

“Envy or Kindness?”

August 2, 2015

Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series

“I’m not a greedy person, just an envious one.” We may not talk about our struggle with envy much, but it’s there. Envy exists in our social lives - at work, in church, in friendships, in families. It’s everywhere!

And it starts early. There was a little girl - a first grader - who loved to use the headphones in the classroom when she finished her work. She and the others in her class could listen to books and music, but you had to finish your work first. She usually did! It was never a problem.

Until one day...another girl got to the last set of headphones first before she did! She hurried and finished her work and then marched right up to the other girl who was listening intently. She proceeded to pull the headphones off of her the other girl’s head. You can imagine what happened next, and it wasn’t any good.

I’ll confess that the girl who pulled the headphones off was me. Thankfully, Sarah forgave me and didn’t hate me for the rest of our school years. But I still remember that feeling. Sure I was angry, but even more, I wanted what Sarah had. It was mine - or should have been mine!

Envy, at its core, is wanting what someone else has. That’s the simple definition. If we define envy that way, does anyone here stand innocent? Haven’t we all wanted what someone else has? It’s another opportunity for “airing our dirty laundry” and showing our true colors.

Cain and Abel and The Ten Commandments touch on envy. It’s the last commandment about “do not covet.” Someone once explained coveting as when you want something so badly you don’t even want someone else to have it. Proverbs 14:30 says, “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.” Envy robs us of the joy we’re called to have in God who is gracious and faithful. Galatians 5 warns against envy as one of the acts of the flesh that keeps us from experiencing the Kingdom of God.

Envy is a close cousin to pride. We get to a place where we can’t even be happy for others’ successes. In fact, we might even be happy when others are miserable. It’s more than jealousy; it’s really a form of hate that’s built on competition and comparison. Frederick Buechner says, “Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are.”

I had to think about that definition a bit, but really it's true. When we envy someone, we don't focus on the incredible blessings of God in our lives. Their successes become bigger, and ours seem to pale in comparison. Envy makes us dissatisfied and discontent. We refuse to see God's gifts. We fixate on someone else's life or stuff or job or whatever.

And envy is something we don't talk about very much. We keep it to ourselves. We don't want to admit it. It really does consume us and makes us very sad. I want you to watch a video called "The Facebook Trap." Facebook is a powerful social media tool, but it can be a breeding ground for envy. It takes two to envy, and men and women both struggle, but usually with the same gender.

Jesus forces us to face envy when he offers this parable about the laborers in the vineyard. The kicker is what the landowner asks: "Are you envious because I'm kind?" Um, yes, we are! Maybe we sympathize with the all-day workers. They've been treated unfairly. Where's the justice in the latecomers getting the same pay? How is that fair? What's this about unequal pay for unequal work? What kind of business practice is that?

In Jesus' day, day laborers gathered each morning hoping to be hired. They worked day-to-day with nothing steady or certain – just enough to survive. The desperation and hardship of day-to-day work was a reality. Steady employment is still elusive for many, and day labor is a reality.

But what if we look at the landowner more carefully? He hires workers for the day, but then keeps going out to get more workers. You'd think he'd send a manager which was the usual way, but he goes himself. Why didn't he get enough the first time around?

And why does he pay those latecomers the same as the all-day workers? It just isn't fair! That's the real downer of the story – that's the struggle. For the religious leaders of Matthew's day, the landowner's sense of justice is skewed. We feel the envy of those first-comers, don't we?

But Jesus' words aren't about the wages earned or about how to run a business. He's talking about the landowner himself. This parable is about God's grace – that unconditional love that we cannot earn – that we don't deserve – but that we receive because of how good and kind God is.

We affirm God's grace in theory. We like to talk about it, but when it comes to extending it to others, it's tough. Grace is great, but not always when it applies to someone else and not just me – and especially to people I don't like, don't get along with, don't agree with, and the list goes on! But as N.T. Wright reminds us, "we're all equal at the foot of the cross."

What those first-comers object to isn't that the latecomers receive wages, but that they receive equal wages. Those who have worked all day think they should receive a bonus because they worked more. They resent the landowner's kindness. It goes beyond their expectations.

But if Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God, aren't we glad for that kindness as it reminds us of God's love and care for us? God will not stop looking for more workers. Each one is valued by God, and that's where God's kindness shows through.

Sometimes we question people's motives even in the church. "How is that person leading something? He's new. She's not been here long. What gives him the right to do that?" In the parable, the landowner wanted to maximize the harvest, so he got more workers. It's not *when* they came to work; it's that they *were needed and willing to work*.

God pursues us faithfully and offers us grace in Jesus Christ. But God's values aren't like ours. Grace, by its very nature, isn't fair. God's invitation into relationship isn't based on our merits, but on God's mercy. And that's something we don't control.

This is a powerful lesson – a difficult lesson – because it's easy to fall into envy. It's easy to get bogged down in what I've done for God that I forget what God does for me. We focus on how unfair the world is rather than on how good God is. But as one pastor said, "you will never be able to see the goodness of God with a jealous eye."

We know the world is not always a just place. Things are unfair. Our situations differ, and some hurt while others seem to continue on without worry. We might struggle with this parable because it is unfair in terms of our human response. But ultimately, aren't we grateful that God is good and kind even when it may not make sense to us?

All of us have experienced God's goodness. Sometimes it's the right word at the right time...the answer that comes when we've struggled, the relief and release to life eternal after suffering a long illness, the treatment that brings hope, the person who knows us and accepts us and yet calls us to be our best for God, the conviction of our hearts when we've been wrong, the forgiveness that we can offer and that we receive. And the gift of salvation itself shows God's goodness: "that God is good, that he is good to me, enters into my heart only if I trust that he cares for his children beyond all that we ask or think and that I, too, am safe and secure in his goodness."

For as much as the parable teaches us about grace, it also reminds us that God will not be bargained with. We can't presume grace because it's always undeserved and unearned. It's freely given. God is not a vending machine. Salvation isn't an achievement that we mark off on our life goal list. Salvation – wholeness and healing that we find in Jesus Christ – is a gift to be shared.

So Jesus teaches about how we should live in community here. We're called to kindness. In God's eyes, we come as equals, regardless of our age or ability or tenure in the church. God loves each of us as if we were the only one to love, someone said. And God calls us into a community of faith where grace abounds.

We seek belonging and connection, and we find that in Christ. And when we nurture that relationship, we're bound to a church family where there is encouragement, strength, grace, goodness. We walk our journeys together. They are not the same, of course, but they are united in God's grace. And as one person wrote, "If I have the grace to rejoice in somebody else's achievement or good fortune as well as my own, I'll be far happier."

The best part is that we learn more about God from listening to each other. It's in being together that we learn about God's grace. I can talk about how God is good to me, but what a blessing to hear about God's goodness in your life!

When we come to the Lord's Table, we confess our sin before we come. Even before we experience the fullness of this sacrament - this sign of grace - we have to come as people in need. Jesus meets all of us here. We all come on equal ground before God. None of us is better or more deserving. None of us has done enough to receive God's grace. We simply come with our hands open and empty. For all that we want to get, for the ways that we compete and compare, in this moment we're challenged to come with open hands that are ready to receive.

And when we come, we encounter God who is good and kind and gracious beyond what we expect or imagine. Come, friends, ready to receive. Thanks be to God. AMEN.