

Sinning Like A Christian: Envy #3 Feeling Bitter When Others Have It Better

November 15, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

The film ,Amadeus, is set in 18th century Vienna. It is a story between a court composer ,Antonio Salieri, and his famous rival, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. As a young man, Salieri prayed for musical talent, promising God his devotion and chastity if only God would make him a great composer.

When Mozart burst in on the scene with his astounding talent and destroyed Salieri's dreams of greatness, Salieri was enraged. How could God lavish such amazing musical gifts on such an arrogant, shallow buffoon? From their first meeting, Salieri was envious of Mozart, and he nurtured his envy long after Mozart was dead.

In the film's opening scene, Salieri tries to commit suicide, guilt stricken over his complicity in hastening Mozart's death. A priest visits Salieri to hear his confession.

Clip of Amadeus. The movie Amadeus is a portrait of the destructive power of envy.

We continue our series on, *Sinning like a Christian*. Last week we talked about pride. Today I want to focus on envy.

A poem by **Victor Hugo** recounts an opportunity granted to Envy and Avarice to receive whatever they wished, on the condition that the other receive a double portion. Envy replied, *I wish to be blind in one eye.*"

The envious person resents another person's good gifts because they are superior to his or her own. It is not just that the other person is better; it is that by comparison their superiority brings that person's inadequacies to light.

The fact is we are always **comparing ourselves** to others. Parents may have compared you with siblings or friends or cousins. Then we have teachers, coaches, standardized tests, performance, evaluations at work, and most of all beauty contests. Our society not only encourages envy, it requires envy to maintain itself

What makes envy so dangerous it operates below the radar screen of your mind. **William Willimon**: *Envy attempts to keep to itself, is shy to reveal its real feelings, seethes, and stews in resentment because of the good fortune of another.*

What makes envy so sad is because it can never be satisfied. It is always wishing that things were other than they are with your life.

Most of the Seven can be fun, let's admit it. Lust is a least momentarily pleasurable, so is gluttony. But who enjoys Envy, even for a moment.

Of all the deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all. - **Joseph Epstein**

Envy has been personified as a sickly person. Envy seems to be its own punishment.

One writer puts it this way, *If envy were an illness, the world would be a hospital.*

So when we Envy someone, we tend to **magnify** that person's good fortune while at the same time **minimizing** our own. Envy makes even our good friends into our competitors, at least in our own minds.

It gives the envier satisfaction to see his rival's good taken away, even if he himself does not acquire it as a result.

We were all just a bit too gleeful in the demise of **Martha Stewart**, a fabulously rich woman who kept her house better than we kept ours. When she was handcuff, did any of you have any ounce of sympathy towards her? Did any of you started praying for her?

Martha's fall may reveal more of our moral weaknesses than hers, an eating away at our souls due to Envy.

Rebecca DeYoung writes, *The envious, by contrast, are the have-nots - they do not have the good their rival does, and they do not have self-love. Thus, they have nothing to lose and everything to gain from another's loss.*

It is notable that the envier does not typically advertise his envy out in the open; he tends toward passive-aggressive stabs in the back, as in the prayer found in the poem entitled:

Piers Plowman: by Langland.

*I have a neighbor near me whom I annoy often.
And belie him to lords to make him lose silver,
And to make his friends foes through my false speaking,
His gain and good luck grieve me sorely.
Between house and house I sow hatred,
So that life and limb are lost through my whispers,
When I meet at market the man whom I envy
I greet him graciously or with friendly manners
And fear to offend him, for he is the stronger.
If I had might and mastery, God knows my wishes!...
So I live without love, like a low mongrel,
And all my body bursts from the bitterness of my anger.*

COMPARISON GAME

When it comes down to it, for the envious the bottom line is how they stack up against others, because they measure their self-worth comparatively.

The theologian, **Kierkegaard**, who wrote a great deal about envy says that **envy is a small-town sin**, a by-product of living so close to a set of other people that one is constantly tempted to make leveling comparisons.

