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Envy: Feeling Bitter When Others Have It Better
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Matthew 22:34-40
1 Peter 2:1-3

Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV), “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

1 Peter 2:1-3 (NRSV), “**Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.** Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

Every week in the news, we hear sad and sordid stories of human sin and failure broadcast for the world to see. This past week was no exception. The sinfulness of humanity is probably the easiest Christian doctrine to support because the evidence for it is all around us, everywhere we look. Today we’re beginning a new series in worship based on Rebecca DeYoung’s book *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Many Christians today have forgotten about or misunderstood the seven deadly sins: **envy, vainglory, sloth, avarice, anger, gluttony, and lust**. Perhaps that’s because the list is old—dating back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. It was originally designed to provide a roadmap for self-examination and a practical plan for spiritual development. The list was first called “the principal or capital vices.” The list of vices didn’t single out the worst sins. **It named perennial and persistent patterns of human temptation we all struggle with.** We don’t often use the language of virtues and vices any more. But early Christian communities used it to describe the process the apostle Paul talks about in his letter to the *Colossians* where he wrote (3: 5, 7-10), “Put to death therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also **rid yourselves** of all such things....**since you have taken off your old self** with its practices and **have put on the new self**, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

Paul says taking off and ridding ourselves of our old self and putting on our new self in Christ describes the movement of the Christian life for all of us. This process is called “sanctification.” For seven weeks, we’re going to walk together through this ancient pattern of how we grow in virtue. Virtue is something that’s sorely lacking and greatly needed in our world today. What Christians of the past have to say about the different ways sin can entangle us is as relevant today as the day they wrote it. We’ll look at each of the vices as well as the spiritual practices and attitudes that are remedies or antidotes to them that open us to the Holy Spirit’s work of creating our new self with Christlike virtues. God calls us to be transformed. My hope and prayer are that this series will help us all become more virtuous disciples of Jesus Christ.

Every week people are caught in the painful consequences of the seven deadly sins. If we wish to avoid them and live a life of Christian virtue where do we begin? The Roman poet Horace (65-8 BC) declared, **“To flee vice is the beginning of virtue.”** What exactly is a vice or a virtue? **A vice (or its counterpart, a virtue) is a habit or a character trait.** Virtues and vices are acquired moral qualities. We can cultivate habits or break them down over time through our repeated actions, which is **why we’re responsible for our character.** In our garage, we have a Flexible Flyer sled that’s about 45 years old. I got it for Christmas when I was a kid. It’s made of wood with metal runners. If you take a sled like that and try to go down a hill with freshly fallen snow, it doesn’t go very far or very fast. However, the more trips you go down the hill, the more the snow packs down making a smoother, faster trip downhill. Vices and virtues are habits, things we repeatedly do, and like a sled packing down snow, the more we do them the faster and farther we go, for good or for ill.

Virtues are habits or dispositions of character that help us live and act well as human beings and to be good people. **Vices** are destructive and corruptive habits that undermine our goodness of character and our living and acting well. Vices eat away at our ability to see things clearly, to live in healthy relationships with others, and to refrain from self-destructive patterns of behavior. Virtues and vices are both acquired and developed through practice. Our scripture is short, so I’d like to share part of it again. *1 Peter 2:1-3 (NRSV)*, **“Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.** Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

The first sin we’re discussing is envy, which is feeling bitter when others have it better. “Of all the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all.” Joseph Epstein. **The sin of envy centers on our need to be loved.** Envy makes us see earning and securing love as a competitive venture. Feeling loved and affirmed as a valuable person depends on how we rank **in comparison with others**, and there are no prizes for second place. When we’re in the grip of envy, we feel inferior. To be worth something or to be loved, then, we feel we must outdo others. Individuals in the grip of envy have various strategies, all of which involve belittling others in some way, or “taking them down a peg.” We want our rivals to be less than we are, or to have less than we have. In the end, these strategies show our lack of love for ourselves, for others, and even for God, whom we blame for unequally doling out the goods that earn us esteem. Envy is “dissatisfaction with our place in God’s order of creation, manifested in begrudging his gifts to others.” *St. Augustine’s Prayer Book*. In the worst cases, envy leads to hatred.

Envy is about our need to be unconditionally loved. It operates out of a lack—a lack of knowing about that kind of love and a lack of feeling that kind of love from God or accepting it as real and reliable. Envy’s connection to love makes it a serious vice, one that both reflects and inflicts serious damage on ourselves, on others, and on our relationship with God. **Envy reveals a lack of self-love and self-acceptance.** It exhibits itself in us whenever we want to

bring others down. “Envy moves from dejection to disparagement to destruction.” Os Guinness. **Only the unconditional love that God offers can heal an envious heart.**

What does it look like when we’re envious? Envy begins to fester in the heart, and then shows itself outwardly. But what are its usual symptoms? *St. Augustine’s Prayer Book* (a 20th century manual for confession) includes this list of envious behaviors:

- Offense at the talents, success or good fortune of others.
- Selfish or unnecessary rivalry or competition.
- Pleasure at others’ difficulties or distress.
- Belittling others.
- Ill-will
- False accusations
- Slander (saying something bad, even if true, in the open about someone)
- Backbiting (doing the same, but behind his or her back)
- Reading false motives into others’ behavior
- Initiation, collection or retelling of gossip
- Arousing, fostering or organizing antagonism against others
- Unnecessary criticism, even when true
- Teasing or bullying
- Scorn of another’s virtue, ability, shortcomings, or failings
- Prejudice against those we consider inferior, or who consider us inferior, or who seem to threaten our security or position
- Ridicule of persons, institutions or ideals.

