

**Sermon: "The Evil Eye"**  
**Scripture: Luke 15:11-32**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
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The list of the 7 Deadly Sins was developed in the early centuries of the Christian tradition as a lense by which we can see ourselves more honestly and thereby take practical steps toward God and greater godliness. That the desert fathers and mothers were on to something profoundly true is evidence by their presence in stories and characters in modern literature, film, TV, even all these years later. I don't think the early church father, John Chrysostom, had Gilligan's Island in mind when he developed the list of sins but we all know that Gilligan represents sloth, the skipper anger, Ginger Lust, Mr. Howell Greed, The Professor pride and so on! Theories abound that the 7 Harry Potter books represent each deadly sin abound and other theories that the location of Voldemort's 7 horocrux's represents each sin. It's hard to doubt that the characters in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory are obvious representations of greed, gluttony, pride, sloth... and if you want all the deadly sins beautifully articulated in one modern-day character who we still like anyway, just consider Homer Simpson. There's even an episode where Homer's nemesis and devoutly good and religious neighbor Ned Flanders is the devil and explaining the deadly sins in very colorful terms to children in hell!

Those are silly examples but if you've been following this series, I do hope you are recognizing the depth and richness of this list and how, without shaming or immobilizing us with how terribly sinful we are, the

deadly sins can be revelatory of a pathway to spiritual growth and deeper relationship with God. The problem has not been with the language of sin in the church so much as the way the church has over-identified people as primarily sinners, when as Christians our primary identifier, and that of others, should be beloved. Beloved of God. Yes we all sin, we miss the mark, we can get turned in on ourselves in ways that diminish us, but that sin in no way has the final say in our lives, only God and God's love does. If sin can lead the human to hanging God upon a cross and still God returns forgiveness and love then is there any doubt that amazing grace has the final say, not sin. As an ordained clergy in the Christian church, let me say once and for all, I'm sorry for any of you who have grown up or attended churches that have gotten that backwards, where the message has been more shame than mercy, more accusation than grace, more fear than love. Our worship and study in our faith should always lead us to amazement and gratitude for how good God is... all the time!

And that's the heart of the problem with our next sin on the list that we have for today - it cuts away at one of the most important qualities of a healthy flourishing human soul and that is thankfulness, gratitude. The deadly sin of envy turns us in on ourselves by seeing what the people around us have, feeling less in ourselves because of what they have, and finally resenting them for having it. Envy cannot grow in a humble heart that is full of thankfulness, it can only grow in heart torqued by a prideful ego where we need to establish our own worthiness and value based upon how we rate in comparison to others.

There are a few other related terms that are worth considering to get clearer on what envy is. Since I've already brought Homer Simpson into the equation let's listen to him describe the difference between envy and jealousy. In one episode someone accused Homer of being jealous of Ned Flanders and he says with a mouth full of food – "I'm not jealous, I'm envious. Jealousy is when you worry someone will take what you have. Envy is wanting what someone else has. So what I feel is envy." Bingo! In the Old Testament God is occasionally referred to not as an *envious* God but rather a jealous God because the Israelites worship other deities breaking relationship with Him. Covetousness is another similar word to envy which shows up in the Old Testament specifically within the 10 commandments but involves one person's desire for the things that another person has.

Envy runs deeper and darker than either jealousy or covetousness. It's not so much about protecting what we have or wanting things but it's about desiring those things that make another person more what we want to be. My desire for a luxury car because I've seen my neighbor with one is not so much about the car but about what the car says about my being a success or not. Keeping up with the Jones' is a practice that can happen in subtle ways and derives from the sin of envy. Envy is nurtured in a heart lacking gratitude and wishing for more of what they have and who they are, disregarding the good of oneself and situation, but it can quickly become more toxic and calcify into disdain or even hatred for the other.

In ancient Rome, there was a great fear of what they called "the evil eye" which was the look of an envious person upon another wishing

ill-will for them and the superstition was that the evil eye would cause bad luck for the one upon whom it was trained. The only thing to satisfy envy when the sin is in full swing is not to actually get what the other person has that you want but rather to experience the other's downfall. The writer Frederick Buechner describes envy's trademark as "the desire that everyone else is as unsuccessful as you are!" In German, the rich word that speaks to this dark turn of the sin is *schadenfruede* – delight in the misfortune of another. Back to Homer Simpson and his envy around Ned Flanders. At one point Homer is waxing poetic and says "I've learned that life is one crushing defeat after another until you just wish Ned Flanders was dead!" That's the trajectory of the deadly sin of envy.

There are few stories as rich and insightful into the human experience as Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. This one story contains at least reference to each of the 7 deadly sins but is called the Gospel within the Gospel, really the heart of the Christian message of good news. The younger brother could be said to embody greed, gluttony, lust, pride and the older brother envy, sloth, anger and also pride. The Father represents the ultimate countervailing virtue to all the deadly sins – unconditional love.

