

Seven Deadly Sins: Envy

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 4:1-16

So we are back again for another deadly sin, this time it's envy. Just a reminder before we read this story, all of these sins are disordered loves. We are made to love, and all these sins twist love out of its proper shape. Let's read Genesis 4:1-16 and let's see what it teaches us about this deadly sin.

If you want to understand the source of envy, you've got to start with these words: "*The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast.*" It begins when Cain saw that Abel was blessed and realized that he did not have the same blessing.

Why did the Lord favor Abel's offering, and not Cain's? I don't think it was because Cain's offering was so terrible. There is some suggestion in the passage that Abel's sacrifice was more intense than Cain's. While Cain offered some of his produce, Abel offers the fat portions of the firstborn. But there is no suggestion in the text that Cain offered moldy cabbage and shriveled Carrots. I think Cain's offering was probably just as sincere as the offerings of treasure and worship that we bring on Sunday mornings. I think there's a better way to look at the difference between the brothers. In this story, Cain experiences what we all experience in the trenches of life. Cain finds out that *God loves all his children equally, but his gifts are not equally distributed.* Some people seem to get more gifts than others.

Cain works hard in his fields. He plants his crops and says his prayers and makes his offerings, but his business just does OK. The harvests have been so-so. This year's carrots crop was puny because of the poor rains. And a late frost took out most of his apples. It's a struggle.

Meanwhile Abel is killing it. His sheep population has doubled in just two years. His cows are fat and happy, and business is booming. God is smiling on his younger brother, and to Cain that just doesn't seem fair. "So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast."

God loves everyone equally, but the gifts are not equally distributed. You work your head off in school and choose a career as a teacher. You work for 15 years in a Christian School, accepting a lower salary for the sake of the Kingdom. After 15 years enrollment goes down and you find yourself out of a job. Meanwhile your brother parties his way through school, drops out of college, and takes a job as kazoo salesman. He sells kazoos and noisemakers and plastic trinkets to novelty shops, and now he controls the market in the entire Midwest. He makes a fortune. Spends half the year in Caribbean. It doesn't seem fair.

You and your husband want nothing more than to have a baby, you pray about it, long for it, see doctors to make it happen, but the blessing never comes. Meanwhile in California there's this couple on the news who are blessed with 10 children whom they abuse and mistreat in the worst way. It doesn't seem fair. One child in the first grade class is graced with looks and brains and social graces; the other child drags around a learning disability. It doesn't seem fair.

God loves everyone equally, but the gifts are not evenly distributed. So one of life's big questions is: 'How do you keep loving when you are the one on the wrong end of the gift distribution? How do you handle inequality if you got the short straw?'

Cain does not handle it well. He is angry and his face is downcast. Please notice that God sees his struggle and tries to help him. God comes to him and makes it very clear that he hasn't been rejected. It is not that God doesn't love him or is unwilling to bless him. God essentially tells him, "Hey...I'm still with you! I'm still here! Stay on the path and do right and you will be fine!"

Does that calm Cain down? Does God's attempt to get Cain back on the right track cheer him up? Nope. It seems to make him angrier. Cain cannot stand this uneven distribution of gifts and so, with fake smile to cover his seething heart, Cain lures Abel out into the field, and he kills him.

The sin that causes him to kill his brother is envy. Envy arises out of the inequalities of the world. In a broad sense, envy is a failure to love in the face of life's inequalities. When a person is overcome by envy she is so outraged by the inequality between herself and another that she wants to bring the other person down.

Let me go through some of envy's central features.

Envy is a completely miserable sin. Some of the deadly sins offer initial pleasure, and *then* make you miserable. Think greed and lust and anger. Envy is miserable from the get go. As Proverbs 14:30 sees this. It says: "a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." And here's what the rot looks like: An envious person is miserable at other people's success, and happy when they fail. So when you are in an envious state of mind, good and evil have actually switched places in your value system. Bad things make you happy and good things make you sad! Abel has done nothing but good! His success hasn't hurt Cain at all! And yet, watching Abel be good, watching him smile and succeed makes Cain seethe. You know envy is rotting your bones when God blesses someone, and that blessing makes you seethe.

And yet, we've all been in that place. Say one of you Orchestra kids has a class at school where you have to give a speech. You're nervous about it, because...well...it's a speech. In front of real people. And right before you go one of your classmates gives her speech and she's amazing. People lean forward in their seats, they laugh, and at the end they applaud. Right before your speech! Are you happy about that? Or would it have given you more pleasure if she'd clunked? Unless you are further down the road of sanctification than me, there is part of you that's pained by your classmate's success. That pain is envy's rot in your bones.

Envy is always aimed at another's person. This is why it's different from covetousness. If I covet something, I want what the other person has. When I covet my neighbor's sports-car I want the sports-car; my focus is on the car. When I envy my neighbor I want him to crash his sports-car. I want him to be miserable. When you envy someone you don't want their stuff; you want their failure, their misery, their fall.

There's a story that Victor Hugo apparently told. In the story Envy receives an offer from a powerful genie. The genie says, 'I will give you anything you desire on one condition: everyone else in the world will get double portion of what you receive.' Envy stewed and brooded and then smiled a thin smile. "Make me blind in one eye," he said.

