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“Giving Up Envy”

Luke 15:25-32

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Now his elder son was in the field. When he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on.

The servant replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound."

Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I've been working for you like a slave, and I've never disobeyed your command. Yet you've never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that's mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found."

Luke 15:25-32

The religious hermit is so Christian, so pure, and so holy that the evil spirits sent to tempt him end up defeated and discouraged. They cannot break him. They try all kinds of temptations and every temptation fails.

Satan scolds the evil spirits, "Your methods are crude. Give me one minute."

Satan goes to the holy hermit and says, "Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria."

That got him.

“My brother, Bishop of Alexandria.”

Envy swept through him like a tidal wave. (Oscar Wilde)

A psychologist asked a crowded auditorium, “Would you rather have a \$50,000 salary when everyone else is making \$25,000, or have a \$100,000 salary when everyone else is making \$200,000?”

What do you think? Half the crowd raised their hands asking for the smaller salary. They would rather have less, if it means they have more than others (Happiness Lab podcast).

Our culture runs on envy. Facebook and Instagram are all about envy. The goal is to outdo our rivals, even when we pretend it is not. Twitter tears down anyone who accomplishes anything. We have trouble admiring or being grateful for anything we do not have. We want to pull it down to our level.

We look for the dark side of famous people. No one gets to stay on a pedestal. We look for the worst. A good person must be covering something. A good deed must have an ulterior motive. A good marriage must have hidden strains.

Professional jealousy is worst among equals. Brokers are not jealous of speed skaters, but other brokers. Lawyers are not jealous of painters, but other lawyers. Preachers are the worst. When we hear someone else’s sermon, we rearrange it, correct the grammar, critique the theology, and shorten it by five minutes.

We ask mean-spirited questions like, “Why would anyone preach on the seven deadly sins?”

We know about envy. We understand schadenfreude—pleasure at another’s disappointment. We know about unnecessary criticism. We have a keen eye for others’ flaws. We know “the consuming desire to have everybody as unsuccessful as we are” (Frederick Buechner).

For reasons that make no sense, we feel less in the presence of others’ success. We take satisfaction in others’ difficulties. We read false motives into others’ behavior. We talk behind others’ backs. We collect gossip. Even if we do not remember middle school and haven’t watched Mean Girls, we know about envy.

We resent the recognition others receive. We notice. We keep score. The unfairness of almost everything makes us envious of almost everything.

Why did your co-worker, who shows up at 9:30 and takes two-hour lunches, get the promotion? Why couldn’t you have had your favorite aunt for your mother? Why is Kim Kardashian famous? What is her talent?

Envy may be the ugliest of the seven deadly sins. The other sins have some early pay off, some fun at the beginning, but envy is miserable from start to finish. Envy is an endless disparagement of others, but it is also an endless disparagement of our self. Envy is self-despising and self-destructive.

Victor Hugo told of envy being offered whatever they wished on the condition that the other person receive a double portion. Envy replied, “I wish to be blind in one eye.”

Envy makes us feel like have-nots and keeps us from seeing what we have. When we feel envy, we do not feel gratitude, love, and contentment. Envy keeps us from

being happy, but we insist on preferring envy to joy.

Jesus looks at the crowd gathered to listen and sees people who prefer envy to joy. He sees older brothers jealous of a party thrown for their younger brothers.

Jesus says, once upon a time there is a father who has two very different sons. The younger is unreliable. The older is dependable and jealous of his unreliable little brother. One day the older brother overhears his irresponsible little brother ask their father for money, so he can go out on his own.

The older brother thinks: “Now, he’s gone too far. Dad’s gonna’ hit the roof.”

But to his disappointment, his father writes the biggest check any of them has ever seen. The younger son slaps a “Party Animal” bumper sticker on the back of his camel and rides off. The older brother does not say a word. With his baby brother gone, he has more work to do, though not much more.

He works in the field all day every day. He thinks about how much fun his brother is having. Each night he falls asleep exhausted and envious, only to get up early the next morning to do it all again. One evening as he comes in from the field, he hears music—the first music he has heard since his brother left.

He smells charcoal briquettes and asks a servant what is going on: “Your brother’s returned and your father’s having a barbecue.”

“Are you kidding me? This lazy idiot demands his inheritance, takes the money to Atlantic City, blows every cent on booze and bad women, and when he comes slithering home, our father throws a party.”

If the father wants to take his hell-raising son back that is his business, but this homecoming should be sackcloth and ashes, not crepe paper and balloons. The fatted calf is not the only one who thinks this party is a bad idea.