I would guess few of us can't relate to a moment in the story that is a powerful sketch of envy. After another long and devoted day on the family farm, the older brother notices that something festive is happening back at the house and so he asks one of the servants what is going on and the servant says "your brother has returned and your father is having a party for him." Can you imagine what shadows cross

the older brother's heart? It's the shadow of envy hardening to anger and resentment. "My brother who wished our father dead and took his inheritance and left me to work the farm alone? He's returned from squandering it all and he's not being punished or even executed but being thrown a party?" Talk about the evil eye beholding that scene.

It begins with comparison - His hard work compared to his brother's irresponsibility, his diligence compared to his brother's negligence, the love of his father for him compared to his father's love for his brother. Comparison is a very natural part of our human condition and imitation too. Imitation in fact is how we go from being a dependent infant into an independent fully human being, we imitate the language and actions of the people around us. And how we come to know our relative position in our social circles is by comparing ourselves to others. It's what makes society what it is, it links us and bonds us. And even in the most egalitarian of societies there are always those better and lesser than ourselves by which we are positioning ourselves. Such a dynamic does not necessarily lead to sin. It can also lead to our becoming more fully who we are meant to be. We look at someone we admire and we want to be more like them and so we work to acquire those qualities or skills that the admired one has.

As we've been saying all along, the 7 Deadly Sins are in most cases good human desires that have gone wrong, "good loves", as Augustine would say, "that have become disordered". So the good and very human reality of imitation and the relatively neutral dynamic of social comparison, can become disordered and sinful when it doesn't lead to our becoming better, more thankful and more loving but when it leads

to us desiring or even working for others to become lesser. The older brother's assessment in comparing himself was that he was lacking, that he got short-shrifted and he resents it mightily. He could have looked to the father and admired his wisdom and compassion and sought to be more like him.

The modern day equivalent of the brother standing on the edge of the property as he observes the party going on, might be the person scrolling through his or her facebook feed and becoming more and more unhappy as they see the joyful pictures of Lynn laughing on the beach with her family or Joyce traveling through Greece or George living it up at a concert with a group of buddies or another happy picture of John with his wife. Another modern day example of envy and its ugly cousin Schadenfreude is when those on the opposite side of the political aisle have something bad happen to them which hurts their standing and that little smile of delight we feel that lights up our lives even when the bad thing is not good for our country ultimately but at least they over there have to pay for it! That's the sin of envy raising its ugly little head.

As we've been saying throughout this series, the deadliest of the deadly sins, the one which the early church fathers suggested was the trunk out of which each sin arises is PRIDE. Envy is rooted in pride in that the envious one believes he or she must establish their own value and worthiness over and against others instead of receiving that value and worth from their Creator, God. St. Augustine's prayer book described envy this way - "Dissatisfaction with our place in God's order of creation, manifested in begrudging God's gifts to others." Again the older brother: "After all I've done for you faithfully over all these years,

you throw a party for the son who ran off and spent your money on prostitutes?!” And the Father’s response is one of compassion and love; love, which is the countervailing virtue of envy, nothing less than love and wanting the best for the people around us.

If we are beset by the sin of envy, there are steps we can take to extricate ourselves from its gnarly clutches. First of all, admitting it, confessing it. Of course this would be true of all the sins but there’s something about envy that makes acknowledging it to ourselves and to another as particularly important so its shadow does not grow unabated within us. What makes that difficult is that acknowledging envy to ourselves much less to someone else means that we have to admit that we are in the very unflattering place of comparing ourselves to someone else and feeling lesser than. That’s a tough thing to acknowledge when the sin of envy is green and ripe within us. Another step would be to count our blessings, to foster an attitude of gratitude for all we do have since envy convinces us that we do not have enough and that we are not enough. And finally and most importantly, our work is to root our self-worth not in what we have or what we can do or in comparison to others but in the fact that we are God’s beloved. We are of value because we are God’s beloved creation.... as is everyone else... but so are we!

One of the most famous of spiritual growth books in our tradition was written in the Middle Ages by Thomas A’ Kempis and it’s called “The Imitation of Christ”. What the book encourages in its readers is to focus all of our natural and very human tendency to imitate those around us onto Christ. Thus unlike the malicious and dangerous

trajectory of envy that wants our rival's demise so we can feel better about ourselves, we seek to imitate Christ and that trajectory pulls us up towards heaven so that we can feel like participants in something much larger and more beautiful than our own narrow and deadly projects of self-aggrandizement.

We don't know ultimately which trajectory the older brother took in Jesus' parable but it didn't look promising for him or his brother or his father as he stood out on the edge of the yard looking in. Jesus told his disciples this story as a center-piece of his course on discipleship as he moved towards Jerusalem and his death at the hands of the Roman Empire. Notice that Jesus did not go to a far away place where he and his disciples could create a utopian community where the 7 Deadly Sins had no room. Instead he went to the city, a place where greed and gluttony and anger and envy and lust and pride flourished and they took love and executed Him! He allowed it to happen so that so that forever more when we sinned, he'd be right there to draw closer to us and grant his love and his power because he loves us! For that we praise God and turn our lives over to Him realizing that there is only so much we can do to extricate ourselves from our sins but in the end must simply allow God to come running out to us and embrace us despite it all. Then maybe we can better see the world as He does, not with the evil eye of envy and a tortured sense of worthlessness but with the eyes of compassion and love and gratitude for all that is given in Jesus name, amen!