
Envy

SCOTT HOEZEE

The comedian, Groucho Marx, once said, “No one is ever completely unhappy over the failure of a friend.” That is pretty cynical and pretty harsh, but really, have we not all sensed this in our hearts? Let’s say you know someone who always succeeds at everything and gets lots of attention as a result. If one day that person messes up, don’t you quietly think to yourself, “Well, good. Now he knows how I feel all the time.” If you have ever been tempted to feel that way, then you are struggling with the deadly sin of envy. Today on Groundwork, let’s think about envy and how the Holy Spirit can help us battle it in our lives.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are looking at the seven deadly sins, which as we said in our previous, first program, is a traditional list that the Church and some of the Church fathers and mothers and monks and nuns who pondered these things came up with this list as sort of the core attitudes of life that lead to all the other sins in our lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think that is why they called them “the deadly sins.” Seven is kind of an obvious number. It is the number of completeness of fullness, biblically; but, the deadly part comes because these things live inside all of us. Every time I think about this list, and I have preached through them, as you have, Scott, and I have written on them, and now we are doing this series of programs, but every time I go through it I think, “I have all seven!” You know, it is not like I have one or the other, they are all there, sort of jostling, and they will kill you if you do not pay attention to this; if you do not fight against them. There is a great line from a great Puritan, John Owen, who said, and this is somebody who believed in grace, believed in forgiveness, believed the Gospel, and all that. “If you do not kill sin, it will kill you.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And these are deadly because they kill your spirit, they kill your relationship with God; as we said in the previous program that the proud are always looking down at others and they forget that they are supposed to look up to God; but, these are also deadly sins because they can lead us to kill other people, or their spirits at least, or their sense of shalom.

So, we looked at pride already. Still to come: Anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust; but today, we are on the sin of envy.

DAVE BAST

Well, let’s start by defining it, because I think a lot of people confuse envy and jealousy. Those are two somewhat similar attitudes and they seem like the words might mean the same thing, but they are not quite the same.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then people get a little confused because the Bible... You know, God will often say, "I am a jealous God," and people say, "Well, if jealousy is a deadly sin, how can God be jealous?" and we say, Well no, no, envy is a deadly sin because it is different than jealousy." When you are jealous, you want to keep something that is properly your own. So, if you see your spouse flirting with another person, you get jealous of that because that is your spouse; you have a right to his or her love and affection alone, even as God looked at His people, Israel, and said, "You are My people. You are My covenant People, and when I see you worshiping other gods, and flirting with other religions, I want you for Myself," and that is a proper reaction in a loving relationship. That is jealousy.

DAVE BAST

Sure, but envy is the attitude that looks at someone and says, "Why can't I have what they have?" It is not talking about being properly concerned about keeping your own good relationships or your own good thing, but it is a kind of resentment at other people whom you think do not deserve what you do not have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it begins every time, envy begins as soon as you start to feel diminished in your life because you have compared yourself to your neighbor or to your friend, and all of a sudden you say, "Hey, I am living in that person's shadow and it is chilly down here in this shadow. I don't like being in this shadow. I want to do something about this person who makes me feel dwarfed and small and diminished." That is where envy starts; that restless feeling of saying, "My life is not good enough when I compare it to her life."

DAVE BAST

Yes, and. "She does not deserve to have that." "He's no better than I am; why does he... In fact, I think I am a little better than he is, and it is probably just blind luck or he knew somebody that got him to where he is." Envy is a real killer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And pride is in the neighborhood, too. The sin of pride we looked at last time on the previous program. Pride makes you want to be the center of attention in the limelight, and when somebody else is, you say, "How can I change this? How can I get back in the limelight? How can I get the spotlight to come back on me?" As we said about pride, that the images are all of height; with envy, the images are all pinched; they are narrowed eyes; they are the downwardly turned mouth, a pinched face, where you are just looking at the other person and saying, "Errr, why does he have that and I don't?"

DAVE BAST

I love what Dorothy Sayers wrote about envy; actually, she wrote a wonderful little book on the seven deadly sins and had insights on all of them, but her is how she describes envy. "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 leveler. If it cannot level things up, it will level them down, and the words constantly in its mouth are, 'My rights and my wrongs.' 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 miserable together."

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, envy starts with that feeling of misery over what others have and then it takes the next step to do what Dorothy Sayers said there; you start to tear people down. So, we say things like, "I would like to bring him down a few pegs. I would like to whittle her down to size." So, we are looking to knock other people down so that they are not above us anymore.

