

Trinity College Cambridge
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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS – ENVY
Genesis 37: 1–11 Matthew 20: 1–16

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Muriel was angry, angry with Elinor and angry with herself. She had not intended to let her sister get the upper hand but somehow Elinor had contrived it. Muriel had come away from the bungalow in Duchess of Cornwall Close feeling wrong-footed once again.

Elinor had been reasonable, affectionate, resisting the slightest disagreement. Muriel was cross with herself because she had intended to admire her sister's bungalow and approve the new life ... instead she had not bitten her tongue, she had retorted, been sarcastic, and pointed out all the pitfalls and shortcomings of the place.

Since early childhood they had disliked and been jealous of one another and that was now inextricably part of their deepest nature. None of which was her fault. Elinor had brought it all about. Elinor gave her the rope, playing it out eagerly until Muriel hanged herself. Perhaps it had been a game when they were children. It was no game now!

That was an excerpt from Susan Hill's latest crime novel, *A Question of Identity*, in which we get a catch a glimpse of how poisonous a relationship between two elderly twin sisters has become as a result of jealousy. The story has a tragic ending – but I won't tell you what it is, in case you ever intend to read the novel.

This evening we focus our thoughts on the subject of envy – as you know, one of the seven deadly sins; the other six being Lust, Wrath, Pride, Sloth, Gluttony and Greed. In our Old Testament lesson this evening we heard the very beginning of the story of Joseph – more of a saga than a story really, in that it continues for fourteen chapters, right to the end of Genesis. This is another story with envy at its heart. Joseph as one of the younger sons of Jacob has ten older brothers who are envious of him. They are envious of the favouritism shown him, they are envious of the special coat given to him, and they are incensed by the dreams he reports to them in which they bow down and do him homage. Their envy leads first to intense dislike, then to a plot to kill him, and finally to them selling him into slavery and pretending to their heart-broken father that he's been eaten by a wild animal.

This story of envy or jealousy once again shows what terrible damage can be done by this common human failing. Through it, the brothers are driven to lying and deceit. By it, Joseph has his young life traumatised, as he's dragged off to a foreign land and sold to a complete stranger. And as a result, Jacob is devastated by this loss and refuses to be comforted by the rest of his family.

This evening as we consider this subject of envy or jealousy I'd like us to begin by thinking about different kinds of envy; then to move on to reflect on the effect it has on our own lives and the lives of others and why this sin can be so deadly; and finally to consider how we can overcome this sin, in particular taking to heart the message in the parable we heard in this evening's New Testament lesson from St Matthew's Gospel.

The first kind of envy is that of being jealous of other people's possessions. The tenth commandment in Exodus Chapter 20 refers to this, saying: You shall not covet your neighbour's house, you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or donkey or anything else that belongs to your neighbour. Although we don't own slaves and most of us don't keep donkeys or oxen, this commandment is as relevant to us today as it was thousands of years ago. Being jealous of other people's possessions or property is a sin that we're particularly vulnerable to in our over materialistic society. We are constantly bombarded with advertising, reminding us of the abundance of earthly goods around us – wonderful houses, beautiful furniture, powerful cars and exquisite clothes. This might not affect us too much until someone we know acquires a material object that we've always desired and this is when envy often sets in. Why should they be able to have that, when I can't afford it?

The second kind of envy is of other people's relationships and this is potentially extremely damaging. Perhaps as young people we've all experienced the jealousy which happens around boyfriends and girlfriends – you really like someone but then they start going out with your best friend; that can be very hard to cope with. Or there's the more general jealousy that happens within relationships: perhaps there is someone in the office, the college or the faculty who seems to be popular with everyone and you wish you could be like that; or, as in the story of Joseph, children can be jealous for their parent's affection; or in a young family, a father may be jealous of a new born baby because his partner's attention is suddenly diverted away from him.

Then the third kind of envy is of other people's gifts and abilities or of the job they do. And I guess this is a sin that we all fall into from time to time. I came across a children's story the other day called the *Discontented Pig*. The pig was a skilled gardener but was envious of other animals who seemed to have nicer jobs which involved less work. So he tried his hand at a number of activities – amongst them, music, cheese-making, and beekeeping; but he discovered all of them required dedication and hard work and in the end he returned to his garden. I wonder how many of us find ourselves being a bit like that pig – looking at others and envying their skills without realising the hard work it took to build them up, or being aware of some of the hardships or heavy responsibilities they bear in what they do.

So those are just a few examples of different kinds of envy, but what effect does this sin have on our lives and the lives of those we're jealous of?

With regard to ourselves, envy can eat us up and prevent us living our lives to the full. Instead of rejoicing in our own gifts, giving thanks for the many blessings of our lives and enjoying the people around us, we make ourselves miserable by wanting things we can't have. Then with regard to the effect it has on others, envy can be destructive and even deadly. It can be destructive in the form of people being so jealous of the possessions of others that they steal or damage them. It can be destructive in communities where jealousy of a leader can make others do everything in their power to undermine that person. And as we sometimes witness in the news, envy can be deadly when jealousy of another person's relationship leads to putting an end to it through murder. So envy is certainly a deadly sin and sometimes it leads to a deadly crime!

But what can we do as human beings to resist this sin which has the potential to do so much damage in life?

In the modern Roman Catholic Catechism each of the deadly sins has a corresponding virtue, the seven being: humility, charity, kindness, patience, chastity, temperance and diligence. The corresponding virtue to envy is charity or love, and in tonight's New Testament lesson we heard Jesus' teaching on the love of God, which we are encouraged to reflect in our own lives. The parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard is one which can make us feel extremely uncomfortable. Because, at a human level it's hard not to feel sorry for those who've worked all day under the burning sun, only to receive the same wages as those who've worked for just one hour. I think we can all identify with their sense of injustice and understand why they grumbled. But the point of this story is not about fairness or justice; it's to illustrate God's grace and generosity towards those who had done very little to deserve it. The challenge is put to the grumblers at the conclusion of the parable: 'Are you envious because I am generous?'

To overcome envy we all need to be aware of the grace of God working in and through our lives. Instead of looking over our shoulders at what others have got; we should count our blessings and give thanks for the wonder of life and the gifts we have each been given. So this evening let us pray that we will be given the strength to resist the destructive force of envy; instead, opening ourselves to its corresponding virtue of charity or love the fruits of which are generosity and always desiring the best for others. By opening ourselves in this way we will reflect the image of God and come to know the fullness of life which is his will for every single one of us.