

Fully Alive: Envy – 5 July

The first church I was involved in leading was a young adults church in Wellington. It was a great season of life, but when we got married and Buzzy was pregnant, I realised there was no way my paid two days and the little financial support I received was going to support our family. It was time to get a “real job.” So, I finished up, and my role was taken up by another leader. He started, and almost immediately, early the following year, as the new wave of university students arrived, the church had an explosion of growth. As you can imagine, I had a lot to process, and whenever I thought about the situation, there was a wild swirl of feelings and emotions. But with distance, behind it all, lay that insidious, and near universal, beast of **envy**.

Of course, I am not the first person to feel envy. Right at the start of the Bible, there's a story that shows us exactly what envy looks like. In Genesis 4, God accepts Abel's offering and rejects Cain's. We are not told why, though the text hints at something in the posture of Abel and the difference of the offerings. But the reason that Abel's offering is preferred doesn't make a difference to Cain. Cornelius Plantinga writes: “An envier doesn't care whether you have earned part of your success or whether some golden parachute from heaven has dropped straight into your lap. To an envier, your advantage is totally unfair either way.” Much of Scripture could be charted through the lens of envy, especially the envy inherent in sibling rivalry. From Cain and Abel to Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Isaac and Ishmael, to Joseph's brothers.

Envy is central to the human experience and yet, it's been said, of all the seven deadly sins only envy is no fun at all. There is no satisfaction or pleasure to be had, just that feeling when someone else gets something good, or is superior to us in some way, and instead of being happy for them, it makes you angry. Joseph Epstein describes envy: “You see something, want it, feel it only sensible and right that it belong to you and not the person who has it. Once the injustice is established, their unworthiness must be emphasised, at least in our own mind. Your own greater worthiness goes without saying.”

Transitory vs Vicious Envy

All of us will experience fleeting moments of envy. Envy is hard to avoid given we live in a capitalist society built upon the premise of envy. The entire advertising industry is little more than an envy-creating machine. What we do with that envy is what matters. Transitory envy becomes toxic when we nurse it and allow resentment to take root in our hearts. In the story of Cain and Abel, and our reading of Saul and David, envy left unchecked developed into murderous rage. When the women sing their song for David, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” The NIV says, “Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly.” He extrapolates from this: “next they'll be making him king.” Envy easily tips into wishing ill of the other or relishing a perspective that makes us feel

better about the situation. While I never wished him ill, if I am honest, when I discovered ways that my colleague's public success came at heavy mental and relational costs there was a part of me that at times found a sense of comfort and justification in that.

Who do we envy? There's something about proximity when it comes to vicious envy. Saul doesn't envy the monarchs of surrounding empires, but this young man in his own court. His son's best friend. The one who plays him music with the black dog comes. Vicious envy is not roused by the most objectively enviable of people, but by those who are close to us, with whom we have a great deal in common. I didn't feel envious of the mega-church pastor across the road, but my own friend who succeeded in a way I felt could have, should have been mine. One of our colleagues admitted to Josh: "I want my peers to do well, but not too well." Who or what you envy reveals a great deal about yourself. It reveals where you might look to for your sense of worth and dignity. Elizabeth Oldfield writes, "we feel envy towards those who surpass us in things that feel central to our identity. Envy is a clue to who we wish we were, indicating dissatisfaction with who we actually are." It all boils down to a deep-seated sense of not-enough-ness.

Jesus' Parable for the Envious

When we are new to faith, what's often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son is immensely comforting as we identify as the prodigal son, returning home filthy to the loving embrace of the father who runs to meet us. However, are we often not more like the envious elder brother than the younger? How often do we find ourselves resenting the unfairness of life? Especially towards those we don't think are worthy of the blessings they have received. The elder son is lost in resentment, perhaps more insidious than the lostness of the younger son. The most obvious casualty Jesus recognises from this kind of lostness is joy. The elder son is unable to enter into the joy of the Father. Unable to rejoice at his brother's repentance, unwilling to come to the party. Resentful envy and joy cannot coexist.

The parable leaves us with a question: does the elder brother come to the party? When we are lost in envy like the elder brother, we can fail to recognise an important point, that the father leaves the joyous party to come out and embrace the elder brother and invite him home too. "My child," the father says, "All I have is yours." The parable reveals that the elder brother's resentment is not aimed at his brother but at his father. Envy is clearly fracturing of relationship with others. You cannot love somebody and be envious of them. But at its core, envy is a rejection of the gifts and position that God has placed us in. Envy doesn't just say "I want what they have," it says "God, you got this wrong."

