

**Transcript: Seven Deadly Sins: Envy – Rev. Hedy Collver**

There is a famous story in our Bible that we usually know as the Prodigal Son. It's a story with which a lot of people even who've never stepped foot in a church would be familiar. It's a story of a young man who didn't really respect what his father had done and accumulated over the years and so instead of waiting for his inheritance he went up to his dad and said "Just give it all to me now." His dad being a very grace-filled person gave it to him. The young man went off to a foreign land and wasted all of it. He quickly became destitute, learned humility, and then made the decision to come back home to beg his father for a place as a servant in his household.

When his dad saw him coming, though, something unexpected happened. He saw his son out coming down the road—the son he had thought he was dead—and he was so excited. The dad runs out to him, embraces him and then throws a party in celebration.

But although we call this the "Prodigal Son," there are actually two sons in the story. This is from *The Message* paraphrase of Luke chapter 15 verses 25 through 32:

*All this time the older son was out in the field. When the days work was done he came in. As he approached the house he heard music and dancing. Calling over one of the servants he asked what was going on. The servant told him "Your brother has come home. Your father has ordered a feast, barbequed beef."*

[By the way, that's actually not what it says in the original: barbequed beef.]

*"... he's ordered a feast, barbequed beef because he's come home safe and sound." The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said "Look how many years I've stayed here serving you. Never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown me a party and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money shows up and you go all out for a feast." His father said "Son you don't understand. You're with me all the time and everything that is mine is yours and this is a wonderful time. We had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and he's alive. He was lost and he's found."*

I want you to raise your hand if you grew up with a brother or a sister. The only people not raising their hands are only children. Okay. Now, in those years did you ever feel like your brother or sister got a better deal than you? Did you ever feel like they didn't have to work quite as hard, or that they were treated a bit better? They got stuff that you didn't get. Come on. Be honest. Lots of you! Okay. Have you ever really, really wanted somebody else's car? Or maybe somebody else's house or someone's job? Maybe you've wished that you had a body like somebody else's or somebody else's health or somebody else's family. Or maybe you just wished you had somebody else's minister who didn't make you raise your hand in worship and answer awkward questions! Totally legitimate.



This is the second week of our Lenten series, the *Seven Deadly Sins*. Even if you hadn't heard the two scripture readings this morning; if you hadn't heard the children's story; if you hadn't looked in the bulletin and saw the title of the sermon, you could probably still guess that what we're talking about today is envy.

What exactly is envy? This is a quote from the *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*: "They say it's normal for people to grasp their identity by comparing themselves with others, but when another spiritual or material goods are experienced as challenging their adequacy, people feel a loss of self esteem. In an effort to overcome dissatisfaction, to reestablish self-esteem, the envious are ready to devalue the other as a cause of their loss of self worth. It is totally normal for us to compare ourselves to others. That's one of the ways that we know where we sit into our world. "

For example, I know that I'm of average height for a female adult in the United States. I know a lot of women who are shorter than me and a lot of women who are taller than me, so I'm right kind of in the middle. I know that I'm middle aged. I'm not really young and I'm not elderly. I've looked at the actuarial tables. I know how long my life expectancy is. I know I'm right in the middle of it. All these different ways that I'm able to look around at the people I know and to be able to see where it is that I fit.

The problem is, though, when that comparison starts to diminish who we are. When we start to look at what someone else has, what someone else does, what someone else has accumulated, who they are, what they have done with their lives, and we start to feel inadequate or inferior. When we start to look at what somebody else has and we feel like we have not then gotten our fair share. That's exactly what happened to the older son in the Prodigal Son story. He is suddenly overwhelmed with soul-eating envy.

Why is envy such a big deal? Why is it included in this list of Seven Deadly Sins? We look around us. We look in our world. We look in our community. We watch the news and we see a lot of really awful things going on. People treating each other in horrible ways. Compared to that, it seems like envy is a pretty minor thing. So why does God even put this envy sin in the Ten Commandments? This is from Exodus 20:

*You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.*

That's envy we're talking about there. Envy is so important. It is such a deadly sin because our thoughts and our feelings lead to action. We had two different scripture readings this morning, but we really could have chosen a whole bunch of different ones. Our Bible is full of stories of envy. Like Cain being so envious of his brother Abel. Jacob wanting his brother Esau's inheritance, his birth right, and being so consumed by jealousy. The disciples fighting over who's going to be first in the kingdom, who's going to have that position of power and influence. The religious leaders of Jesus' time looking at Jesus and being so envious of the

influence that he had had, the power and the authority, his ability to heal and save and help people. This is such a problem because in each of the instances that we talked about here in our Bible, each time that envy led to deception and betrayal and even murder. Our thoughts and our feelings lead to action. Envy is dangerous, dangerous stuff in our lives.

There are two main problems with envy. The first is that envy chisels away at our joy. It's interesting that envy is the only one of the Seven Deadly Sins that has no emotional positive upside. Look at anger. When you experience anger you have that momentary surge of adrenaline. You feel powerful in that moment. Lust and gluttony have temporary pleasure. All of the different seven Deadly Sins have some sort of upside— except envy. Envy feels awful right from the onset. We feel diminished. There is no good feeling that comes from that. So why is it so prevalent in our lives?

A friend of mine told me about a fourth century legend that talks about an incredibly godly man, a man who had devoted his entire life to faithfully following God. He had become a hermit living out in the desert. The legend says that the Devil had sent some novice demons to learn their trade with this man. They were doing everything that they could to tempt him. They were bringing out sumptuous feasts and wine, but nothing would make this man turn his back on God. So they went back to the Devil saying "We can't do it. We've completely failed." And the Devil said "You're trying too hard. Go back and tell this man some good news." So they went back to the man, and told him, "Your younger brother has become Bishop of Antioch." And in that moment the man experienced the soul-eating sin of envy, and he lost it all.

