

Recycling Envy

Gen 4:1-8, 1 Cor 12:14-27

Friends, imagine for a moment that you are going about your daily business as you normally do, when suddenly an angel appears in front of you – and you know he’s an angel because he’s a well-built good-looking fellow wearing in a white robe with leather sandals and you can see a halo above his head.... and he tells you “do not be afraid, I am an angel sent by Jesus”

Then, once you’ve recovered from the initial shock and composed yourself, he tells you that Jesus has sent him to let you know that you are going to be blessed! You can ask for whatever you desire to have in your life and Jesus will bless you with it...

And just as you are about to blurt out “I want to win Lotto 649” He adds... there’s only one condition - whatever you ask for, your rival will be blessed with also – doubly!

So friends... who is your rival? and with that condition... what would you ask for?

This conundrum comes from a Jewish fable where two rival shopkeepers were both presented with this option.

Neither shopkeeper said anything for a long time as they mulled over the implications of what their request might mean in terms of their rival having more than they would. Finally one of them decided what his request would be.

Knowing that his rival would receive double whatever he requested he said “I wish to be blind in one eye!” and that friends... that is Envy.

You see we typically think of envy as your garden variety type of jealousy.

That wishful comparative type of discontent where we think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence and so we say things like - “Oh they are so fortunate... I wish I had their

job, their family, their looks, their vacations, their luck... you fill in the blank”

We think of envy that which makes us feel the need to keep up with the Jones.

But Envy is much more malignant than simply wishing we had the nice things that others have.

As one of the seven deadly sins Envy is when you harbor malice, ill-will, and spite towards someone else because you don't think they deserve whatever nice things they might have.

When you Envy someone you have a bone to pick with God for choosing someone other than you to receive what you consider essential blessings in life – why them and not me.

Envy is bred from the rivalry that occurs among equals, among people who are more similar than not.

You see I'm not likely to envy Jerome Iginla for his hockey skills, I'm a minister... but when I see that a former seminary classmate of mine is a now featured speaker at the Breakforth Conference... well I feel a stab of envy! Why him, why not me?

And we all have rivals that we can envy don't we... from our past and present. What about that co-worker who got that promotion, that assignment, that corner office... and not you?

That sibling who always seemed to have it better, who succeeded at everything while you had to work so hard for everything? That kid in high school or a friend in college who got all the attention or got all the scholarships...

Friends we do have our rivals... those people that just seem to make us feel like we have to compete and do better than they do... we envy them, and sometimes we don't even realize it's happening to us.

Now maybe you wouldn't wish them blind in both eyes... but if we're honest we do harbor a certain degree of ill-will and criticism towards our rivals, don't we?

So we downplay their success by saying that they got the promotion because they are brown-nosing the boss! That's why we feel a smidge of satisfaction when our successful sibling's kids get into trouble with the law. When we discover that our old high-school rival had their marriage fall apart...

We can always find a way to blow out our rival's candle so that ours seems to shine a bit brighter, find some way to try to pull them back down to where we are – friends, that's the heart of Envy.

And it's a deadly sin... because it rots us from the inside out. Proverbs 14:30 says *"A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones"*

On the outside you look like a normal, everyday, successful happy person – but inside there is a cancerous discontent that

eats away at the joy and happiness you might feel with who you are and where you are at in life, all because your rival has what you believe you need to have to be happy, what you think should rightfully be yours.

And if we don't learn to understand what is at the heart of envy, if we don't discover what it is that Sin is twisting, then friends... Envy will have its way with us.

Such was the case with Wanda Holloway. When her daughter, Shanna, was beaten out for a spot on the Jr. High cheerleading squad back in 1991 by another girl. Wanda was so envious of this position for her daughter she tried to put out a hit on this other's girl's mother.

She decided to target the mother instead because she figured the girl would be so devastated by her mother's death that she would drop out of the team and the spot would open up for her daughter instead.

Fortunately, the person whom she had asked to arrange the hit had gone straight to the police and they arrested Holloway the next day.

So, we can see why the scriptures teach us that *“Where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice”* (James 3:16)

In fact friends the very first murder was committed because of envy.

Cain was the first born of Adam and Eve; his birth was a big deal – his name means “brought forth” and there’s good reason to think that in naming this child Eve was remembering that fateful day in the Garden and God’s promise about one of her children crushing the head of the serpent.

I’m willing to bet that Cain was probably the golden boy and the favorite of his mother, while Abel – whose name means temporary and meaningless, was not so much the favorite.

And I suspect that with the birth of Cain, Adam and Eve were hoping for an undoing of the terrible consequences they had brought into the world, but some time later... when Abel was born – nothing had changed, life was still hard and Abel’s name reflects that.

So, when Abel receives God’s favor for bringing God a choice offering that is indicative of his love for God – Cain becomes envious, Abel has become his rival.

Cain is supposed to have God’s favor, he had given God an offering as well... but his offering was perfunctory and out of entitlement, not of love for God.