The film *Amadeus* tells the story of composer Antonio Salieri, who as a young man, prayed for God to make him a great composer, promising a life of devoted service in return. Then Mozart arrives: vulgar, immature, and unmistakably a genius. Salieri cannot make sense of it. Why would God pour such a

gift into someone so unworthy of it? He becomes convinced he is being mocked, even tested, and his envy of Mozart reveals something closer to hatred of God. Early on, a priest assures the aging Salieri that all men are equal in God's eyes. Salieri's reply: "Are they?" He points out that Mozart's middle name, Amadeus, means loved by God. Like Cain, like Saul, like the elder brother, Salieri's deepest quarrel was never really with the man in front of him. It was with the God who he felt had chosen wrongly.

The Good News for the Envious

But this is the good news Jesus is trying to help envious people to understand in this parable. That our worth is not found in what we do. The love of the father for the prodigal son does not come at the expense of love for the elder son. The father in the parable tries to assure the elder son that his brother's gain was not his loss. But the elder son was too much in the grip of envy to hear the assurances. His envy told him that his brother's advantage was his own disadvantage.

There is nothing we can do, nothing we can have, that can add to or take away from being beheld by the God who loves us, and in whose image we are created. Oldfield: "We have been taught to value in comparison. The imago dei means that we are entirely loved and can be entirely unremarkable in doing so." When we hear this, we are so schooled in competitive thinking we can respond like Dash in The Incredibles. When Mrs Incredible says to her son, "Everyone is special Dash." He responds with, "Which is another way of saying no one is." But, as we have learned with pride and greed, our attempts to earn, increase and bolster our human value outside of the love of God and our identity in Christ often work against our ability to live in the fullness that God has for us.

This good news is not just an idea. Jesus himself was the victim of envy (Matt. 27:18). He comes, as Hebrews says, as a new and better Abel whose blood speaks a better word: one that cries out not only for the innocent but for the guilty too. On the cross, Jesus represented both Abel and Cain. On Easter morning, God raised the victim of envy from the dead, so that we could all find our identity as beloved children of God, prodigals and elder brothers alike.

Resting in that love, that sense of worth in Christ, we are free to accept our life as gift. And to have the generosity of spirit to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. That is, we can celebrate the successes and gifts of others without being threatened or questioning our self-worth. We can admire others. **Admiration** requires a level of self-forgetfulness. We can even think to emulate others whom we respect, allowing their gifts to inspire us to be the best version of ourselves in a non-competitive way. The invitation to the elder brother is to learn from the younger brother, to emulate him. To take his posture of throwing ourselves at the feet of the father, in recognition that we are not owed anything. We are not entitled to anything.

A valid question remains: where does injustice end and envy begin? Some advantages really are unjust and inaccessible to us. The message to simply accept your lot has historically kept oppressed people down. But the choice before us remains: get angry, blame God, be consumed by resentment, or rest in our identity as beloved, that same unremarkable belovedness God has for all of us. We can choose a posture of gratitude for the gift of our life (Why me, Lord?), or bitter envy that others have it better (why them Lord?).

Conclusion

I want to finish by sharing a humbling and moving experience. A couple of years ago, my friend was up in Auckland running an event I went to. He was sharing about the growth in the church those years before. And then he acknowledged me, said that things happened far too quickly for him to take any credit and that I had been instrumental in building culture and praying into what he saw. It was humbling because I was being extended the admiration (publicly) that I hadn't offered to him for all that he had done.

Envy is a clue to who you wish you were. It will show you exactly where you've gone looking for your worth outside of the Father's love. Can you recognise **what** stirs your envy? What does this reveal about where you are looking for worth and identity?

And can you recognise **who** is it who stirs the quiet, insidious feeling of envy in you? Can you name them? This week, could you do one deliberately uncompetitive thing toward that person? Pray for their flourishing. Say something true and generous about them, even if just to yourself. Send the message. Even if you haven't yet resolved the feelings of envy. Like the elder brother, you get to choose whether you stay outside at the sound of the party, or let the father come out and bring you in.

Choose life. Choose the party.