The fact is enviers don't usually envy those who are vastly more talented or successful than they are. They tend to envy people to whom they might actually be compared unfavorably, that is, those who are just like them - only better.

I don't envy Bill Hybals or Rick Warren, they are way out of my league. They have more people directing traffic on Sunday morning than those who are attending Christ Community. But it's real easy to play that comparison game with the other pastors in town. As Aquinas puts it, we envy only those whom we wish to rival or surpass in reputation.

The envious want to be superior, for their self-esteem depends on outranking others in the relevant field of comparison. Their own identity hangs on excelling others, those close enough to be compared as rivals.

Robert Bringle, a professor at Purdue University, stresses that we covet most strongly in areas that are important to our sense of self worth. In other words, each of us is most susceptible where we feel the most vulnerable.

In **Chariots of Fire**, we get a character portrait of two different men with diametrically opposed views of competition. Eric Liddell and Harold Abrams are rivals in the 100 yard dash.

Harold is driven to excellence and devoted to winning, because he is afraid to lose. This is the envier's mentality. After the first race in which he failed to win, Harold sits in the stands with his head in his hands, his whole self-image dashed to pieces. *If I can't win, I won't run* he says vehemently to the woman he loves.

Harold's attitude is like the envier's; he is defensive, afraid of being shown inferior, happy with himself only when he outranks all his competition in excellence. His identity and worth depend on his being better than another.

Eric Liddell in turn, tries to explain to his sister that his desire to run comes not from a restless desire to prove something, but and I quote:

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.

Eric is already sure of God's favor. He does not strive to run well or to win in order to **earn favor**, but rather to revel in it. He loves competition not because he needs to win, but because he loves to run well.

His competitors are valued because they are his partners in seeking excellence, not rivals who would strip him of all excellence should they beat him in a race. Eric has a calm confidence of one who knows he is worth something, whatever place he finishes. He runs with joy and freedom, not fear.

Those who are envious are astute judges of excellence in how they measure up against others. When

their rivals outshine them, especially in an area that is close to the heart, their success threatens the best part of themselves. **Rebecca DeYoung**, *The envious essentially see the world as a great competition, a world of winners and losers with nothing in between*

In **Snow White** the evil queen asks, *Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?* It is not enough for Envy merely to achieve a status of attractiveness; it wants to be the most attractive of all.

In *Amadeus*, what Salieri really envies is Mozart's musical genius. This is not something Salieri can buy or attain with more hard work. Mozart's musicianship is a gift, something unique and internal to who he is.

Salieri thinks that the musicianship of Mozart should be his, but he realizes it lies impossibly out of reach. That is why Salieri's strategy - typical of those consumed by envy - is to take Mozart down, to ruin him, rather than emulate him.

We do the same. Those that we envy we try to tear down through gossip, slander, speak ill against. Instead of celebrating what God is doing in that person's life we try to pull them down, to make them less than what they really are.

Envy has many disguises. It's the human tendency to use humor or sarcasm as a mask for what is really envy. It can look like constructive criticism, self pity, or avoidance. Envious rejoice at the other's downfall. If the envious try to undermine their rival and are not successful, then their bitterness intensifies and they resent the other person gifts or material things even more.

Envy's view of the world is essentially antagonistic; it is me-versus-you. My good or your good - never both.

So Salieri takes down his crucifix - the one before which he prayed for the talent to become a great composer - burns it in the fire vowing to destroy the person he envy's the most, Mozart.

What does the Bible say about envy?

Look at how envy gets played out in the Book of Geneses. Envy came on the scene when Abel was born. We don't need Freud to tell us that birth order is a major factor in the tension among siblings.

Cain was envious of his brother Abel.

Jacob was envious over Esau for having the birthright.

Joseph's brothers were envious because he was the favorite.

God is so serious about envy that he prohibited coveting in the Big Ten in Exodus 20, *You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Proverbs 27:4 NLT says, *Anger is cruel, and wrath is like a flood, but jealousy (envy) is even more dangerous.*

Story in Numbers 12 of Miriam and Aaron who are envy of Moses.

