

Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Envy and Contentment

Psalm 16:1-8 Philippians 4:10-13

Here is our weekly reminder: the 7 deadly sins are not deadly because they will kill us or because God will smite us with a bolt of lighting or something like that. They are considered deadly because they squelch love. They are deadly to the flow of love into and out of our lives—which is why we’re looking at life-giving virtues or qualities, and practices, which open the flow of love.

This morning: Envy. And contentment—which leads to our next reading:

Philippians 4:10-13

10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

This is the word of the Lord.

One of my favorite films: Amadeus (won 8 academy awards, including best picture in 1984). It tells the story of Antonio Salieri, the court composer for the king of Austria and the most well-known composer in Europe in his day. Salieri

had committed, from childhood, his whole life—his industry, his heart's devotion—to praising God through music. It was his life, and his passion.

The king (of Austria) hears about a talented young composer named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, brings him to Vienna and commissions an opera from him. Mozart ends up composing much more than that while he's there! And, while he was there it was discovered that Mozart was a somewhat irreverent party animal—a brash personality who was frequently found living it up during his time in Vienna.

But while Vienna, and much of Europe, realizes that Mozart is a fine composer, only Salieri recognizes that Mozart is not just a good composer—he is a genius; he's brilliant. He possesses other-worldly brilliance. His talent and boldness surpass all others, including his own, and Salieri sees that. Mozart composed music that no one at that time had even dreamed of.

And this is what begins to possess Salieri: how God could choose a brash, irreverent and irresponsible “creature” (as he calls him in the movie) to be his instrument for communicating his grace, with creative genius, while Salieri—who had devoted his whole life to the glory of God—had been given (in his opinion) only mediocre talent. He became obsessed with the unfairness of it. The injustice of it.

And it begins to drive him insane. At one point early on, Salieri commits himself to ruining Mozart's life and (to quote) "blocking God's incarnation." But in the end, Salieri ruined two lives. He did ruin Mozart's life, through his influence as court composer: Mozart died young, penniless, in a pauper's grave, and in relative obscurity. But he also ruined his own life: Salieri lived 30 more years to become a bitter old man; he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide, and died in an asylum.

All because of envy. Over the centuries, envy has appeared second on the list of 7 deadly sins, right after pride, which is always first. Some of the juicier sins like lust and anger are further down the list. But envy is often second. That may seem surprising, and we'll talk about why in a moment.

Webster's dictionary defines envy as: "discontent and ill will over another's advantage." Evagrius (4th century monk) defined it as "sadness over another's good." But I like Frederick Buechner's definition of envy (Buechner is a Presbyterian pastor, but has spent most of his career as a writer). His playful definition of envy: "the consuming desire to have everyone as unsuccessful as you are." Envy is a drag! Literally. It drags everyone down! It's no fun. The other sins, at least, have some element of fun or gratification. Envy is just a drag.

One way to detect envy in ourselves: if someone else's success or good fortune upsets me. St. Thomas Aquinas: "Love rejoices in our neighbor's good, while envy grieves over it."

Envy is related to pride—we might think of it as the underbelly of pride (which is why it's often #2 on the list)—because it is in both of their natures to compare oneself to others. Pride compares, and finds me superior. Envy compares and finds me inferior, but with a desire to be superior. Pride believes that God has favorite children and I'm one of them. Envy believes that God has favorite children and I'm not one of them, so I have it out for that other person who I think is favored. Think Cain & Abel. God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice, and that bothered Cain. Cain's sin was envy, which led to his murdering his brother.

So we might say that envy is pride in the making. Salieri wanted to be as talented as Mozart so he could be superior and have the praise of the people (all for God's glory, of course). But Salieri knew—rightly—that that kind of talent was only God-given, so if he couldn't have it, then he would work tirelessly to subvert the one who did have it.

On Thursday of Holy Week we will be remembering the night when Jesus sat at table with his disciples. And we remember that part of the conversation at

the table was an argument over who will be greatest—and who gets to sit at Jesus' right and his left in the Kingdom. Even after Jesus' rather laborious reiteration of the meaning and importance of servanthood, even after he kneels before them with basin and towel and washes their feet, there is still a competitive spirit that wants to establish who is #1. As Methodist bishop William Willimon so playfully but truthfully put it: it's not just the dumb barnyard chickens that have pecking orders.

