

Envy or Grace?

(Matthew 20:1-15)

In Dante's Poem *The Divine Comedy* there is a scene depicting those governed by envy. Those afflicted by this sin are clothed in coarse garments and sit among the rocks like pitiful blind beggars, each leaning on a neighbor's shoulder. They hear sounds around them, but they do not see. Their eyelids have been sewn shut with iron wire.

Dante depicts the envious as blind. They cannot see the light that surrounds them. Their blindness is no accident. It results from the many times they chose not to recognize life as a gift freely given to everyone even as the daylight is a gift. The envious always wanted what others had. They could not celebrate the gifts those others had received. They closed their eyes to the light of a shared life and sewed them shut.

As I was thinking about how envy weaves its tangled web in my own soul I recognize that not only does it lead me to become pre-occupied with who others are and what others have, but it also blinds me from seeing how God's grace touches my life.

Envy is like flatulence that at times catches me by surprise and at others times I choose not to control. It so fills the air with its foul odor overpowering my other senses. Not only does it make my surroundings unpleasant, but when under its influence those near to me catch its stink too!

How about you? In your day to day life do you struggle with keeping envy at bay so that you can be governed by the grace of God? Envy or grace? Which will govern how we live today?

Jesus teaches us in the parable for today that as his disciples we need to be on guard against this sin, which Christians in earlier centuries classified as one of the seven most deadly sins.

In the parable that Jesus tells about a labor-management dispute we hear the following. It seems that a vineyard owner pays his whole crew a full day's wage whether they worked for only an hour or spent all day slaving in the summer

heat. Those who worked a full day are enraged. They call the owner's action unjust.

The owner sees it differently. The all-day workers have not been cheated. He has rescued them from idleness, they have received the agreed-upon wage, and they have enough to live on. The vineyard owner looks with compassionate eyes on the other workers. He knows that they also need a full day's wage in order to get by. The wage he pays them represents a fresh start, new life for those who have borne the heavy burden of unemployment through the long hours of the day.

Yet the all-day workers know only the arithmetic of strict justice. Though they receive what they expect and what they need, they want to deny life's necessities to others. Their eyes are sewn shut by envy. They no longer see the human faces of their neighbors. They no longer know what it is to be governed by grace.

How sad are the eyes of the envious, their lids sewn shut with wire! They sew their eyes shut themselves, and find no pleasure in the work. As Henry Fairlie notes in his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, "If all sins are loveless, Envy's eyes are particularly so. They seem to find nothing to love in all the world, not in the whole of creation, not in anyone else, not even when they are turned up to what is lovely. The other sins have been celebrated, however perversely, in popular song down the ages, but Envy has no song. It does not sing; it cannot bear to look, except through its slit eyes; it is unable to love, because it is riddled with fear." [Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 68.]

Envy is unable to love. That has its sad result.

It closes the heart:

All sins make the heart hard, but envy goes further. In the words of one religious classic, envy "frets and gnaws the very heart of him that harbors it." [The Whole Duty of Man (c. 1658).] Envy does not simply makes us indifferent to God, but envy causes us to murmur against God, for when we become sad because someone else experiences good, then we are saddened by God, who is the author of all good, and what we speak against is his mercy.

Peter and the other disciples had a spirituality that was governed by this kind of thinking. In chapter 19 at verse 27 he asks Jesus: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Peter is like those hired at 6:00 a.m. He was looking for a better payoff because he and the eleven had left everything to follow Jesus. Peter you see was thinking about his faith not as a response to the grace Jesus had shown him but as a labourer who has given up so much to follow Jesus and is now waiting for a better payoff.

So Jesus warns the twelve apostles with this parable. Peter don't cultivate that kind of spirituality. If you do you will be one of those hardened bitter and unhappy people who choose to reject grace for yourself and make a stink when you see others receive it. What's it going to be Peter? Envy or Grace?

When envy touches each of us, we too have a strange urge to shut our eyes and sew them together with iron wire so that we no longer see daylight or the splendor of creation or the face of Christ in our neighbor.

I would like to suggest a two-fold remedy for this.

i) First, we must practice thankfulness to God.

Thank God not only for what is rich and rare, but also for what is plain and ordinary, and you will find that glory flashes in every plain place, that God leaves no day or hour unvisited. Become proficient in thankfulness, and you will experience abundance. It is not that the world will change, but that your eyes will be open.

With Paul we will see our life as the venue where our work is done in such a way where we are not competing with others but sharing in their lives. Look at what he writes at verse 25 and 26 of Philippians chapter 1:

"I know that I will remain with you and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again." Paul is governed here by grace that grows out of thankfulness. Look at verse 3 of this chapter. There, Paul writes "I thank my God" and then spends the rest of this chapter and indeed the whole book telling his readers why he is thankful. He is delighted to see how these fellow Christians are growing in the faith so that rather than boasting to them

about how superior he is to them he wants to boast with them.

ii) The other remedy to envy is to show kindness to others.

This we must do if we are to escape from envy. Show kindness, and the less people deserve it, the better. Do not reserve your courtesy for saints. Take God as your example, who makes the sun shine on good and bad alike. Pray the most for those you like the least. This may be the blowtorch needed to soften your heart, to make it pliable again. Practice kindness, and you will find community, but not in the way you expected. And through that difference, your healing will happen.

Kindness and thankfulness do not originate with us. They are only responses to what we hear in our hearts. And when we hear the gospel clearly rather than seeing faith as a payoff we will see more clearly God's gracious favour. May we learn to pray to God more regularly words that express the following theology "Father in heaven because you have been and are gracious to me in Jesus Christ, help me to cultivate a gracious spirit in my dealings with others." As we cultivate our faith in this way we will be able to listen carefully to the question that today we heard in Scripture: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

"Are you envious because I am generous?" This question, once asked of irate workers, can lead us from murmuring to thankfulness. It can cause us to rejoice in a generosity that originates with God and can be extended to everyone. It can lead us from condemnation to kindness. The generosity we rejoice in becomes the spring and source of what we do.

When envy shuts our eyes, as it does from time to time, we must listen with our hearts. Kindness and thankfulness offer the way to new sight so that the aroma of grace fills our lives.

Envy or grace? Which will you choose today?