

4th Sunday of Lent
6th Sermon of Mission
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The Capital Sin of Envy

(Thanks to Mother Nadine, Superior of the Intercessors of the Lamb,
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A CHRISTMAS STORY

My two nephews are very close in age. The youngest, Nick, wants desperately to do the things his brother, Alex, does and have the things his brother has. Last year for Christmas, they both received toy cars. Despite the fact that both of the cars were the same, Nick wanted the one his brother had. In fact, no matter which one his brother offered him, he wanted the one his big brother had. As I watched the drama unfold, an old, but familiar saying came to mind-- the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

ENVY

The sin of envy takes place when we become preoccupied with how others have been blessed by God. We become concerned with the proverbial "other side of the fence." Envy is the desire for God to do for us what He's doing for other people. Now, at first glance, this doesn't seem like a big deal. A part of us even says, "what's so wrong with wanting God to bless **all** of us as He blesses **some** of us?" But the problem lies in the fact that we can become so preoccupied with what God is doing in **other people's** lives that we lose sight of what He's doing in, with, and through **us**. Envy denies God's love for each of us as individuals.

ENVY IN SCRIPTURE

There are many examples of this in the Bible. Two of my favorite examples are found in the Gospel of John and the Book of Genesis. In the former, Peter concerns himself with God's will for John (John 21:18-22). Jesus tells Peter that he will no longer be able to go about wherever he pleases, but will be taken where he does not want to go. Peter then saw John following them and asked Jesus what was going to happen to him. Jesus once again puts Peter in his place, saying, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (John 21:22). Peter begins to envy the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20b). Peter wants to know what God is going to do with John's life and loses focus on what God wants to do in his own.

Another example of envy is found in the Book of Genesis (4:1-8). Cain and Abel both brought their offerings to God. Cain brought the fruit of the ground from his farming. Abel brought the firstlings of his flock. God looked favorably upon Abel's offering and not on Cain's. This might be because Abel brought the "first fruits" of his labor, the firstlings of the flock, while the Bible says that Cain simply brought *some* of

his produce. Regardless, Cain becomes envious of the favor that Abel finds with God, so he kills his brother.¹ Not only is envy a sin, but this story demonstrates how envy can lead to other sins. Envy destroyed the joy Cain should have felt at seeing his brother blessed by God. Through the blessing He bestowed upon Abel, God may have been challenging Cain to offer the first fruits of his labor, but the blind eyes of envy never saw this challenge.

POOR VISION

Both of these Scriptures demonstrate the dangers of making human judgments about God's work. In order to think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, we have to make a judgment about the grass on both sides. Unfortunately, you and I typically judge things based on what we see and what we know. The first reading today explains how faulty our judgment can be. "Man does not see as God sees, because man see the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). It says in Romans, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor" (11:33)? We cannot have the unlimited vision of God. Therefore, we cannot make wise judgments about the proverbial "other side of the fence." We cannot judge what God is doing in other people's lives nor compare it with what's He's doing in ours.

CHRISTIAN ENVY

Rather than trying to cover every type of envy, I want to focus on two popular forms of envy among Christians. Neither of these types have to do with envying other people's belongs, but rather, envying what other people do.

The first type of envy is a popular one among Christians. In fact, I doubt there's a single Christian who hasn't experience this at least once. It's when we envy those people who are not Christian, and/or, who do bad things. While we know in our heads that being Christian brings peace, joy, and contentment, we don't always feel it in our hearts. There are times when we don't see the immediate fruit of being a follower of Christ. In these moments it is very tempting to envy those who don't seem to be bothered by their sin. This usually starts with the feeling of being over-burdened by our faith journey. I like to call this "goodness fatigue." We become sick and tired of being good. We envy those "sinners" who seem to be able to do anything they want and not be punished for it. They seem to be having all of the fun, while we sit around like a bunch of bitter prudes. We envy those who seem to be able to sin so freely and enjoy doing it! This envy leads us to compromise parts of our Christianity. We desire to see how the "other side" lives.

There's no simple way to overcome this type of envy. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives us the best advice when he says, "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and

¹ "On Envy," Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, Vol. 4, pg. 143: "What was it Cain did? He saw another honored by God, and burned with envy. He killed the one who was honored that he might insult Him Who honored him. Since he could not attack God, he turned his hatred to the murder of his own brother."

steal” (6:20). In other words, if we stay focused on the reward to come, we won’t be preoccupied with the blessings of this life. Hopefully, then, we will be able to say the same thing Timothy did when he wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

The second type of Christian envy is directed toward those who appear to be more advanced than we are in faith. It is so easy to think that God is doing more in other people's lives than in our own. Other people's faith in difficult situations leaves us wishing we had as much faith. Other people's activity in the church leaves us wishing we were more active. The piety others demonstrate before, during, and after Mass leaves us feeling inadequate in our own spirituality. The ministry and vocation that God calls others to can leave us feeling inadequate and useless. These, and similar, feelings can leave us wondering why God isn't doing the same thing in our lives. The best way to purge this type of envy is to focus more on our own relationship with God and less on His relationship with others. God leads and guides each of us in different ways. We all experience God in different ways. God loves each of us individually, yet differently.

THE FRUITS OF ENVY

When we can't understand and appreciate how God loves and blesses each of us differently, then we become consumed with envy, which hurts *us* more than anyone else. One of the fruits of envy that hurts us is hate, and the goal of hate is to see other people unhappy. Rather than experiencing joy at seeing other people exceed and be blessed, envy leads us to desire their bad luck. Saint Basil said it best when he wrote, “[The envious man] looks for but one remedy for his affliction: to see one of those he envies fall into misfortune. This is the goal of his hate: to see someone he envies miserable instead of happy, to see one who is admired pitied” (“On Envy,” Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, Vol. 4, pg. 142-143). Whereas greed desires to possess something, envy desires to take away something that someone else possesses (mainly happiness and peace).

Following from this, we can rightly say that another fruit of envy is hypocrisy. There is not another sin that gives birth to hypocrisy like the sin of envy. Envious people will try to outwardly show friendship to someone while despising him or her in their heart. They will speak compliments while thinking criticisms. The envious person cannot help but also be a hypocrite.

GREEN GRASS

The grass really isn't greener on the other side of the fence. In fact, it is the same green on both sides. God loves each of us the same, but individually. And, He needs each of us the same, but in different capacities. Overcoming envy means celebrating the vocation, gifts, and blessings God has given to us, as well as celebrating those He's given to others.