Why is envy on the list of 7, and so high on the list? Because when I have envy, I care more about what *others* think of me than what God thinks of me, and I lack the ability to give thanks to God for what I **do** have, and for who I am and who he has made me to be, and to become. It makes me blind to the good gifts that God has given me—while I might try to subvert the gifts that God has given someone else.

So, as we've been saying with all of the sins, it blocks God's love and the flow of his blessings into and out of our lives. 1Cor.13 (famous love chapter): “Love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy...” I never noticed how high it is on Paul's list too! Envy is self-debilitating. And God does not want us to be debilitated. God wants us to thrive, in who we are and who he has made us to be and to become, and to be content and grateful for what he has given us.

Envy debilitates. Our expression “green with envy” denotes that, historically, envy has been personified as a sickly person. Gaunt & tense—because we depart from our true self and become almost obsessed with the success or good fortune of another. And the movie’s portrayal of Antonio Salieri reflected that very well.

If I have envy—if someone else’s success or good fortune upsets me—it leads to one of two roads, usually:

1. Despair. Like the college professor who reads his alumni magazine and sees all the achievements of his classmates and then derives his estimation of himself from that publication, and after reading it quits his job as professor and begins a quest to look up all these classmates and find out why they are so successful and he is not (in his eyes). And he begins travelling down the road of despair.
2. The other road that envy leads to is criticism and judgment (it’s a parallel road). We begin to dissect another person critically rather than celebrate their success (and our success). Show me the person who constantly criticizes someone, and I’ll show you the person whose ambition has been frustrated because of envy.

The other side of envy is when someone's *failure* brings us satisfaction; when we are glad to see someone fail or fall. There is a German word, "Schadenfreude," which describes an emotion of delight in the failure or misfortune of another. Schadenfreude translated literally into English means 'harm-joy.' When someone else's harm causes me joy.

The deadly sin of envy is not "I want what they have," though we need to be careful about that too (that is perhaps more related to greed or coveting). The deadly sin of envy is, "God, I don't like what you've given me. I feel shortchanged. You've only been good to that person and not to me." It creates ingratitude and blindness to God's blessings to us.

Antonio Salieri thought that the gift he was supposed to have was to become a composer like Mozart; and because he wasn't, he didn't think he had anything to offer—he thought he had no gifts. Because of his envy he became blind to the 2 great gifts he did have:

1. He **was** a fine composer. The best known in Europe at the time. He was the court composer for the king of Austria. In the city of Vienna, the city of musicians! What an honor! But he couldn't see it. He became blind to that gift.

2. In all of Europe, Antonio Salieri was the only man to recognize Mozart's genius. That was a gift. No one else heard what he heard when he listened to Mozart. And that's a great gift—to recognize brilliance where others can't. It occurred to me: how many more Mozart operas & symphonies & vaudevilles would we have today if Salieri had chosen to accept this gift of seeing Mozart's brilliance, *and affirming it*. And Salieri himself would have been better off and probably would've learned how to become a better composer himself.

It reminds me of the Biblical equivalent of this story: King Saul, who recognized the talent and leadership of young David. He saw it. But instead of mentoring David and celebrating what God was doing in David's life, Saul became jealous and tried to kill David. He saw him as a threat rather than an ally.

The cry of envy is "It isn't fair!" A brother or sister's achievement is better than ours. It isn't fair! Someone else gets the promotion at work. It isn't fair! A classmate is more athletic and successful at the sport *I* love and want to be good at. It isn't fair! God loves Abel's sacrifice and brother Cain says "It isn't fair."

And God's response to all of this is: You're right. It isn't fair. But I never promised fairness. I *have* promised faithfulness. I have promised grace to all desire to receive it. But even grace, when you think about it, isn't fair. If it was fair, it wouldn't be grace, right?

