

The Seven Deadly Sins  
Envy – Sour Grapes  
1 Kings 21:1-16

Now Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. <sup>2</sup> And after this Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house, and I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." <sup>3</sup> But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." <sup>4</sup> And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him, for he had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food.

<sup>5</sup>But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?" <sup>6</sup> And he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money, or else, if it please you, I will give you another vineyard for it.' And he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" <sup>7</sup> And Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Arise and eat bread and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

<sup>8</sup>So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the leaders who lived with Naboth in his city. <sup>9</sup> And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. <sup>10</sup> And set two worthless men opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death." <sup>11</sup> And the men of his city, the elders and the leaders who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. As it was written in the letters that she had sent to them, <sup>12</sup> they proclaimed a fast and set Naboth at the head of the people. <sup>13</sup> And the two worthless men came in and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, "Naboth cursed God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones. <sup>14</sup> Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, "Naboth has been stoned; he is dead."

<sup>15</sup>As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money, for Naboth is not alive, but dead." <sup>16</sup> And as soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

This morning we come to the conclusion of our series on the 7 Deadly Sins as we look at the sin of envy.

If you remember from last week, I suggested to you a contrast between greed and envy.

Greed comes from a lack of contentment, and is the avaricious zeal to acquire more stuff. Greed is about having more possessions

Envy on the other is about rivalry. Envy makes the same observation as Greed – you have more stuff than I do. Or really, it's more accurate to say that Envy observes: you have different stuff than I do. For envy, the comparison is personal. For envy, the end game is not the acquisition of stuff but the destruction of a person.

We can see this in our text today. Ahab wants Naboth's vineyard. Naboth refuses to give up his family's land, his inheritance. Ahab's response is... well, perhaps it's a lot like the way we have responded when we don't get our way. We go to our room and sulk. We curl up on our bed, pull the covers over our head, and we have a pouty cry. We've been sooooo wounded that we cannot face life. We're so distraught that we didn't get our way that we lose our appetite. "Dinner's ready, come and get it." And you pull your thumb out of your mouth and grumble, "I'm not hungry." And if you're really in the grip of envy, you might say "I'm gonna starve myself – that will show them." Ahab's exploitation of Naboth was personal – Ahab could not endure anyone saying no to the king, and his possession of the vineyard was his way of proving his superiority to Naboth. Note, Jezebel has to remind Ahab that he's the king: you are superior so act like it.

Envy is the unhappiest of sins and the most miserable of habits. There is no joy or pleasure to be found in envy.

If you've seen the movie *Amadeus*, you'll recognize that it is the story of Salieri's envy of Mozart. Salieri saw himself as the worthy beneficiary of God's musical gift... but not the irreverent, immoral, immature genius that was Mozart. When he realizes he cannot best Mozart, he determines to destroy him. In one scene he says to God, "From now, we are enemies... You and I. Because You choose for Your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy and give me for reward only to be a witness to Your incarnation. Because You are unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block You, I swear it. I will hinder and harm Your creature as far as I am able. I will ruin Your incarnation."

Envy really does become a holy war in the end, a raging against God. We say, "Who else is responsible for the inequities, the uneven distribution of gifts, and beauty, and knowledge, and ability?"

As we look at Envy this morning, we'll ask questions similar to those we have asked about the other sins we've considered in this series.

I. What is Envy?

II. What are the consequences of Envy?

III. How can we live with and value our differences with joy?

## I. What is Envy?

The wisdom writer tells us that “A tranquil heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones (Prov 14:30). Or, “Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before envy? (Prov. 27:4)

We see it throughout biblical history. In fact, envy occurs as soon as there are 2 people.

Our 1<sup>st</sup> parents envy God’s moral authority, so they take and eat to their damnation and destruction. Perhaps you’ve noticed that pretty much all the 7 deadly sins are wrapped up in that first sin. Envy is no exception.

The first 2 brothers. Cain is envious of Able – God approved of Able’s sacrifice, but not of his. So Cain slaughters Able.

Rachel who is barren is envious of her sister Leah who has many children  
Jacob is envious of the place his brother Esau has in the family, so much so that he connives with his mother to deceive his father and steal the family blessing  
Joseph’s brothers are envious of Joseph and their father’s love for him, so they sell him into slavery and convince their father that he is dead.

Saul is envious of David’s favor, his military prowess, and his musical ability, and in a jealous rage hurls his spear at the lad in an attempt to kill him.

When Paul writes in 1 Cor 13 that love does not envy, he bothers to mention it only because it’s still alive and well, even in Christian community.

