

“It is Easy Being Green”

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Mark 15:6-14

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Series: Break the Chains

Print Media is on the decline....has been on the decline for several years. Even Woodside Church followed this trend when we retired the Woodside Word several years ago and have since gone to emailing or e-blasts. It was a bittersweet decision as the Woodside Word had been a Woodside staple for years. It was always however, an administrative challenge to produce and the information was dated practically the minute it was printed. I know because I was the editor of the newsletter for years. In 2003 I started writing a personal monthly column for the Woodside Word called Musings by Martha. It was my personal observations about a variety of things. Over the years I wrote reflections on parenting, gardening, snoring...even shopping carts...all with a spiritual twist.

The premise for this message is actually born out of a column I wrote several years ago called Reflections On: “Greener Grass...Look in Your own Backyard.” Here is what I wrote for the issue from September 2003:

“Early this summer I interviewed three landscape companies to help me out with some much needed lawn and tree work. I prudently reviewed each estimate and decided to go with the company I felt gave me the fairest price and the firmest handshake. The landscapers appeared to begin the work we agreed on and then....disappeared. Games of phone tag turned into phone chase and I was always it. There were holes in my yard, weeds were thriving, and so were my feelings of disappointment that I put my faith in an unreliable company, discouragement at the thought of finding someone else to finish the work and disgust at the current state of my yard. In short I found myself in a bit of a spiritual funk.

It didn't help much when we left our landscaping mess behind for a week to visit relatives who are...well...rich. The home we stayed in with them is one of three they own. We swam in their pool; played tennis on courts bordered by their meticulously

maintained yard and were driven around town in their latest model of designer car. Their grass was sooo much greener! This did not make me happy. I felt poor and cheated. *If only I had what they had...*"

We are in the middle of our message series on the 7 Deadly Sins. We've talked about how Pride makes us think we are above the law, how Lust and Anger can destroy relationships and Gluttony effects our physical mental and spiritual health.

Today we are talking about Envy.

'The essayist Joseph Epstein writes, "Of the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all."

There's plenty of research to back up Epstein's statement. Psychologists have found that envy decreases life satisfaction and depresses well-being. Envy is positively correlated with depression and neuroticism, and the hostility it breeds may actually make us sick. Recent works suggests that envy can help explain our complicated relationship with social media (like Facebook): it often leads to destructive "social comparison," which decreases happiness.

Epstein goes on to say that envy makes us look "ungenerous, mean, [and] small-hearted." No wonder nobody wants to own up to this unhappy sin!

Adapted from Arthur C. Brooks, "The Downside of Inciting Envy," The Wall Street Journal (3-1-14)

Envy is a synonym of covet. Other synonyms include invidiousness, green-eyed-monster and resentment. Related words include animosity, hatred, ill-will and malice. Of all the Deadly Sins Envy maybe the most insidious because it is the easiest to be silent about. It is however a biggie – coming in at #10 of God's top ten in fact.

¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Another one of God's top ten is: ³ "You shall have no other gods before^[a] me."

This commandment, interestingly enough, refers to Jealousy. Envy and jealousy are often used interchangeably but there is a difference between the two. Jealousy can be used in a good sense. Its root is *zelos*, the same word from which we also get zeal, or zealous. When the word is applied to God, saying He is a jealous God, means He demands that we worship and love Him exclusively above all other gods.

Jealousy can also refer to the fear of losing someone's love or favor.

Envy is defined as: 'a painful awareness of another's possessions or advantages and an inordinate desire to have them too.'

While jealousy **can** be positive, envy, always has a bad meaning. Envy starts with jealous desire.

Envy is an emotion. A mindset. It is a craving for things we don't have or want more of: money, a smaller waist line, a better home, someone else's job or spouse. Maybe it's a talent someone has for something you aren't very gifted for. And envy goes beyond just wanting something someone else has. When it rears its ugly head, you may find yourself resenting everything about the person. Not only their things but every success the other person has. Envy robs us of the ability to celebrate others' successes and joys.

Hence my spiritual funk when comparing my own circumstances to my relatives. My envy made my blue eyes green.

Do you ever wonder where the phrase "Green With Envy" came from? If you go back a few hundred years to the 16th and 17th centuries, great authors such as Shakespeare wrote of characters who were green with envy, who were 'green-eyed monster.'s In Anthony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare wrote of the 'green sickness,' And in Merchant of Venice, he used the term 'green-eyed jealousy.'

Long before Shakespeare connected green with jealous envy, the color was more commonly used to describe illness. Author David Feldman claims the early Greeks interchanged "green" and "pale" to mean sickly. The Greeks thought that when you were ill or jealous, the body produced too much bile, giving the skin a green tint.

<http://www.sensationalcolor.com/color-meaning/color-words-phrases/green-with-envy-2109#.V4Zf7vkrLcs>

Are destructive emotions doing a number on you? Are you feeling poor and cheated because your life seems full of weeds while everyone around you has a lush garden of success? Has it put you in a bit of a spiritual funk?

Les Carter, in his book *Mind Over Emotions*, gives kind of a litmus test to help us determine if perhaps we are harboring feelings of envy:

Do you work extremely hard to come out looking good?

Do you examine others with a critical eye?

Do you have hidden feelings of inferiority?

Do you complain about not getting fair treatment?

Do you find it hard to pay compliments to others?

Do you keep score of your own good deeds and those of others?