The bible is full of this truth. In the parable of the talents (which we will look at after Easter), one worker got 5, one got 2, another got 1. That's not fair. But notice: it doesn't say that someone got zero talents. Everyone gets something; and it's generous: just one talent is equivalent to at least 10 years' wages for a day laborer; that's a lot! But the one talent guy compared himself to others and said it's not fair! And he buries his talent. He can't see what he was given; only what more the others were given.

Parable of the all-day workers (Matthew 20). Some worked all day, some worked just a few hours, some worked less, and then comes along someone who only works one hour. The boss pays all of them exactly the same wage at the end of the day (talk about grace!). And the cry of the all-day workers is: it's not fair! The boss says, I know! That's right! He is the God-figure in the story. And he says to those who are upset (and here is the great punch line at the end of the parable): "Am I not allowed to do

what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? You received exactly what I said I would pay you. I kept my word. Take what you have been given, and go.”

The best story of the recklessness and unfairness of God’s grace is the prodigal son story. The older brother cries “It’s not fair” when the father not only welcomes the younger brother home, but throws a grand party for him. The older son is throwing his own party: a pity party out in the field; and the father graciously and lovingly comes out to the older son and talks to him, and takes his focus off of the younger brother (in other words, he tries to separate the older son’s object of envy from him—which is a great strategy: “let’s not talk about him, and what I gave him; let’s talk about *you* right now”) and the father then reminds the older son of what he has; he says to him, “You are always with me, and all I have is yours.” He’s reminding him how much he has—and it’s stunning: “all I have is yours.”

I worked alongside a pastor years ago when I was just beginning in ministry, and he always kept a deck of playing cards in his pocket. When he went to visit people, he might start a game of gin rummy or something like that. During the course of playing some card game, the person might complain about being dealt a bad hand; maybe would throw the cards

down. At the appropriate time Dave might say to them, “Ya, that was a bad hand you were dealt. It looks like you’re feeling like you’ve been dealt a bad hand in life right now. Are you just going to give up on that too?” It became a living parable: having a full life is not always having a good hand, but in playing the hand we **have** been dealt as best as we can. Without giving up or giving in, or getting upset about the hand that someone else has been dealt.

The apostle Paul calls this contentment—the antidote for envy—the ability to play the hand you’ve been dealt, with gratitude. In the Philippians reading, Paul says I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have a little; I know what it is to have a lot. I have learned the secret of being content. And then in verse 13 he says: I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. Looking to Christ alone (as opposed to looking at others) created in him an ability to give thanks and be content. To see God as generous, and himself as blessed.

Envy may be further defined as counting someone else’s blessings instead of your own. Counting others’ blessings is a burden. So, as an antidote to envy, count *your* blessings, but don’t just count them; savor

them. Don't just count your blessings, savor them. Delight in them. Enjoy them. See how good God has been, and is, to you. Give thanks.

Psalm 16: Lord, you have assigned my portion and my cup; the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.

Contentment is the ability to say “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” Right now the boundary lines might be in tight, and at other times the boundary lines might be out wide—like Paul: sometimes plenty, sometimes little. It might be more about relationships or my abilities than about my things or my successes. We Americans tend to define success and contentment in terms of our bank accounts and our possessions or our achievements. Many cultures around the world define success in terms of relational riches and inner riches. It’s more about who I am and who I am in relationship with.

But however we define it, it’s good to take inventory of our lives and say, “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” To look around us and say, God *has* been good to me.

And, in the grand scheme of things, in light of eternity, the only real possession that matters is the Lord. I have the Lord, or, the Lord has me.

"I keep the Lord always before me," David says (v.8). "The *Lord* is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot" (v.5). "Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." In other words, I shall try to learn to be content. I can have nothing, yet have everything.

And he ends the Psalm with these words that reflect the physical and emotional benefits of having the Lord as our possession (or, our being in the *Lord's* possession). He says, "Therefore my *heart* is glad, and my *soul* rejoices, and my *body* also rests secure (heart, soul, and body). You show me the path of life, and in your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Who wouldn't want that?!?

Savor your blessings, and savor the Lord's love and goodness toward you , so that in the end we can say with contentment: whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, 'it is well, it is well with my soul.' And, we can praise God for God's faithfulness.

Great is Thy Faithfulness