DAVE BAST

You know the phrase, "Misery loves company." I think of envy this way: It is the actions of the miserable who want to increase their company. "If I can't be happy, I don't want that person happy. I want them

miserable like I am.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So in envy, here is how it sometimes goes, even in the church, right? Your church has an apple pie baking contest and you enter it, but you do not win; Marge Williams wins. Oh, great. But, all of a sudden, you find yourself saying, “Well, I guess Marge does make a good pie, but oh, my goodness, the trouble she has with that one daughter of hers, let me tell you!” And then you will because you are trying to knock Marge down a few pegs. She beat you in one competition, but you want to beat her by having the better family and you do it by tearing her family down in the eyes of other people.

DAVE BAST

Yes. So, envy leads to gossip quite often, or slander.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Meanness.

DAVE BAST

How about, to get a little more personal, Scott, the preacher who is more lauded than you and I are or has a bigger reputation or a bigger church or has written more books?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you start looking for which parts of his theology are not quite right? Maybe I’ll write a book review.

DAVE BAST

Or somebody makes a comment and you say, “Oh yeah, yeah, he’s pretty good...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

[0:07:37.1] “I heard something about his wife, though, let me tell you.” Well, that is the way it goes. This is also, by the way, as we said earlier, envy is not jealousy. Another thing envy is not is covetousness. When you covet your neighbor’s possessions you just wish you could have one just like it. So, if I covet my neighbor’s boat, that means I wish I could have a boat like that, too. If I envy my neighbor’s boat, I hope his boat will sink, so that he cannot have it either.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned at the top of the program that great line of Groucho Marx, “Nobody is entirely sad when they hear about the failure of a friend.” Well, there is a great German word for that: Schadenfreude. I know you know that word, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, schadenfreude. *Badness-joy* is literally what it means. It is taking joy at somebody else’s misfortune; something happens to another person, a rival of yours perhaps, and you find yourself saying, “Aw, isn’t that just too bad, now,” and you do not mean it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, because secretly we know that feeling deep down, or you hear about a celebrity’s problems – their struggles with their marriage or whatever, and we are always looking at these people who have so much money and so much fame and they are beautiful people or they appear to be. It is like those tabloids that run scandal headlines. They may not be true, but it is all appealing to schadenfreude; that envy that we feel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In scripture, we run into envy very early in the human story, and when we come back we will read a very familiar but very sad story, at whose heart lurks the deadly sin of envy.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

Hello, I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork.

DAVE BAST

And we are talking about the sin of envy; one of the deadly sins; how it is wrapped up in this attitude that if others have something I cannot have, I am going to try to bring them down a couple of pegs, or if someone outshines me, I will find another way around to spread some dirt on them. Just this terrible feeling... and it often poses simply as a desire for fairness or truth. “Well, okay, they did such and such, but did you know also this? This is only the truth; so let’s get the whole picture.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Envy is always lurking if you have a near rival. In the Bible, from Genesis 4, starting at the second half of the second verse, here is a very familiar story. Let’s listen to this and then talk about it:

^{2b} Now Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. ³In the course of time, Cain brought forth some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ Abel also brought an offering, fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering, He did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. ⁶ So the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” ⁸ Now Cain said to his brother, Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

And there is envy in all of its ugliness.

DAVE BAST

There is the primal story; the original murder – Cain and Abel. I think several details are significant about this story. The first is, Cain is the elder brother, and yet, little Abel begins to outshine him, and there is classic sibling rivalry going on there. There is so much profound psychology, you know, as well as the early history that we are told in these first stories in the Bible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Somehow – it is not completely spelled out – but somehow Cain sensed that God seemed to like Abel more.

DAVE BAST

You know, some people have speculated that it is because Abel sacrificed an animal, and that God preferred a blood sacrifice, and they kind of try to make a theological slant out of it, but I really do not think that is in the text. I do not think that is legitimate.

SCOTT HOEZEE

0:12:11.6] The only thing in the text is that we are told that Cain brought *some* of the fruits, not his first fruits; whereas, Abel brought fat portions from the firstborn. So there might be something in that Abel was actually a little more spiritually devout than Cain; but whatever happened, Cain just sensed that Abel was liked better. He was better than Cain. Maybe he even thought Adam and Eve, as their parents, liked Abel better. You know, they always loved his lamb chops, but the rutabaga thing that Cain grew, not so much. Whatever happened, Cain felt that he was dwelling in Abel’s shadow, and it was getting chilly in that shadow; and so he started to think, “How can I get rid of this terrible feeling? I know, I will just get rid of Abel, and then the feeling will go away.”

