

## Envy



The Letter of St. James 3:13 "Who is wise . . . among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with . . . wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above . . . For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness ~~of every kind~~. But the wisdom from above is ~~first~~ pure, ~~then~~ peaceable, gentle, ~~willing to yield~~, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

The most common word for sin in the New Testament is the Greek word, "amartia," which is actually an archery term which roughly translates as "missing the mark." In archery, we aim for

the bull's eye, but we often miss the mark! Thus, sin can be seen as a good human intention that simply misses its mark, a basic human instinct gone awry. This is true for all sins, I believe, including envy, about which St. James writes in today's reading.

For the whole of this month, we have had a series of sequential readings from St. James. In his letter, James is highlighting how we are to live as Christians. We are to "not to be hearers of the Word only, but doers" he wrote in the reading three weeks ago, where he encouraged his readers "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Two weeks ago, he warned us against showing partiality among the faithful, especially to the guest who arrives in gold rings and fine clothes as compared to the one who comes in dirty. Last week, he advised his readers to bridle their tongues. Next week he will encourage us to care for the sick and suffering. In today's reading, he warns us against bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Envy is one of the Seven Deadly Sins according to the Christian tradition, a tradition that goes back all the way to Tertullian in the late second century. Envy is often associated with selfish ambition and covetousness. Sometimes the sins of envy and covetousness are labeled as jealousy and avarice, and the two are so closely related that many people are confused between them. I once heard it explained that one envies people and covets

things. Either way these sins derive from a basic human instinct that we all share to some extent or another --- that is, the simple desire to be good enough, to be accepted and valued, as we are.

One thing to note about envy is that it usually occurs only among equals. For instance, I am not a scientist, so I am not likely to feel envy for a sixty-year-old biologist who has just received the Nobel Prize for science. However, I am likely to feel some envy towards a fellow priest with whom I went to Seminary who has just been elected bishop because of his renowned preaching and pastoral sensitivity. Envy is a sin among equals, and it is common to all groups of people. If we listen to a discussion among any gathering of colleagues or peers, we are bound to detect some envy from time to time.

And since envy is a sin among equals, among our coworkers and family and friends, it is particularly divisive and cruel. For it breaks up and disrupts the very groups from which we are seeking approval. It upsets our relationships with those we most care about. Look at gossip, for instance, an early sign of envy according to Thomas Aquinas, gossip seeks to diminish the success of a colleague's achievement by focusing instead upon their failures or shortcomings, even if they are totally irrelevant to the achievement. When we hear of the good fortune of a friend or peer we may say one thing, but often feel quite another, we often

feel a pinch of envy, because somehow their achievement makes us feel diminished in some way. We can express our delight at their success, but we can also become embittered and disdainful at our apparent failure to achieve the same success. Envy can produce in us a sense of dejection, that we don't have what they have, and we are thus less acceptable than they are.

The temptation to envy comes whenever someone is suspected of living more successfully or abundantly than we are, a bigger house, a faster car, a larger paycheck. And there is a wealth of truth in the saying "I am consumed with envy." For envy is seriously consuming, devouring our spiritual and mental well-being, often our happiness as well, without producing any positive result or outcome at all. The deeply envious person will thus never really be happy, as envy's eternal itch slowly drives them mad, for we never seem to have enough, you can never be too rich or too thin, and we are thus always envious or covetous for more and more. Someone is always wealthier, or more beautiful, or smarter than us.

Aesop in one of his famous fables illustrates this point well. In the story, Zeus, the chief of the gods, grants to an envious man the fulfillment of any wish that he cares to make, no matter how large the request might be, he can ask for anything, but on the sole condition that his neighbor would get twice as much of whatever was asked for. The envious man in the fable

simply could not bear the thought of his neighbor benefiting so and getting more than he got, even though he himself could get so very much of whatever he wanted. So, in the end, the envious man wished for only one thing, for the loss of sight in one of his eyes, for that would make his neighbor blind.

The root of both envy and covetousness lies in our terrible sense of inadequacy and inferiority. Envy is a deadly sin because it tries to take away someone else's good fortune, or to demean their success with gossip or malice, simply so that we may feel better about ourselves. Those who are really covetous often try to buy off their own self-doubts and insecurities with the accumulation of status symbols, to try and prove our worth to others, and to ourselves. We try to remove our inward doubts by surrounding ourselves with all the trappings or signs of success. We brag about our standard of living, measured by the food and drink we enjoy, the possessions we have amassed, the important friends we have, the exotic holidays we enjoy, and so forth. In this way, our "lives" are measured then solely by the outward appearances of our daily life, and not by the true inner movements of our hearts or our spirit, as Jesus, and now James have suggested.

And the things we buy or covet, in the end, do not meet our real human needs, they miss the mark, so that any momentary sense of satisfaction quickly fades away. And then we think that we

simply need more and more. Much of our advertising plays upon this fact, as it constantly holds out the promise of mystical satisfactions if only we purchase the newer and improved version of one thing or another. But this too never meets our real human needs, so we simply go on wanting more and more and more. Often, we are either in the gnawing and lonely bitterness of envy or in the itching compulsive desires of covetousness, and at the bottom of both sins is that same cause; that overwhelming sense of inadequacy and our deep-seating human longing to simply be accepted and appreciated and valued for who we are. We are all in this situation. It is a part of our human nature.

Our mean old envies and our pathetic sins of covetousness come from a source that, deep down, is only satisfied by the real object of our longing --- which is God's love and acceptance. The real answer to these sad little sins is the saving acceptance that we are indeed loved by God as we are, sinners though we may be. God does not have to be, indeed cannot be, impressed by the multitude and magnificent of our achievements. And still God accepts us all as we are, with all our weaknesses and inadequacies and failures. No one else really does. No one else really can. For only God fully knows us as we are, even when we may not be acceptable in our own eyes. Thus, acknowledging God's love of us is the only really lasting answer to this basic human desire. Only with the knowledge that we are accepted by God can we gradually

learn to relax and accept ourselves. And when we do so, then we can accept that the successes of others do not endanger our self-worth, and thus we can rejoice with our friends' good fortune without seeing it as a threat to us. Jesus said that he came that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly, a life, I imagine, without envy or covetousness. AMEN