Just about everyone experiences envy at some point in our lives. The details are different, but the issue and the sin is the same. It even happens in really young children. Have you ever watched a couple of kids playing together with a bunch of toys? What toy is the most amazing, most desirable toy in the room? Whatever toy the other child has. It's a part of who we are. It's deeply engrained. Envy: wanting something that someone else has. Envy chisels away at our joy.

The second problem with envy is that it also chisels away at community. Proverbs 14:30 says this: *"A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones."*

Have you ever seen somebody really, really sick, especially with nausea? There is a visible change that happens in their skin. Many years ago, I was on a boat with my dad in The Bahamas. It was a 90 foot driftfishing boat. My dad practically grew up on boats, so when I saw him leaning over the railing, I thought he was just looking at the rolling waves. But when he turned to look at me his face was literally green. I had never seen him that sick before.

We have a phrase "green with envy." Envy, when it takes a foothold in our life, can make us spiritually, emotionally, mentally and even physically sick. It is incredibly dangerous.

At Aldersgate we want to be a different kind of community. We want to be a community that is characterized by God's love and grace and forgiveness and power. We want to be the kind of

community that is known for loving each other, for caring for each other and for loving and caring for the world, as well. If you were to make a list of things that could bring something like that to a screeching halt, envy would be right up there at the top. Because envy isolates us. When you are envious of someone else, you don't want to be in their presence. When you are being envied by someone else, they don't want to be near you. That's exactly what the older son experiences. He can not believe that his bad-news, jerky younger brother is receiving this kind of treatment from his father. The older son cannot even physically be in his presence. Luke 15 verse 28: *"The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in."*

There are two reactions that we usually have to envy. The first is that we just want what the other person has. We want it for ourselves. But, if we can't get that, if we can't have what they have, then at an absolute minimum we want them to lose it. We don't want them to have it. If we can't have it, they can't have it.

I lived in Germany when I was 18, and I went over there knowing hardly any German so I had to learn it very, very quickly. So I was fascinated by the way they put words together. There was a word that struck me so powerfully back then that it has actually come part of English language as well so you may have heard it called "schadenfreude." Schadenfreude is a fascinating word because it's made up of two different words, "schade" and "freude." You would use "schade" when you have somebody in your life who you love who has gone through something difficult you would say, "Ach, schade." Oh, I'm so sorry. Oh, what a shame. Oh, what a pity. And then that second part of it, "freude." If something really wonderful has happened to someone you would say, "Ich freue mich fur dich!" I am rejoicing for you. I am so happy for you. So you have shame and pity on one hand, and then joy and rejoice on the other. Finding pleasure and joy in someone else's misfortune. Schadenfreude.

Compare that with what Jesus says in Matthew 22 verses 37 through 38. A bunch of people have come up to Jesus, and they ask him what is the greatest commandment in all of the Jewish scriptures. This is how he answers:

*"Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind."  
This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it. "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Love God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind, and with all of your strength. Loving God with everything that you are and then loving your neighbor, those around you, in the same way that you love yourself. That is the exact opposite of envy. When we live according to this great commandment, someone else's loss is our loss. Someone else's triumph is our triumph. It is the exact opposite of envy. And yet envy has such a foothold in our lives. So what is the prescription?

I believe that there are two parts to the prescription. The first is to recognize that envy, and all of the Seven Deadly Sins, have at their core a good gift from God, but we have just grossly distorted it. In pride, the good gift that God gave us— that we distorted— is the enjoyment of



our accomplishments and the things that we have in our life. The good gift at the core of anger— that we have distorted— is that thirst for justice. A good gift at the core of greed is the yearning to grow and to learn and to build. Every single one of them has a core of good that has been distorted. Including envy: the desire for something more in our lives. That “more” was always intended to be more of God. When we replace God with other things, that is when we get into trouble. That brings us to the second part of the prescription.

Deciding to define who we are by who we are, not by who we are not. Let me give you an example. I could decide to define myself by what I am not. I could say that I am not a Carnegie Hall worthy singer like my sister-in-law Kelly. I am not a 5’ 11” former model like my cousin, Makeira. I am not a parent like my brother Curt. I cannot run a marathon— actually I can’t even run a mile without needing a nap. I can’t play the violin or the piano. I can’t salsa dance or drive a stick shift. I haven’t received my doctorate yet. I could go on and on. I could spend the rest of my life telling you all the things that I am not. There are an infinite number of ways that I can define myself that way. But I get smaller and smaller and smaller every time.

Or... I could make the decision to define myself by who I am. I am a beloved child of God. I have been given exactly the gifts and graces and resources that I need for this moment in my life. And I have been promised life eternal with God.

We don’t know really how the story ends with the elder son. We’re not told anything beyond the dad coming out and begging him to come in to this celebratory feast. We don’t get any information after that, but my prayer is that someone in that kind of situation, that he would go off in his anger and his bitterness and his rage and his envy, and that he would open himself up to God, praying to God, and that there would be a change in his heart— revolution in his heart— and then he would suddenly realize what a gift it was that his brother has come home safe and sound. That he would be released from envy, and be happy that his family has been restored. And that he would go in to the party and enjoy that barbequed beef. That he would be able to be a part of the family again.

First Corinthians 2:9: *“No eye has seen. No ear has heard and no human mind has conceived— the things that God has prepared for those who love him.”* When you really understand, truly understand in the core of who you are that you are forever loved, forever valued, you don’t have to compare yourself to other people. When you know that you are a beloved child of God, that God has given everything to be able to show you that love, you don’t have to waste an ounce of energy ever again feeling diminished by what someone else has or what someone else is— because you know that you have all you need and a God who loves you and who will never stop loving you.

I offer this to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.