If you answered yes to some of these questions, you may be having trouble with envy, even though you haven't recognized it.

Here is kind of the 'good news/bad news' about envy: it's a product of human nature.

"Deep down we are creatures of comparison" says author Andrew Oswald, a professor of economics. He did a study about **The Strange Link between Suicide and "Happy Places"**

"Apparently, a number of nations with high levels of happiness—Canada, the United States, Iceland, and Switzerland—also have high suicide rates. It seems counter-intuitive, but researchers think they've found the basis for this trend: we're constantly comparing ourselves with other people. So living in a place where everyone seems upbeat, happy, and put-together can lead a depressed person to say, "Great, now I'm sad, and I'm also worse off than all of you disgustingly happy people. Now I'm depressed *and* inferior to you."

In short – it is easy being green. And it's just about inevitable that you are going to experience envy in some way, shape or form in your life time. And it has a long biblical history too:

- God gave Adam and Eve everything yet Eve listened to the Serpent and then she was envious of God's knowledge. She wanted to be like God – knowing all. Genesis 3:4
- Cain was envious that Abel's offering to God was looked upon more favorably than his offering. Did Cain celebrate Abel's success? No, he was so consumed with envious rage, he killed Abel for it. Genesis 4:8
- Because of envy Jacob tricked Isaac to steal Esau's birthright. Genesis 27:27-29
- Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him into slavery because he had dreams of leadership and success. Genesis 37:19

And envy was one of the driving forces behind the Sanhedrin's push for Jesus' execution.

"Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of **envy** that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Mark 15:6-14

Envy can drive you to extremes.

But what you don't act upon your envious desires? I mean if it is in our nature to be envious what's so bad about it? I might be thinking: 'I want what she has, yes, but I would never kill her for it!'

When I was writing this column I really struggled with that – is coveting the actual sin? Or is it the behavior used to acquire what we covet? I thought I'd found a loop hole! A perfect way to rationalize – if I just had thoughts but didn't act upon them... it isn't sin!

I went back to the Bible looking for clues to support this clever revelation and found...none.

"You shall **not** covet..." doesn't leave much room for interpretation.

So if we find ourselves looking at others through green colored glasses what can we do?

1. Recognize and acknowledge how you are feeling.

Acknowledging your envy means looking at yourself honestly. The Apostle Paul advises to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you whether your actual motives are for selfish gain or to achieve status in other people's eyes or causing you to be disingenuous towards another friend or family member.

"The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:19-21

Name envy for what it is. Blow away the cover-up.

2. Confess it as sin and use your energy to get rid of it.

Focusing or hanging on to envy keeps us from focusing on God's Word. It's a deadly deterrent to growth and allows the weeds to flourish in a garden of spiritual funk. The Apostle Peter advises: "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy,

envy and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good"

1 Peter: 2:1-2.

God promises to forgive and cleanse us from all sin if we agree with Him that what we are doing is sin. Offer your struggles to him in a time of confession. We've talked about the ACTS method of praying...the C stands for confession. Make confession part of your prayer time and turn your feelings of envy over to him.

3. Accept forgiveness.

I had another revelation as I tried to wrestle my green-eyed self through the coveting loophole and finish writing my column. An awakening, in the middle of the night, the night before the day I had to finish writing. I woke with the palms of my hands and the soles of feet burning, intense, fiery burning that was like nothing I had ever experience before nor have since. I remember turning on the light thinking I would see red, burning blistered skin but what I saw was...nothing. Not one unusual thing about the way my skin looked. It was the strangest sensation. Eventually it eased enough that I was able to fall back asleep and in the morning the burning feeling was completely gone. But in its place came a clear understanding.

I believe my burning hands and feet were a sign to me that my sin is exactly what Jesus died for. His hands and feet were pierced for my sin, for your sin, for our sin. He didn't look for a loophole when he stood before the envious Sanhedrin. He went to the cross to put jealous envy to death once and for all. Because he was forsaken, died and rose again, we are forgiven.

4. Develop a thankful heart.

Thank God every day that you are just the person He created you to be. Thank Him that He chose you to be His own. Make a concerted effort not compare yourself with others but celebrate the gifts he's given you. Remember that study I mentioned on suicide and happy places? That research also found that making a list of things you are grateful for at least two or three times a week can boost life

satisfaction. I don't think that's enough. We should give thanks daily. Greg Penza has a sign in his office that reads:

"What if you woke up today with only what you thanked God for yesterday?"

5. Celebrate others.

After all aren't we all created in God's image? If we are more sincere in our appreciation of how he blesses us all in unique ways, we can nurture a greater appreciation for all He has given us and have less need to be envious of others.

Fred Rogers wrote, in his book **Life's Journeys, Things to Remember Along the Way**:

"I believe that appreciation is a holy thing – that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to with at the moment, we are doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something sacred." Pg 68

But most of all remember that the grass is never greener in someone else's yard. All that stuff my relatives had that I was so envious of? In the end it wasn't enough to sustain their happiness or their family. Their divorce was finalized 6 years ago.

Best to keep your eyes turned toward your own backyard. That's what I did. That doesn't mean I didn't wish for that disappearing landscaper to reappear and clean up my yard. But I didn't wait around. I headed outside to tackle some therapeutic weed pulling. Maybe you should try that too and you'll find, like I did, it can do wonders for your spiritual funk.