DAVE BAST

And God warns him; He appears somehow, again, we are not told how, and speaks to Cain and He tells him: You know, Cain, sin is crouching at your door.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is ringing the doorbell.

DAVE BAST

It is the image of a wild animal sort of lurking – and you have got to watch out for this.” Again, I think it gets at this attitude/action thing. He has probably already been sinning in the sense of envy over Abel’s better standing, or maybe he envies Abel’s faith or whatever it was; but that is going to lead to something much more terrible; and God tries to warn him and say: You have to nip this thing in the bud or the sinful action is going to leap on you and devour you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is what we said also in the first program. The seven deadly sins are attitudes; they are dispositions. They are not of themselves actions, but they lead to actions, and when they do, they are always terrible. I think of some years ago, some of our listeners will remember this; two Olympic class – they were both going to go to the Olympics, figure skaters – Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan. Nancy was a little better than Tonya. Nancy won a few more medals than Tonya, and Tonya started to envy Nancy. And so what does Tonya do? She hired somebody to break Nancy Kerrigan’s knee so she could not skate in the Olympics. She reached out and whacked her rival, just like Cain did. She did not kill her in this case, but she made it so she could not skate anymore. So, now Tonya will look better because Nancy is not around to make her look worse. That is envy.

DAVE BAST

Yes, a notorious story. I remember reading a while back about two brothers. One of them won the lottery and won a big prize – millions and millions of dollars – and as so often happens, it really ruined his life, in self-indulgence and all that. But it also ruined his brother’s life because his brother was so resentful and envious that he ended up changing his name and moving to a different state. It completely destroyed their relationship. So, yes, it is poison.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is poison. There is another famous story I read in the book, *Parting the Waters*, which is a great history of the civil rights movement, but when Martin Luther King, Jr. was in seminary, he was already a really good preacher; he got way more preaching invitations to area churches than his classmates, and that bugged some of them; including one classmate named Walter McCall. Well, one week Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon in a church and the sermon was titled: The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life. A few weeks later, that same church invited Walter to preach, and what did he bring to that church that day? A sermon titled: The Four Dimensions of a Complete Life. He just had to top Martin; he just had to knock him down a peg by having an even better sermon.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, there you go. We were just talking about that; envy among preachers, and it is a real thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It crops up everywhere.

DAVE BAST

It crops up all over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, the other thing worth thinking about to a degree is that we live in a society that to a degree has what you could almost call designer envy. Advertisers sell their products by making you feel diminished because your neighbor has an Xbox video game with a little more memory than your Xbox video game, and your life is not going to be worth living until you get one even bigger than his.

DAVE BAST

You can see it in commercials. Just the way they are always putting neighbor and neighbor and, “Oh, you’ve got a 60-inch television now? Well, you know, there is an 80-inch television.” What is the phrase, keeping up with the Joneses?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Always looking across the driveway at what the other guy has. Now, there could be covetousness in that, as we mentioned in the earlier segment of this program, that you just look and say, “Okay, I would like one, too.” But if envy took hold, then what you really want to do is go smash his TV so he cannot have it now either. There is this great ancient story from Jewish folklore of a shop owner who had this other rival who owned a store and he was always envying. But one day, an angel came to this one shop owner and said, “I will grant you any wish on this condition; your rival will get double of whatever you wish for.” And so the shop owner said, “Fine, make me blind in one eye.”

DAVE BAST

There you go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now his rival is totally blind.

DAVE BAST

I think we recognize this, and to name it and to talk about it is to see that, “Yep, I can have this tendency as well, and it is closely linked to my pride and my sense of entitlement.” The question is, what do we do about it? Do we just say, “Oh, that’s the way I am.” Or is there some way of combating the deadly sin of envy? That is what we want to focus on next.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we have been digging into the sin of envy – the deadly sin that causes us to tear down and get at others and try to bring them to our level; and it can even, as we saw in our story of the original envy, it can lead to murder, literally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Cain and Abel, a terrible story.

DAVE BAST

Or at least the murder of people’s reputation in the sin of gossip; equally serious in God’s eyes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We hurt other people so that they do not look so good anymore in the eyes of others. So, what can we do about it? Where in our lives as we live as people forgiven by grace, justified by the blood of Jesus on the cross, but now leading lives of sanctification; in which, as Paul wrote to the Galatians, we have to keep step with the Spirit. Well, when it comes to combating envy, where is the Spirit leading us? What does it mean to

keep step with the Spirit in combating this?

