a unique purpose nobody else can.”

The second way to get rid of envy, and this is a big one, is to **celebrate God’s goodness to others**. Instead of comparing the differences between you and somebody, celebrate the differences. Jesus said, “Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.” We don’t have much trouble doing the first part – weeping with those who weep. The hard part is rejoicing with those who rejoice. It’s easy to sympathize when others are down, but it’s hard to celebrate when the fortunes of others go up – when they get a promotion, when they get recognition and praise, or when they are blessed with a financial windfall. For some reason we feel like we are less when others have more.

What happened to these workers is instead of rejoicing over the owner’s generosity to the other workers, they resented them. They began to grumble against the landowner. “What’s the deal? We worked all day and they only worked an hour, and you paid us the same thing. No fair!”

The interesting thing about envy is that we envy those who are closest to us. Aristotle said, “Potter’s envy other potters.” Athletes envy other athletes. Mom’s envy other moms. Politician’s envy other politicians. Preacher’s envy other preachers. Fishermen envy other fishermen. You tend to envy the people who do what you do. You’re worried about those who might be getting just a little ahead of you, or might be blessed a little bit more than you. Don’t envy them, but celebrate who God made them to be, and when something good happens to them, rejoice with them. When you do this a wonderful shift begins to take place in your heart, and envy is replaced with love.

Never compare, celebrate God’s goodness to other, and number three, **be grateful for who you are and what you have**. Instead of complaining like these workers did, they should have just been grateful. They should have said, “Thank you, boss, for giving me a job and giving me the ability to pay the bills and put food on the table.” When you’re grateful, it’s hard to be envious.

I like how *The Message* paraphrases 1 Corinthians 4:7-8... “Isn’t everything you have and everything you are sheer gifts from God? So what’s the point of all this comparing and competing? You already have all you need.” It’s good to remember that God doesn’t owe us anything, but in His grace, He calls us to salvation and gives us the privilege of working in His kingdom. The folks in the Corinthian church were having a huge issue regarding spiritual gifts. They were comparing gifts. The proud people said, “Look at me... I have the important gift.” The insecure people said, “Why can’t I have the kind of gift that gets attention and praise?”

Paul says, “Stop it... Gifts and talents and abilities are not something you can wish for – “I wish I could sing, I wish I speak in tongues, I wish I could preach,” gifts are sovereignly given by God and He says, “Instead of trying to be someone else, be grateful and content with who I made you to be, and be the best you, you can be.”

The person I most envied growing up was my older brother Ron. Ron was seven years older than me, and when God handed out gifts, Ron got a bunch. He was a really good athlete, an excellent musician – he could play guitar, bass, piano, and trombone. He could sing. He was also smart and could retain information unlike anyone I’ve met. On top of that, he could build or fix anything, and before he died in July, he had just finished building his own house.

Being his little brother, I looked up to Ron and wanted to be like him. By the way, its not wrong to look up to someone and want to be like them in a good sense – having a role model can inspire us to be better. But along the line I realized I wasn’t my brother. God wired him very uniquely and he had talents I did not have.

So much joy and contentment comes when you look in the mirror and say, “This is who God made me to be, and by God’s grace I’ll try to be the best me I can be.” And then say, “Thank you, Lord, for what you’ve given me and help me to use it all for your glory.”

Hebrews 12:1b-2a says, “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” God has given each of us a lane to run in, and when you’re running a race, you should never look over to see what the person in the other lane is doing. In the Kentucky Derby, that they put these little blinders on the horses, so that they look straight ahead and just run. Just stay in your lane and keep looking forward, fixing your eyes on Jesus. We are to run for an audience of one. And when we do that, envy melts away.

The fourth way we overcome envy is this: **I must trust God when life seems unfair.** Someone I read this week said, “Pay attention to envy when you’re suffering.” When you’re suffering, when you’re hurting, when you’ve had a setback, when you’re depressed, it’s easy to look over in the other lane and say, “It’s not fair... why are they running so freely? Why do they have good health? Why did they find love and get married before I did? Why are their kids turning out good?”

That’s the attitude the workers had. Verse 12 says, “These who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” We read that and say, “Yeah... why should the ones who barely broke a sweat get paid as much as us? It’s not fair!”

Because we’re only looking at our suffering, we’re not able to see that everyone suffers. Their suffering may look different than ours, but in a fallen, broken world no one is immune from pain and hardships. We forget that life is not all roses for them. And if God has given them more, more will be required. It comes down to trust and saying to God, “I don’t know all the reasons why you made me as you did, or why this is happening to me, but I trust you Lord. I trust you. You’re the potter and I’m the clay, and I trust that everything that happens to me is shaping and molding me to look more like you.”

God wants you to live free from envy, so that you can enjoy life – so that your bones won’t rot – and so that you’ll be fully able to make your life count for His glory. To do that you need to let the Holy Spirit look deep in your heart and repent of the sin of envy. You need to say to God, “With you help, I’m not going to compare. I’m going to be grateful for what you’ve given me, and I’m going to rejoice with those who rejoice and celebrate your goodness to others.” If you think God has been unfair, confess your lack of trust in Him and rest in the way He has uniquely made you, and focus all your time and energy into serving Him.