These are classic symptoms of an envious heart. They’re the way we act when envy dominates our lives. It’s a little disconcerting to discover how many of them are a frequent part of our daily behavior. In the Christian tradition, the “poison fruit” of envy includes joy over another’s misfortune, unhappiness when another does well, and ultimately hatred of others and God. We might think “hatred of God” sounds a little extreme. But if we regularly feel scorn and bitterness toward the people God has made and the gifts God has given them, it’s a shorter step than we realize to scorning and despising their Creator. Envy leads us to belittle others, seek their evil, and even try to take them down ourselves. As many of the items on the list describe, envy is often expressed verbally, with gossip and backbiting (done behind the envied one’s back) or even with detraction (done to the envied one’s face). Put-downs are the bread-and-butter of Twitter feeds, too many politicians, and TV sitcoms, and

many of us can imitate them to a “T.” Is it just for laughs, or do we actually take pleasure in putting others down? When children tease or bully each other, it’s usually obvious that they are compensating for or covering up a lack of self-respect. When adults do this from envy, their lack of self-love is less obvious, but no less real.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a thirteenth century Italian Dominican friar, Catholic priest, and an immensely influential philosopher and theologian. He teaches **that envy is opposed to the virtue of Christian love. Love for God includes love of our neighbor (as we love ourselves).** This love is the remedy for envy. Just as these three loves go naturally together, so do the opposite three hatreds. The envier does not love herself, and her self-loathing quickly turns outward, making her unable to love her neighbor. And her inability to love her neighbor cannot but affect her ability to love God. There is a vicious spiral of hating here—and everyone, perhaps the envier herself most of all, gets hurt. Envy creates malice between us and others, envy causes us to resent God, and envy causes our own sense of inferiority and inadequacy to fester. John Chrysostom (died 407), the Archbishop of Constantinople said, **“As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man.”**

Envy is the enemy of love, the only thing that can save us from it. Envy is easily confused with other sins, like **covetousness and jealousy.** In everyday conversation, we often use these terms interchangeably. “You’re going to Hawaii for a 3-week vacation? I’m so jealous!” “I’m so envious of your new shirt! Where did you get it?” The **jealous person is distinguished** from the envious or covetous person by **being a have**, rather than a have-not. The jealous person has something good already, but desires to keep it—and jealousy flares when someone threatens to take that good thing away. Jealousy in its righteous form, the sense in which God can be jealous, is rooted in justice—in what is rightfully ours. Jealousy’s bad name comes from its selfish, paranoid and harmful forms, as when a jealous man exaggerates the threat to keep the woman he loves under his control, treats her like his property, or harms another person to get her back.

Unlike the jealous person, covetous and envious people start from the position of being have-nots. To covet your neighbor’s house requires that you **not have** the beautiful house they do have. **Covetousness is best distinguished from envy by being primarily about possessions.** The covetous person wants something he does not have, but is most concerned **with the thing**, and getting it for himself. If getting that thing means taking it away from another person, so be it, but his main aim is not to harm another, but to acquire something for himself. Because it is more focused on possessions than persons, covetousness tends not to degenerate into malice, spite, or delight in despoiling others of something good. **The greedy person** may want possessions, too, but he wants more, or enough to feel secure, or to have one just like his neighbor. The premise of covetousness—like envy and unlike greed—is that I want the very one you have, not that I merely want one just like yours.

As with covetousness, the envier also starts from a position of not-having, but the lack in this case is linked to her self-esteem—**her ability to love and value herself, and to recognize and accept unconditional love from others**. The not-having of something does not just leave the envier wanting that good. It leaves her feeling inferior, as if she is personally deficient or defective for having-not or having-less. This lack makes her feel less lovable, less admirable, less of a person. **This is why envy is usually personal and about love and identity**, like jealousy, but unlike the possession-oriented vices of greed and covetousness. Greed and covetousness can lead to stealing; envy and jealousy to more direct personal harm. In *Genesis 37*, Joseph's brothers didn't tear off his coat and keep it—they sold him into slavery to rid the family of him forever and almost killed him

It's important to grasp that envy is really about love. Envy concerns the ability to love and be loved at all. **We all need to be loved and we need to know that we are loved unconditionally.** Its connection to love is what makes envy a serious vice, one that both reflects and inflicts serious damage on the human heart. God's love for us and our seriously seeking to love one another is the antidote to the poison of envy. Poet W. H. Auden (English-American poet, 1907-1973) wrote, **"Then, since all self-knowledge tempts man into envy, may you...love without desiring all that you are not."** *Many Happy Returns*

Blessing: *Proverbs 14:30*, "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones." Embrace the will of God. Obey the call of God. Receive the power of God. Reflect the peace of God. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Share a time in your life when you were envious. What provoked it? What did/do I envy others for? How did/does it affect you? How was it related to your own sense of worth and your trust in God?
2. "The grass is always greener on the other side" seems to be a common theme in many people's lives. In your experience, what contributes to this attitude? How is our competitive lifestyle related to envy and our sense of worth?
3. Which relationships of yours with others are infected by comparisons? In which relationships of yours do you feel loved just for the person you are, without ever being compared to anyone else?
4. Spend the next day finding something to be grateful for in every encounter or event. Make a list and read through it again at the end of the day. Read *Psalms 139* and meditate on God's love for you—before you were born, before anyone knew you or judged you, before you did or accomplished anything. Spend five minutes at the beginning of each day thinking about how it feels to be loved like that and live the rest of your day out of that confidence.
5. Share a couple of things you've personally found helpful in fighting the sin of envy.

6. Spend the rest of the day (or week) offering only words of affirmation, encouragement, and gratitude to others. Silence any reputation-ruining talk you might be tempted to speak about them.