DAVE BAST

Well, one place, certainly, is humility, again, as we saw with pride. That comes in handy in all of these sins, frankly. I think that is probably why the New Testament especially makes so much of it as the bedrock of the Christian life; to just kind of get low, get on a level with others, and do not think too highly of yourself, as the Apostle says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, as we said in the previous program, if in combating pride you nurture humility, you clothe yourself with humility, then you are going to also probably short-circuit a lot of envy, because now you no longer feel the need to be in the spotlight. But, the other thing that envy does; the other deadly effect in your heart envy has if you have envy is that it is a gratitude blocker; it just cuts off gratitude because all you can think about is what you do not have and what other people have that makes you feel diminished, and now you are no longer grateful for anything you do have.

DAVE BAST

Count your blessings; name them one by one, as the little song says. That is a way of fostering gratitude. So, I can think of two great qualities that will go far to freeing us from the sin of envy, and the first is to cultivate a sense of gratitude for what God has given you, for the good things that He has. To believe, as we say we do in our faith, to believe in Providence; that God provides all things we need for our body and our soul. If there is something we do not have, maybe in His estimation we do not really need it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. The other thing, too, is that in envy we compare ourselves all the time to those who have more. Maybe it is a good spiritual discipline on a regular basis to compare ourselves to those who have so much less; fewer things, fewer opportunities. That, too, can remind us, “Oh my goodness, I have a lot to give thanks for already.” Instead of only comparing yourself to people who have more; compare yourself to people who have less, and see if that helps to level your thinking.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it might lead you to be more grateful, too, for what you do have.

And here is another thing; I love the idea of cultivating the spiritual attitude of contentment; the belief that I am thankful, not only for what I have, but I am content with it. What I have is enough for me. There is a wonderful passage from a spiritual writer I know you know, George McDonald. He was a favorite of C. S. Lewis’s, actually, who points out that contentment does not mean we somehow run down the goodness of the good things we do not have; because that, too, can be kind of be a function of envy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That can be a problem, too.

DAVE BAST

Where we say, “Oh, I do not really want that anyway. That is no good.” But, this is how McDonald describes it: Let me, if I may, be ever welcome to my room in winter by a glowing hearth, in summer by a vase of flowers; (He was very poor, incidentally, and he did not always have these things.) but if I may not, let me think how nice they would be and bury myself in my work. I do not think that the road to contentment lies in despising what we have not got. Let us acknowledge all good, all delight that the world holds, and still be content without it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There you go.

DAVE BAST

Isn't that great? That is a great thought.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a great thought; see, with envy you are never content. It is a miserable thing to have envy. You are restless. In fact, that is why – we did not go on – but, in the Cain and Abel story, what happens to Cain at the end? God sends him off and we are told Cain became a restless wanderer on the earth. The punishment fit the crime.

DAVE BAST

East of Eden. He lives east of Eden.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and you are restless. Well, contentment, therefore; gratitude, contentment, count your blessings one by one, as you said Dave. That is a great way, and it is what Paul said, too. You can read in I Corinthians 12, where Paul compares the Church to the Body and different body parts, different talents; and Paul says, "Look, God gives different gifts to different people." And in I Corinthians 12:11:

All of these are the work of the one and same Spirit, and He distributes these gifts to each on as He determines. We all have stuff to be grateful for; we all have more than enough to be content with, Paul says, stop comparing yourselves, stop tearing each other apart – which the Corinthians were doing, of course – and be content.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and to use that analogy that he does there of the body: the eye is not the same as the hand, and maybe the hand looks at the eye and says, "Oh, wow, they are much more important than I am, and who are they?" and envy sets in. If we can get to the point where the hand can look at the eye and say, "Boy, thank God for the gifts that person has, and yeah, it is way beyond me, but I am grateful for that. I am grateful for their gifts. And God has given me some stuff, too. I am thankful for that, and I am content with who He's made me."

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. The Christian writer, Robert Roberts, once said that pride and envy sometimes seem to have too much self-esteem, too high an opinion. Robert Roberts says, "No, it is low self-esteem, because you forget God has already loved you like the entire universe. In Jesus Christ, God has already given you everything you could ever want. Be glad for how much God loves you and then be content and be grateful. Let that set the tone for your whole life."

DAVE BAST

Yes, amen to that! Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like us to dig into next time on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/envy>

Printed on December 9, 2024