But what is Envy?

Socrates called Envy the “ulcer of the soul.”

John of Damascus said that “Envy is discontent over someone else’s blessings.”

Aquinas defines Envy as “sorrow at another’s good.”

Augustine reminds us that Envy can surface in the most ordinary of situations and relationships: “feeling offended at the talents, successes, or good fortune of others; selfish or unnecessary rivalry and competition; pleasure at other’s difficulties or distress; ill will; reading false motives into others’ behavior; belittling others; false accusations; backbiting (saying something bad, even if true, behind another’s back); slander (saying something bad, even if true, in the open about someone); initiation, collection, or retelling of gossip; arousing, fostering, or organizing antagonism against others; scorn of another’s abilities or failures; teasing or bullying; ridicule of persons, institutions, or ideals; and prejudice against those we consider inferior, who consider us inferior, or who seem to threaten our security or position.” (from de Young)

Will Willimon, from his academic vantage point as dean of the chapel at Duke, observes that Envy is common within college faculties “where professors, living in such limited and confined space, and there being little economic rewards to fight over, must fight over something. So they fight over tenure or parking spots, or titles, anything to suggest that one person is better than another.”

It’s similar for many students making the transition to college. In high school you were a standout, a valedictorian, the star athlete. But now, you’re lost in a galaxy full of

shining lights, and you wonder, How do I stand out? How do I make a difference? How can I be significant?

We could be here all day if I tell you how I'm tempted to experience envy as a pastor. Westminster has a way nicer building than any of the space New Life rented. There are churches with larger congregations, bigger budgets, more staff. I'm certain Kevin and John are way better preachers than I am – there are preachers who write books or have popular podcasts. Yeah... envy comes knocking at my door every day, and I have to ask: Am I content to be faithful, or am I going to go down the angry rabbit hole of envy?

What about those of you who are single. How do you respond in your heart and mind when your friend gets a girlfriend or boyfriend, gets engaged or married? Are you happy for them, or resentful and envious? For those of you who are not attracted to the other sex, it's easy to grow weary of living courageously and faithfully when others are living with a happiness you desire.

Parents, how do you react when someone else's child succeeds or is given recognition? When your child is not chosen for the swim team or for the school play... or, when your child gets the highest SAT score in the class?

How do you react when someone else gets a promotion? Gets recognition for their contribution? Get's published?

Willimon calls Envy a "small town sin" because it's a by-product of living so close to people with whom we make comparisons.

But envy is deadly because it rarely settles for making unpleasant comparisons. It leads to hatred and a willingness to destroy.

Dorothy Sayers puts it this way: Envy begins by asking, plausibly: "Why should I not enjoy what others enjoy?" and it ends by demanding: "Why should others enjoy what I may not?" Envy is the great leveller: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down; and the words constantly in its mouth are: "My Rights" and "My Wrongs." [Similar to what we noted last week, "my money."] At its best, Envy is a climber and a snob; at its worst, it is a destroyer. Rather than have anybody happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together. (99)

Envy has a corrosive power – our internalized anger for the inequities we experience begins to churn and drive us. We come to believe that we cannot endure what we perceive as our inadequacies and our inferiority. So launches a destructive quest to ruin, discredit, to murder and to maim. Envy is an ugly business.

One writer observes that "there's a long tradition of using vivid metaphors to describe various sins. Images of envy are especially grotesque. Envy is a green-ey'd monster, a ravenous wolf, a beast with many heads. Envy is a gnawing worm, the rust of the heart, the malignant shriek of the shriveled soul. Dante depicts Envy as chewing on a venomous toad, drooling poison. Envy lies in wait and springs like a serpent when its

prey is within range. Envy cries over other's wealth. Envy cheers when another stumbles. Envy weeps at those who rejoice and rejoices over those who weep." (Killjoys)

Victor Hugo wrote a poem in which Envy and Avarice (Greed) are each granted an opportunity "to receive whatever they wished, on the condition that the other receive a double portion. Envy replied, 'I wish to be blind in one eye.'" (de Young)