God confronts Cain about this and lets him know that he can rectify the situation *“if you do what is right, will you not be accepted?”*

In other words - realize who you really are... a fallen human, and who I really am... a God who blesses out of mercy, not

obligation... and offer me a sacrifice in that mindset from gratitude and you will have my favor as well.

But Cain won't listen, and so God's warning to him about Sin comes true – Cain does not master his sin, he doesn't recycle it; instead Sin twists Cain's identity from one who will crush the head of the serpent... into someone who will crush his own brother's head.

If He can't have God's favor – neither will Abel, so he kills Abel.

And friends, while we may not be plotting the murder of those who might be our rivals at work, home, school, or even at church... if Envy has its way with us we will say things, we will do things, which will cause that relationship with our rival and with others to wind up as casualties, Envy kills community.

And we might be tempted to say “no big deal – I'd be better off without that person in my life anyways” but then friends

Envy is crouching at our door – desiring to have its way with us...

You see the truth is that your rival could become your partner; in fact I'm willing to bet that your rival probably plays a vital role in whatever context you are in, and the truth is - if they were eliminated, it would also hurt you in some direct or indirect way.

This is what the Apostle Paul was trying to teach the Corinthian Christians. He says in vs. 21 *“there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don't need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!”*

On the contrary friends, as he says in vs. 26 *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”*

So you see the whole issue of Envy goes back to Sin twisting our identity. If we see ourselves as isolated individuals who are all competing for a limited amount of pie, if we believe

that our identity consists of how much of the pie we've been able to gather for ourselves... then Sin has an easy job of bringing envy out of our hearts.

But if our identity is built on the truth revealed to us in the scriptures, then when we experience those stabbing pangs of envy starting up, we can quickly move in on recycling it by reminding ourselves of who we truly are.

Starting with the passage we read in 1 Corinthians today we discover we are a unique part of the body of Christ, specifically placed, and arranged according to God's design. (vs. 18,27)

But friends, identities are complex and multi-faceted, so the scripture has a lot to say about identity – and frankly we just don't have the time to go through all this morning...

However in Ephesians chapter 2 we discover a wonderfully concise summary about our identity that for the purposes of recycling envy will do us just fine.

It starts with how Sin has affected us... which is good because that's what we are dealing with. Eph 2:1 – *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”*

Then because God believes we are worth recycling... Eph 2:4-5 *“because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.”*

And so now it is Eph 2: 10 *“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

That's the big picture of who we are friends... that's amazing! Being reminded of this truth when we start to feel envious lifts us back up above those petty things we're getting all worked up about.

Relax... so that other person has some success, that's good for them – but God won't forget about you – you are God's

project, he's got plans for you too, He created you and he will give you exactly what you will need – trust Him!

Isaiah 40:31 says *“those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up on wings as eagles”*

Eagles fly above the storms friends. So, as a “recycled – forgiven - wait'n on the Lord” type of person that you really are... you don't need to mess around down in the storm being envious over this or that!

See the big picture of who you really are and let that lift you up to soar above it all.

Now, we also need to learn and accept the smaller part that each of us has been given to play in the big picture.

Paul's analogy of the body in 1 Cor 12 implies that we need to discover specifically if we are a hand, or a foot, or an eye or an ear... and then embrace it and go with it and not try to be

something else, or envy someone else for who God has made them.

Paul reminds us of this further on in chapter 12 saying *“in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.*

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

It's a rhetorical question – obviously no, everyone doesn't need to do everything – God's given specific gifts and functions to specific people.

So Friends we need to believe that we whatever our functions or gifts are, we truly do play an important role in the body, whether we are prominent or behind the scenes.

Because vs. 17 says *“If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?”*

Friends, this is God telling each of us that we matter, that who we are and who we are becoming is important to the body, to the church - and we need to believe this, it needs to become part of how we see ourselves – our identity.

And these truths that scripture teaches us about our identity are primarily related to our role in the church but the principles behind them also hold true in your work, in your school, and in your family.

You are part of something bigger than yourself by God’s design, and God has specifically made you and placed you where you are for a purpose and a reason.

So when you feel envy starting to creep up on you, remind yourself that the person who you see as your rival, that person who seems to be getting what you want so badly... remind

yourself that they have their own unique part to play in God’s bigger picture, and its different from yours.

Instead of focusing on them you need to focus on discovering and being faithful with what God has designed you to do.

And when you do that friends, your envy will be recycled and your identity, your spiritual gifts will emerge and you will have a heart of peace that gives you vitality.

And you begin to see how that vitality, that passion - which comes from how God has uniquely designed you - is matched to perfectly meet some great hunger in this world!

And we come to truly know who we are, and what we’ve truly been made for – and there is no need for Envy, it’s been recycled into our Identity.

So, friends – imagine again that an angel appeared to you and told you that you could ask for whatever you wanted, with the condition that your rival would get double...

What would you ask for? Well friends *if one part is honored,*
and every part rejoices with it...

Why not ask to know who we truly are and what we can do for
the body of Christ – that friends is recycling envy!

Let's pray...