

*The Seven Deadly Sins 5: Envy*

James 5:13-18

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It's kind of funny how each of these deadly sins has made some distinctive claim to fame. Sloth, for example, which claimed to be the cure for all the other sins because the rest of them are too much work. Envy's claim to fame is that it's the only sin that's no fun. All the rest of them afford some kind of pleasure. Even anger, because we all love a good rant! All the other sins are based in something good, and that's what makes them so tempting and enjoyable. All except envy.

And yet, I do think there is one way in which envy feels good, and that's when it comes in the form of *schadenfreude*. It's a great word, but apparently we don't have a word for it in English. It's when we take delight in someone else's fall, a sort of self-satisfied gloating. It's what is behind celebrity gossip magazines. Celebrities without make-up! Celebrities with flabby abs! Martha Stewart is probably the poster child of *schadenfreude*, for when the perfect homemaker fell, the whole world took delight in it. Why were we so gleeful? Because we envied her: her talent, her money, her fame. Envy is always tinged with malice. Most people admire Oprah Winfrey. We look up to her and respect her, and when she struggles with her weight or has other troubles, we sympathize with her. But Martha inspires envy. We think she doesn't deserve her fame. And more to the point, *we* deserve it more than she does!

It's this personal rivalry that distinguishes envy from greed. Greed is wanting more. Coveting is wanting what someone else has. Envy is resenting the other person for having what we want. We often use envy and jealousy interchangeably, but jealousy is actually the flip-side of envy: the fear that other people envy what we have.

One writer claims that envy is the least studied of the sins because no one will ever admit to it. Nevertheless, it has been studied quite a bit. Scientists have devised some very clever ways to understand how envy works in the human soul. In fact, there is an entire school of thought in the subject of anthropology which says that envy, covetousness, and desire are at the very root of all human societies, and even at the root of violence. This in turn has given rise to a school of theology which looks at the Bible from that perspective, and there is no shortage of examples in the Good Book!

The theory goes that we humans are social creatures. We always hang out in groups, in societies. Indeed, we learn how to be human by watching and imitating each others. It's not instinctual for human babies to walk, talk, or even crawl. If they don't see other humans doing it, they won't do it themselves.

Another thing we learn from others is desire: we learn what to want by seeing what others want. Again, kids illustrate this well. Sam has a truck. His friend has a train. They each immediately want what the other has, but they don't want the other kid to have their own toy. So they fight, and sooner or later, one of them whacks the other. Envy, the root of human violence! Indeed, humans are not even capable of sharing until they are at least three years old. And some of us never really learn the concept.

You don't have to look far to find it in the Bible as well. Envy is right there in the third chapter of Genesis. God forbids Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It's all very well and good until the serpent points out the fruit to Eve, and what is it he says to tempt her? "You will be like God." He arouses envy in her, envy for what God

has: knowledge and power. The Bible says simply that she gave the fruit to Adam, but it's more much likely that he saw her eating it and wanted what she had. Envy.

As for envy being the root of violence, we need only to read on to the very next chapter, to Cain and Abel. Both offer sacrifices to God. God prefers Abel's offering. Cain wants what Abel has – God's favor – so he kills his brother. It may not exactly be logical, but it is all too understandable based on what we all know of human behavior.

Envy: resenting someone else because they have what we want. Interestingly enough, we don't tend to envy people who are vastly out of our league: geniuses, or the fabulously wealthy, or the innately talented. We don't tend to envy Marie Curie, Oprah Winfrey, or Michael Phelps. If there is a huge disparity, we somehow manage to accept it. Rather, envy is aroused either by a random stroke of good luck, as when my next-door neighbor wins big in the lottery, because it might just as easily have been me. Or it is aroused when someone pulls slightly ahead of the pack, as when my next-door neighbor makes \$5000 a year more than me. Somebody closer to my level, someone whose rewards could have gone to me instead, maybe *should* have gone to me. She doesn't really deserve it, but I do. Clearly I'm smarter. More talented. More hard-working. More deserving. And that's the guise that envy often comes in: a sense of superiority, that I'm more discerning or have better taste or smarter than these unworthy people who are reaping the rewards that should rightfully have gone to me. Perhaps that's the worst, when envy masquerades as wisdom.

This is what James is talking about in his letter. Some Christians are not that fond of James because he seems to undercut the whole "salvation by faith alone" doctrine. That's why Martin Luther wanted this letter left out of the Bible. But I like James because he cuts through the B.S. He calls us on our hypocrisy, when our words sound good but our deeds are not. We like to think we are so much wiser and more discerning than everyone else, but James warns us that if we truly are wise, it ought to show in our deeds, deeds that are humble and not boastful. "If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition," he says, "then your 'wisdom' comes from the devil and not from heaven, for wherever envy is, there you will find disorder and every evil practice."

Fortunately, when James diagnoses our hypocrisy, he also prescribes the cure. Wisdom from heaven is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, fully of mercy. In other words, it is kind, and that indeed is the heavenly virtue that counters envy: kindness. And we know it works, because that is how Jesus behaved toward those who were envious of him.

For why did the religious and government authorities kill him, except for envy? They wanted him to be envious and fearful of their power so he would keep in line, but he did not envy them. So they in turn envied his power, a power over which they seemed to have no control. Even the disciples themselves were envious of Jesus, as when they would argue among themselves who was the greatest. And at the crucifixion they felt a kind of negative *schadenfreude*, a fear that Jesus' fate would be their own.

But Jesus greeted all of this deadly envy with kindness. He forgave his executioners – and he forgave his disciples. It's easy for us to lose sight of that detail, but in every single resurrection story, Jesus' first word to his disciples is "Peace." He treats them with kindness – what we might call undeserved kindness or grace – and that experience is life-transforming for the disciples. When we have been treated with such kindness by one who surely had the right to judge, how much more then should we not treat one another with kindness? If there are those that we envy, then we can foster kindness toward them instead, even just by praying, truly praying, for the other person's well-being.

But there's another way that the deadly sin of envy can be transformed into the heavenly virtue of kindness. As I said earlier in the sermon, we humans are creatures of envy, coveting and desire. But we can covet positive things, such as qualities of character. We might call this ambition, the desire to improve ourselves, the desire to acquire characteristics of people whose character we envy. St. Paul had another word for it: discipleship, becoming the students of the one we envy, and of course the one Paul sets up for us to imitate above all others is Christ. Paul takes our envy, or desire for greatness, even our competitiveness, and transforms them by urging us to outdo one another in imitating Jesus, who was loving, giving, serving, humble, patient, forgiving. If we turn our energy and effort to becoming more like that, then what will happen to our envy of our neighbors?

We covenant with God and with one another,  
and bind ourselves to walk together in all God's ways,  
as God is revealed in the blessed word of truth.

Spirit of Peace United Church of Christ  
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