Again, Dorothy Sayers writes: Envy is cruel, jealous, and possessive. My friend or my spouse must be wholly wrapped up in me, and must find no interests outside of me. That is my right. No person, no work, no hobby must rob me of any part of that right... There must be no escape into pleasures that I cannot share. If [I am threatened by the possibility that] my husband's work means more to him than I do, I will see him ruined rather than preoccupied; if my wife [finds great joy in]... Beethoven or dancing, or anything else which I do not appreciate, I will so nag and insult her that she will no longer be able to [enjoy them] with a mind at ease. If my neighbours are able to take pleasure in intellectual interests which are above my head, I will sneer at them and call them by derisive names, because they make me feel inferior, and that is a thing I cannot bear. [Oh, yes, it's true that] all men have equal rights. [But if anyone has been] born with any sort of privilege, I will see to it that that privilege shall be made worthless-if I can, and by any means I can devise. Let justice be done to me, though the heavens fall and the earth be shot to pieces. (99)

Why labor this grotesque deadliness of envy? Perhaps because it begins to grow as soon as there are 2 people in the same room. Remember, it's a small town sin that hangs out at the ball field and the local diner. God created humans to rule together but sin corrodes our hearts with envy so that we would rather play god over one another.

I. What is Envy?

## II. What are the consequences of Envy?

What happens when envy takes root in our lives?

There are no doubt many ways that Envy leaves its mark upon our minds, in our affections, and on our wills. But I want to consider 2 consequences of Envy.

A. The loss of heroes – we live without greatness

B. The loss of community – we live in exile

### A. The loss of heroes – we live without greatness

The competitive spirit that is corrupted by envy cannot endure others to be great. The field must be leveled with no one greater than me. It's a world that must see every rival as a loser... and it's often a cynicism that insists that everyone is a loser, except me.

The competitive spirit can become ruthless, and yet there is in the good order of the world a whole host of differences that we are the better for preserving and honoring. We might think of it as a biblical approach to DEI.

You have likely encountered the belief that discourages one person excelling over another – you may have run into this in athletics. It's a belief that demands that no one

rise above the lowest common denominator. Everyone who competes gets a participants trophy. But that's an artificial and unsustainable equilibrium

Will Willimon observes that "when everything is coercively leveled and all are legislated to be equal, then Envy really kicks in."

We think that by making things the same we will have eliminated rivalry and envy. But that's not true. What cannot be eliminated is that deep inner desire to be distinct, to be known as our own person.

So, somewhat ironically, when we strive for individuality, when we are determined to be known as unique, there is a current of envy driving that desire. Very simply we are not satisfied to be the same or less than. Envy convinces us that it's dehumanizing and demoralizing.

Modern literary and philosophical deconstruction opposes the heroic – those who have been regarded as great must be torn down by exposing their weaknesses and foibles, and those regarded as not-so-great are ennobled when they discover they share the same weaknesses of those once thought great. Those who envy say, "See we are no different you and I, but I am more noble because I admit it." However, in tearing down one standard of greatness, we erect another in its place. Now I'm superior because I'm more authentic.

We live in the age of Envy... in an egalitarian time when heroic characters have feet of clay... when the heroic is not defined by a standard of moral greatness or of noble achievement, but by the degree to which an individual can break free and be true to himself or herself.

Peter Kreeft writes: "In a world in which people really are superior and inferior to each other in many ways, and in which an ideology of absolute egalitarianism forbids us to admit that fact, we will demand a degree of comfort, security, and control undreamed of by any other society. And we will find the technological and political means to create it, even if it kills us. And it will."

In a world without heroes, we have no models of greatness to which to aspire. In a world without heroes, how can Jesus be heroic? How can we believe that Jesus is forever one of us, the greatest and the best of our race, as someone who is truly fully human, if we live with the lurking suspicion that he possesses some as yet undiscovered hidden fault that will make him flawed and fallen like the rest of us. Hence the persistent efforts to prove that Jesus and Mary Magdalen were lovers, that Jesus was married, that his mortality is stained just like the rest of us.

Dick Keyes observes in his book on heroism: In our culture the loss of heroes is no small thing.

Heroes are immensely important to the writer of the book of Hebrews. The writer knows we are surrounded by negative examples, people who give up on Jesus (or, to use our modern term, who deconstruct) or who live grossly contradictory hypocritical lives. Listen to what he writes: I want you to live with the full assurance of hope until the very end. Don't be sluggish – don't be sloppy, lazy, and inattentive... But... be

imitators... regard as heroes those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Then he devotes a whole chapter to a heroes hall of faith, "men and women of whom the world is not worthy."

Paul echoes the same theme when he tells the Corinthians with a kind of boldness that frankly I find uncomfortable (1 Cor 11:1) "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ."

He tells the Philippian Christians (3:17) "follow my example.. and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us"

He commends the Thessalonians (1 Th 1:6-8) "you became imitators of us and of the Lord"

Well then, who are our heroes?