The older brother confronts his father with the truth: "All these years I've worked hard. You've never given me a party."

The father wipes the sweat from his son's face: "You never asked."

The older brother stands in the yard feeling sorry for himself. The father asks his jealous son to come in and have some fun. The father turns toward the party he had hoped would bring his children back to life. The younger son has come out of the house with a drink in his hand. The music from the party hangs in the air between the three of them.

For just a moment, the father is no longer tired. There, between his two sons, the joy of his heart overflows into his feet. He begins to dance, hoping the music that he cannot resist will find the hearts of the two brothers and bring his children, his true inheritance, his delight, back to him. We do not have to be jealous, because the father is still dancing, inviting us to join the party.

In *The West Wing*, Ellie Bartlet envies her successful sisters, but her father says, "The only thing you ever have to do to make me happy is come home at the end of the day."

The father says to us, "The only thing you ever have to do to make me happy is come home at the end of the day."

The father hopes that elder brothers will understand that the father loves them, not because they are better than their younger brothers, but because they are God's children.

What would it be like if we stopped comparing? What if we believed that we have value that does not come from devaluing others? What if we gave up envy in favor of love? God loves us without qualifications—not because of our achievements—but because we are God’s children.

Envy begins with a sense of inferiority. If we see that God has given us the love we need, we do not have to feel inferior. We do not have to find our self-worth in the failures of others. While envy sees that God is generous to others, wisdom sees that God is generous to us. We give up on competition, because there is enough love to go around.

We get over envy by enjoying gifts that do not lend themselves to competition. Enjoy music. Take a walk. Appreciate art. Be a real friend. Share a real conversation. Learn something. Learn to appreciate without comparing. Look for the good of others. Do something kind and keep it a secret. Enjoy something good that does not feel diminished when we see that someone else enjoys it, too.

Chariots of Fire was one of those movies that won Best Picture and not many people saw. The 1981 film tells the story of the 1928 Olympics and two men with different ways of understanding competition. Harold Abrahams drives himself to win out of the fear of losing. He envies anyone who runs faster. He sees his competitors as enemies. He says, “If I can’t win. I won’t run.” When he does win, he does not enjoy it.

Eric Liddell runs for the love of running. He says, “When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.” When he runs, not just when he wins. He strives to run well and win, not in order to earn favor, but to revel in joy. He loves competition not because

he needs to win, but because he loves to run.

Living without envy removes the fear of failure and leads to more success. When we understand that we have been given all the grace we need, we lose our fear of being shortchanged. When we figure out that it is for our brother, our sister, then we join the party. We are family so we stop envying people and start enjoying them. We stop looking for what we do not have and start recognizing the love we share. We are delighted by others' beauty, success, and intelligence.

We spend less time figuring out how much money others have, and give more of our money away. We stop counting how many miles we have walked, and pay more attention to the fresh air that fills our lungs. We read fewer books in order to say, "I read this," and more for the sheer pleasure of the words. We spend less time comparing what is on the menu, and more time tasting the food. We stop pushing our children to be better than someone else's children, and enjoy the children we have. We stop comparing what we have to what others have.

In the 1840s, a poor family suffering through the Irish potato famine has no choice but sell the family farm and use the money to immigrate to New York. Their little village throws a farewell party. They have a great feast. There is bread and cheese. The wine flows. They dance.

When the party is drawing to a close their friends say: "Take the leftovers as our gift. You have a long voyage ahead of you. You don't have much money left. This food will sustain you."

The first week at sea the bread and cheese are wonderful, but the bread grows stale and the cheese

The children say, “Father, we can’t eat this anymore. It’ll make us sick. Everybody else is eating good food in the dining hall.”

The father replies, “How can you complain about our food? You know I have no money. Perhaps you can find someone who’ll give you food in exchange for work.”

The children are gone a long time before the father becomes worried and goes to look for them. A steward says that he directed the children to the dining hall and points the way. The doors to the dining hall are like the doors of a palace. Luxuriant carpet covers the floors and lavish tapestries the walls. Extravagant chandeliers hang from the ceiling.

At a huge wooden table the children sit stuffing themselves from the buffet. They have filled their plates with meat, vegetables, and chocolate cake.

The father is shocked: “How could you do this to me? I don’t have money like the other people on the boat. How can I pay for the food that you’ve eaten?”

“Father, you don’t understand. The meals are included in the price of passage.”

They have been eating stale bread and moldy cheese when they should have been feasting at the banquet table.

You and I will always be able to find something to envy, but we have been given all that we need to live with peace, contentment, and gratitude.

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