

7 Deadly Sins, week 5

Envy

What's so deadly about *envy*?

The problem with envy is that it is diametrically opposed to *loving*. How so? Let's define our terms.

Loving, in the Christian tradition, *is the invincible determination to seek another's well-being and joy*. It is being genuinely glad when another person's life is working well, and when her/his joy is full. We rejoice when this happens for another person!

Envy is the reflexive resentment of another's well-being and joy. Envy looks at the blessings, happiness, and gifts that another enjoys, and thinks, *"What did she/he do to deserve those good things? I wasn't given those good things. It's a pretty unfair system that confers those gifts on others, and leaves me with my comparatively paltry good fortune."* And more than resenting the other's apparently favorable situation, we typically disparage the persons involved, assuming that *"those people"* are clueless, ungrateful, and inappropriately self-satisfied about their advantages.

We commonly think that *envy* is simply the desiring of the good things that others enjoy. But the disordered disposition of envy more deeply disfigures our souls. Os Guinness, in **Steering Through Chaos**, describes envy as "the one vice that its perpetrators never enjoy, and rarely ever confess. As Henry Fairlee wrote, 'The face of envy is never lovely. It is never even faintly pleasant.' Because envy is congenitally incapable of enjoyment, the more its appetite increases, the more it drives its perpetrator toward torment."

St. Basil the Great writes of envy, *"Envy is pain caused by our neighbor's prosperity."*

Thomas Aquinas observes that "'Envy is sorrow at another's good.' Envy occurs when, seeing someone's happiness or success, we first compare and find ourselves or our condition lacking, then—out of the hurt of our wounded self-esteem—seek to bring the other person down to our level by word or deed. Envy, in short, moves from dejection to disparagement on to destruction... What is decisive is the feeling that the envied person's fortune is to blame for the envier's feeling of inferiority." (Guinness, p. 72)

If this condition weren't a twisted enough flaw of the psyche, it has a fraternal twin called *schadenfreude*: joy at the suffering of another. In either expression, this profoundly flawed disposition undermines gratitude, robs us of contentment, and puts us at enmity with our neighbors.

Our antidote? *"Blessed are those who mourn..."* An expanded translation of this passage might read, "Blessed are the mourning ones who see the true nature of things in a broken, fallen world so that, broken-hearted, they are open to the comfort only God can give... Thus, if envy is 'sorrow at another's good,' its counterpoint is sorrow at another's evil, grieving with others in their affliction or loss. Whereas envy weeps at those who celebrate and celebrates at those who weep, mourning weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice... Mourning ignores comparisons and sees people." (Guinness, pp. 105 - 106)

Charles Simeon, a legendary Anglican clergyman, wrote out these guidelines to govern his own attitudes about others people's fortunes or foibles.

“The longer I live, the more I feel the importance of adhering to the rules which I have laid down for myself in relation to evil-speaking (and gossip) about others.

1. To hear as little as possible what is to the prejudice of others.
2. To believe nothing of the kind till I am absolutely forced to it.
3. Never to drink into the spirit of one who circulates and ill report.
4. Always to moderate, as far as I can, the unkindness which is expressed toward others.
5. Always to believe, that if the other side were heard, a very different account would be given of the matter.”

Our Homework

How shall we recognize envy at work in us? We can begin to suspect its operation whenever we sense resentment toward another person about whom we know few real details. Does this happen when we see a physically beautiful, or well-dressed person? When we see someone in possession of high-end property (jewelry, cars, boats, houses, planes)? When we see them enjoying favor from peers? From our parents? When we encounter someone with an obvious gift of intelligence or performing arts talent? When someone else is admitted to a selective college or university? Gets a promotion at work?

Our culture fiercely promotes this vice in what passes for journalism and comic satire. Our media celebrities heap ridicule generously and constantly on whomever is in power in government. It doesn't matter which party is represented in the White House, or who controls the Congress. We are coached too look for the fatal flaws, worthy of condemnation, in “those others,” and to rejoice when they fall ignominiously.

When was the last time we expressed praise or admiration to another person, just because... without looking for a favor from them?

If **empathy** is evidence of genuine, godly kindness, then we should be able to come alongside neighbors and, in some way, enter into their joys and sorrows. We should be the first to think, feel, and express, “I'm so happy for you! Good job! Yay... You did it!” In the same way, we should be those who are daring and big-hearted enough to think, feel, and express, “That must really hurt; I'm so sorry that you're going through this. Oh... what can we do to find our way through this?”

All the Christian spiritual and moral virtues entail dying to our self-importance and self-absorption. We must stop thinking of ourselves as the central point of the cosmos. And that is difficult to do. But that enables us to perceive, to understand, and to care about others. What does St. Paul mean when he writes, “We have been crucified with Christ?”

My goals this week: I will actively look for, identify, and compliment or praise something in another person. I will not do it in the expectation that the person will return the favor. I will do it simply because it can begin to free me from thinking that another person's well-being must entail my denigration.

I will pray for God to help me to recognize and to express gratitude for all the favor that I enjoy in life.

I will try to see myself as God's beloved child. Whenever I start thinking of myself as my neighbor's competitor for scarce honors, I will revert to thanking God that I am His child, alive, and loved.