Tolkien wrote that Hobbits are made small mostly to show up, in creatures of very small physical power, the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary people "in a pinch." We are hobbits in the family of God, but God can make our influence upon others great... and theirs great upon us. He can make us mighty men and women for our fearless and unselfish love for our great King. There are hobbits among us... and they will lead us to Christ and a courageous enduring life in Christ.

But when we have no models of greatness, we lose aspiration. We lose a noble desire to be better, and for us as Christians, to be more and more like Jesus.

What happens when envy takes root in our lives? What are the consequences of envy?

A. The loss of heroes – we live without greatness

**B. The loss of community – we live in exile**

Consider the biblical instances of envy I've already noted... and consider the fallout.

Adam and Eve envied God's position and desired to be like him

The result: exile into the wilderness of the world.

In envy Cain killed Abel

The result: exile as a marked man

Jacob, in a deceptive act of envy, tricked his brother out of the family inheritance

The result: exile – he had to run for his life.

Even before human history, Satan envied God's position

The result: exile from heaven – he was cast down to roam earth like a vagabond

When Joseph's brothers sell him as a slave in an act of envy

He is in exile

When Saul sought to kill David in an envious rage

David fled and made the caves and mountains his home

In fact the whole of biblical history is marked by exile imposed by sin either by our envious determination to play God, or by a world system that exiles us because of our submission to God.

It is the nature of envy to divide and alienate, where in community we see our differences and become jealous and angry.

But even more, it is the nature of envy to exile us from God (as with the character of Salieri)

If left unchecked, envy will convince us that the differences which exist among us are because of God's capricious and impersonal decree: that one has good health – zap! – that one has an underdeveloped brain – zap! -- that one is beautiful – zap! – that one is ugly – zap!

If we see God as a fickle manipulator, we will turn our back on him in “righteous indignation” choosing rather to be alone in the world. We'll choose exile rather than live with a God who does not fully explain himself to us.

I. What is Envy?

II. What are the consequences of Envy?

**III. How can we live with and value our differences with joy?**

I'll suggest 3 ways we can live with our differences with joy:

- A. Theology
- B. Love
- C. Community

### **A. Theology**

First theology – and by theology I mean our knowledge of God. Theology rightly understood is not for the few – it is for the many. Karl Barth said that the gospel is both a puddle that a child can play in and an ocean that will drown an elephant. Theology is not scholarship even though good theology will stretch the mind to its limits. Theology is the truth about God that shapes how we live our everyday lives.

If Envy flourishes in the world of constant comparison... if Envy breeds in the spirit of competition, of who's better than whom... if Envy begins with that feeling of worthlessness because I am not as gifted, or intelligent, or good looking, or anything as someone else, then what truth about God will speak to that raging fear that lashes out in anger to destroy those who shame me by being better?

C'mon, let's be honest. Everyone of us can look around the room and say, you're a better husband or wife than I am, you're a better speaker, a better listener than I am. You're a better parent than I am. You're a better programmer, teacher, writer, musician... you're more content, more loving, more patient, more generous than I am. You're a better Christian than I am.

All these statements may be true. But what truth about God counters the despair that breeds envy, the resentment that results from our self-comparisons... our honest admission that I feel as if I'm indistinguishable from that mass of humanity swirling around me? What truth about God quiets the destructive rage that results from our feelings of worthlessness?

It is the confidence that God knows you by name and loves you. Your uniqueness is NEVER lost to God, to the One who is always present with you.



That's true of every person who has ever lived whether or not we have accepted his free offer of grace in the gospel. It's true whether or not you call Jesus Lord. God loves you so much that he sent Jesus into the world to demonstrate the enormity of that love.

And for those of you who call Jesus Lord, his love has proven to be effective unto salvation, rescuing you from yourself at the price of his own death on the Cross. When we know the love of God in Christ, we realize that we are the objects of an everlasting love, a love by which we were foreknown from before the creation of the world.

We sing these words from Is 43: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine. I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I have ransomed you because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you. Do not be afraid. (Is 43:1-5)

There is a ferocious jealousy to God's love – that's why he hates sin and all that harms us and hurts us and lures us with rival idolatrous loves. So he shouts through the Apostle Paul. Who or what can separate you from my love? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you from my love in Christ Jesus your Lord. (Rom. 8:35-39)

This is the gospel – it's true and we stake our lives upon it. Our freedom depends upon it. Our joy depends upon it. Our hope depends upon all that Jesus is and all that Jesus has accomplished in his perfect life, his atoning death, his resurrection and ascension. Do we believe it? Amen?