Here we are getting close to Envy's darkest place. At root of envy is hatred of God and his gifts. In this story who is Cain really angry at? Is he angry at Abel? Or is he angry at God? It's God. He is furious with the way God has distributed the gifts between himself and his brother. He's furious at God for the inequality. When he kills his brother, it's not Abel he's trying to hurt, it's God, God who did not favor his offering, God who didn't bless him like his brother. Abel just happens to be there right in front of

him; a smiling pink-cheeked evidence of God's unfairness! I'm sure that if God were right there in front of him, if he could actually get his hands on God, he wouldn't have wasted time whacking his brother. It would have been God he struck down in the field, or, who knows, maybe pressed a crown of thorns into his head and nailed him to a cross.

This is the brilliant insight at the heart of the movie *Amadeus*. That movie is essentially a case study of envy. I don't have time to explain the whole movie, but it centers around the composer Antonio Salieri's envy of Mozart. He can't stand Mozart because he thinks Mozart is an immature buffoon, and yet God has given him this transcendent talent! Talent that he, Salieri wants more than anything. In the movie Salieri does all sorts of nasty hostile things toward Mozart but the true object of his wrath is revealed in a chilling scene. As he takes his crucifix off his wall and lays it in the fire, Salieri says, "From now on we are enemies, you and I. Because You choose for Your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy and give me for reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation. Because You are unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block You, I swear it. I will hinder and harm Your creature on earth as far as I am able." Outraged by the unequal distribution of gifts, Envy rebels against God by maiming his good works. Envy is truly a doorway to hell.

How does one fight this deadly sin? There are lots of old and very important preventative measures. The most obvious is gratitude. Envy wants to focus on your deficits, the places where you are behind your neighbor. Gratitude tends to keep its eye on your blessings, the MANY things God has given you. Simply starting your daily prayers with thanksgiving and adoration instead of launching into your needs will focus you on the FACT that you are blessed and the love of God is coming your way all the time, every day.

You could also watch your comparisons. Don't compare yourself up, compare yourself down. Don't compare yourself to those people who live in those really nice places in East Grand Rapids; compare yourself to the people in Syria or in Yemen. Instead of looking with longing at the people who have more, look with compassion on the people who have less.

You could compliment potential rivals. Compliment people close to you: colleagues, teammates, siblings who do or achieve wonderful things. Do it even if you don't feel like it so much. Thank them personally and thank God for them. Here's the mindset you're aiming for: In *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis says: "You want to get to a place where it would make no difference to you if the greatest cathedral in the world was designed by you, or by another architect in your firm...you're just happy that something so good and so beautiful has appeared in the world."

I know. That sounds impossible. Who would ever actually feel like that? If a person was to ever feel like that they would have to be totally remade inside; they have to be like new creations. Well, exactly. You will never beat envy with a set of Spiritual disciplines; you can only conquer envy when the Holy Spirit remakes you. You can only conquer envy when the unconditional love of Jesus poured out on the cross, washes you clean and turns your heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

You can see God pouring out some of that unconditional love in our passage. Cain lashes out at him. Cain kills his beloved Abel. And the pain of that loss appear to be ongoing for God! Remember that detail in the text, God says he hears Abel's blood crying out from the ground. Like it's ringing in his ears. Like he never stops hearing Abel's fearful cry. Like he's a parent who's seen his child murdered.

God has every right to demand Cain's life, but what does God do? He protects him. He doesn't allow others to seek revenge on Cain, even with the cry of Abel's blood ringing in his ears, he absorbs the pain and gives Cain undeserved life. It's an amazing foreshadowing of the cross where Jesus will take the full force of humanity's rage and pain will absorb it into himself, pouring out instead a river of

grace that will give life to a whole bunch of undeserving people. We may not be equal in this world, but in Christ we all have enough. And when you know that you are standing in the flow of that river of undeserved grace, you can get the short straw in life, and still find the strength to love.

Consider Josephine Bakhita, a young girl from Sudan whom the Catholic Church calls the patron saint of Sudan. Josephine is someone who got the short straw. When she was a young girl, slave traders took her from her native Sudan. She went to Italy where she served a Venetian family. When Italy abolished slavery, they gave her the chance to go back to the Sudan, but by then she had experienced the kindness of some nuns in the city. The nuns treated her well and told her about the love of Jesus. So, when she was freed, instead of going back to Sudan she chose to become a member of their order. She spent the rest of her life doing simple chores in the convent. She cooked, she sewed, and she was the one who let people in the front door. She minded the door. She did that simple thing with her whole heart. She greeted everyone who came through the door with a hearty hug, a kiss on the top of the head and the gift of her overflowing love. Josephine wrote no great works, and made no great speeches. All she did was love people really, really well. This despite of the meagerness of her beginnings. When she died, everyone realized that her small love had made an enormous impact. She was a living example of the truth articulated much later by Mother Theresa, "In this life we cannot do great things; we can only do small things with great love." And if I can add to Mother Theresa's words...we can do these small things because of the great love poured out on us small people in Jesus Christ our Lord.