1 While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. 2 They said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, too?" But the Lord heard them. 3 (Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.)

4 So immediately the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and said, "Go out to the Tabernacle, all three of you!" So the three of them went to the Tabernacle. 5 Then the Lord descended in the pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tabernacle. "Aaron and Miriam!" he called, and they stepped forward. 6 And the Lord said to them, "Now listen to what I say:

*"If there were prophets among you,
I, the Lord, would reveal myself in visions.*

I would speak to them in dreams.

7 But not with my servant Moses.

Of all my house, he is the one I trust.

8 I speak to him face to face,
clearly, and not in riddles!
He sees the Lord as he is.
So why were you not afraid
to criticize my servant Moses?"

9 The Lord was very angry with them, and he departed. 10 As the cloud moved from above the Tabernacle, there stood Miriam, her skin as white as snow from leprosy.[c] When Aaron saw what had happened to her, 11 he cried out to Moses, "Oh, my master! Please don't punish us for this sin we have so foolishly committed. 12 Don't let her be like a stillborn baby, already decayed at birth." NLT

Miriam was the older sister of Moses who watched over the papyrus basket float down the Nile, ultimately retrieved by Pharaoh's daughter. As a young child she made sure that Moses would be returned to his mother to be nursed and cared for.

Years later, it was Miriam who led the women of Israel in song and dance on the eastern shore of the Red Sea after the Egyptian army was drowned. God's presence in her life is clear and her ability as a prophet is unquestioned.

Aaron certainly had an important part to play in the Exodus. Moses's reluctance to speak meant that Aaron was the one who confronted Pharaoh. It was his voice God had used to free His people. It was Aaron who was the High Priest and it was he who entered the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement.

Somehow that was not good enough. Here stands Aaron and Miriam just at the point in time when the Lord is about to send them into the Promised Land. and they think they haven't had **sufficient honor** for themselves. How much more could Aaron and Miriam want?

Well, they wanted to be revered in the same way that Moses was revered by the people. They were envious of Moses. Their attitude is very much like that of Adam and Eve after Satan had lured them into desiring to be like God. **Being vice president wasn't enough; they wanted to share the president's chair with him.**

As they looked at the elevated position of Moses, Miriam and Aaron became envious. They wanted to be equal with Moses. Miriam was the instigator of the open rebellion. Because she and Aaron could not find fault with the way Moses was leading the people, they chose to criticize his wife. But this was a smoke screen for the real issue at hand, envy.

The common interpretation is Miriam and Aaron are referring to Zipporah. Zipporah was a Midianite whom Moses married years before, but their complaint is just now festering. She is from the area of Cush but they use the term Cushite as a term to ridicule her.

They are pointing out she is of another race. They are making reference that she is not the **fair olive tone** they possess, but in fact she is black.

There often is a much deeper issue when envy arises. Notice, rather than being thankful for the opportunities to be spokespersons for God, rather than seeing their positions as ones of grace rather than merit and self-effort, Miriam and Aaron think they are God's gift to humanity. They deserve greater recognition. They are extremely envious of Moses, but much more than that, they are angry with God that He elevated Moses to TOP DOG instead of them.

How does God respond to Miriam and Aaron over being envious of Moses.

Verse 9. **The Message**, *The anger of God blazed out against them. And then he left.*

Verse 10, *When the Cloud moved off from the Tent, oh! Miriam had turned leprous, her skin like snow. Aaron took one look at Miriam—a leper!*

It appears that the punishment was very well suited to the crime. For one to look down upon another because of their dark skin color, this was a very appropriate punishment: that Miriam's skin should be made white as snow with infirmity. Perhaps she thought she was better for being light skinned, but being made very white with the illness of leprosy is like getting the death sentence.

Leprosy was so humiliating because you had to be isolated from the community, like an outcast. If that is

how they treated Cushites, then it would do well for Miriam to experience that same kind of humiliation.

Here is a classic example of envy, walking hand in hand with anger and pride. The sins are all intertwined together. This is not the end of the story. But I'm going to stop. You can read it for yourself and find out what happens to Miriam in Numbers 12.