What would it be like to be loved without condition, without qualification, without a hint of comparison?

It would be to know the love of God in Christ.

In Christ, we know that God loves us for Christ's sake alone. He alone is worthy of God's favor and grace. He alone is the one beyond comparison. He alone is the one worthy of God's love and honor. But it is for Jesus' sake that we know God's forgiveness and acceptance. If we accept the Love of God in Christ, it will not be because we think we have risen above or accomplished more. It will not be because we are good mothers and fathers, good husbands and wives, good friends and colleagues. It will not be because we have distinguished our selves socially, or academically, or athletically. It will not even be because we are virtuous, that we are exemplars of Christian character. The love of God in Christ will be ours solely by his measureless love, by his omnipotent grace, by his unfathomable mercy. The creator of heaven and earth, the Lord God Almighty, has stooped low, has taken you by the hand, has looked into your eyes and into the depths of your soul and said, I know you and I love you.

There is no need to prove that his love for us is merited. It's impossible.

We may be still... we may cease our striving, our competition, our rivalry... we can silence our envy... be still. Hear his voice: "I am God. I love you."

The Apostle Paul writes, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or living in want." (Phil 4:11-12)

So the secret of contentment is to have something that cannot be taken away and that no one can better.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more than he does already. And there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less than he does already.

That is the truth – that is the good news of the gospel – that is what it means for Jesus to be the cornerstone of the foundation upon which we build our lives.

The first way we can live with our differences with joy:

A. Theology – grounding our lives in the solid truth of God.

**B. Love**

Our confidence in God's love for us emboldens us to love others as he loves us. You and I are exemplars and ambassadors of his love.

We disempower envy as we begin to love... when the focus of our lives stops being ourselves and when our lives are focused on others.

The sum of the law is to love the Lord our God with our whole being... and to love our neighbors as ourselves... in that order. We know what envious self-love does for us. But God has created us and redeemed us to love him and to love each other.

Loving others begins with the recognition that the same desperate desire I have to be love... a desire that will drive me to destruction if I do not find it... a desire and hope that is alive within every person we meet.

In the same way that we are to comfort those who sorrow with the comfort with which we have been comforted... we are to love. As we have been loved in our unworthiness and rebellion, we are to love one another with the love with which we have been loved by God in Christ.

The first way we can live with our differences with joy:

A. Theology – God in Christ loves us with an everlasting invincible love

B. Love – the love with which we have been loved, becomes the love by which we love others.

**C. Community**

It's a natural progression

God loves us, and in Christ restores us to communion with himself

We love one another and restore communion with each other.

At the beginning of human history, Cain killed Able in a rage of envy.

But what was the question he asked when God confronted him with his sin?

Am I my brother's keeper?

Well... yes. If we love one another... yes, we are to care for one another in every way that makes us human and bearers of God's image. We are to care for each other in this fellowship as well as in our neighborhoods, schools, places of work.

Again, Peter Kreeft: envy is a deadly sin because it refuses to honor our fundamental human situation of solidarity, neighborliness, family. The deepest and most important

horizontal fact about our being is that we are our brother's keeper, and this is the reason for the second great commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves

If we fail to live with compassion, we fail to know each other. The weak and wounded, sick and sore, are left to a life of exile by those who refuse to see and understand.

But God has made us to be a community that functions like the body. To each member has been given gifts, Paul writes, "for the common good."

And we employ those gifts to honor and encourage one another.

Paul introduces his remarkable description of the humility of Christ in the incarnation by reminding us about our own need for humility

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4)

In Ephesians when Paul writes about our relationships in life he begins by saying that we are to submit ourselves to one another out of love for and submission to Christ... and his instruction to husbands is particularly terrifying and humbling: Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church (a love demonstrated by his death), and do everything to seek your wives glory (even as Christ will present his bride spotless, without blemish and fully of glory). In humility, in Christlike love, regard her as more significant than yourself.

Free of envy, what kind of community can we be as a congregation:

To be a fellowship that is confident of God's love in Christ... an unshakable love and confidence in the gospel.

To be a fellowship that is so gripped by God's love, that it overflows generously toward our neighbors and to one another

To be a fellowship that is so fluent in the love of God, that we find great joy in being a means of God's grace to one another, being his agents of mercy, the hands and feet of his kindness, truth, patience, goodness, and righteousness.

Joy, not envy, is the fruit of the Spirit, Christ's life among us, making his character and presence visible among us, to the praise of his glorious grace.