Here's a few questions we can ask ourselves to see if envy might be creeping into our hearts.

- Are you upset when co-workers advance or competitors get the edge on the market? professionally or socially?
- Do you feel pain because of another person's success?
- Do you belittle the accomplishments, the talents, or the appearances of others?
- Are you tempted to bad mouth or sabotage a person to whom you feel inferior?
- Are you secretly pleased when a friend, even a loved one, suffers a setback?

I'd like to offer some practical suggestions to constructively deal with the sin of envy.

1.) Call envy what it is and admit our feelings. Dr. Joyce Brothers says that we are so ashamed of envious feelings we seldom pull them into the light where we can get a good look at them.

Envy has many disguises.

- * If you're frequently finding fault with others,
- * if you feel a lack of joy,
- * if you can't rejoice with those who rejoice, examine your heart carefully; * if what's really going on is envy, admit that to be true.

Say it aloud: *"I am feeling envious."* Once we own up to envy, we empower ourselves to use it instead of the other way around.

2.) Stop making comparisons. Train your mind to keep from viewing people in a hierarchy. Remember that different means different not necessarily better or worse. When you get close to some people you envy, often you find their lives aren't as wonderful as it might have appeared. You find out that they struggle with some other things you had no idea about.

3.) Use envy as a stimulus for change.

All the voice lessons in the world aren't going to make me a singer. Praying with piano music. Start to become envy. Emulate instead of being envious. Doesn't mean you'll be as good as they are. That's OK. The winners of this life are those who learn from people who are better than they are. They surround themselves with people who are better than they are, instead of criticizing them.

4.) Reaffirm your uniqueness and choices. Know that you don't have to be good at everything.

5.) Celebrate the gifts and opportunities of others. We need to be able to say *"I'm so happy for you"* without gritting teeth. It really helps to remember that my friend's victories are my victories. When it comes to serving God, there is room for everyone.

When a friend receives a promotion or gets a new car, rejoice with their good news. Don't let the stab of envy rob you of the joy of shared celebration.

6.) Find your contentment and significance in God. **Joe Stowell** writes that the focus of our contentment needs to be our confidence that Christ is all He says He is, that He is aware of and will supply our needs. If we have Him, we have enough.

Remember how Numbers 12 described Moses?

Verse 3: *Now the man Moses was a quietly humble man, more so than anyone living on Earth.*

Was Moses always humble. No. When you look at the best of the best of the best saints of God, Moses, David, Saul, they all started with a spirit of arrogance but they come to the end of their lives humble.

Moses is of another class. Others hear from God in shadowy terms. They have visions and dreams. But Moses gets to meet with God face to face. If you truly want to be in another class in your Christian walk, a person who meets with God face to face, then humility has to be at the forefront of who you are as a person.

And we need to remember that we're running this race together. Someday when we arrive in heaven, we're going to say we played a part in a movement of God in Western NY. I want to be able to stand before God and say I didn't get dragged down by the sin of envy.

Nancy Beach writes this: *In the winter, I run laps at the YMCA. There are three lanes. The walkers are supposed to stay on the inside lane, the speed demons are on the outside lane, and the rest of us in the middle. Sometimes I find myself looking over my shoulder to see a fast person coming. I think, They're not going to beat me. So I start running faster. If they do pass me I think, they're not going to lap me another time. I start running too fast for my own pace and by the end of my run I'm out of steam.*

Other days when I run there's a group who comes from a home for adults. They come with big smiles on their faces, and start walking slowly on the inside track. Sometimes they stop, or start going the wrong way. I don't need to compete with the super speedy guys, and I don't need to compete with the slow, adults. I need to run my own race.

Run your own race. We need to remember that we're running this race together. As Christians we are not competing against one another, we are here to help each other finish the race that God set before us.

(The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors)

Resources:

Beach, Nancy: Miriam, Aaron, & the Green-Eyed Monster

DeYoung, Rebecca: Glittering Vices

Willimon, William: Sinning Like a Christian