

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

Nailing the Envy That Slays Us

Text: John 11:45-57

The Window

G. W. Target tells the story of two seriously ill men who occupied the same hospital room. The man in the bed by the window was allowed to sit up for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back. As the men talked, however, they found much in common. They spoke of their wives and kids, and of their homes and jobs. They discussed their experiences in the military and on vacation, and how hard it was to be so old and sick and stuck in this place.

During the hour the one man sat up, he would describe in great detail to his bed-bound roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake and grand old trees. Ducks played on the water while children sailed their model boats there and young lovers walked arm in arm. One afternoon a parade passed by and, although the other man couldn't hear the band, he could see it in his mind's eye as his roommate described it all in such vivid detail. The man on his back came to live for those hours when through his colleague's eyes he would finally have entry into the glories of the world outside.

And then, one day, another thought came slithering into the room. The man in the bed by the door started to think: "Why should the other man get to see so much while I never get to see anything?" At first, the man tried to suppress the thought. He was somewhat ashamed that he even had such a thought, but the more and more he tried to push it away the more it surged back up. It just didn't seem fair to him that he should be in this position and the other man to be in his. As the days passed, his resentment grew, and his desire for that window view became consuming.

Late one night, the man by the window began to cough, then to choke on the fluid in his lungs. Through the dim light in the room, the other man could see his roommate flailing wildly, groping for the call button. The impulse arose in him to just touch his own call button which would surely have brought the nurse running in. But he resisted the impulse and did nothing. Within minutes, the coughing and choking subsided, only to be replaced by silence—deadly silence.

The following morning the dead man was found and his body removed. When a suitable time had passed by, the man in the bed by the door said to one of the nurses, "Do you suppose I might be moved over next to the window." The nurses thought it a reasonable request and the orderlies came in, wheeled away the empty bed and rolled his into its place. When the orderlies had left, the man slowly, painfully, struggled to prop himself up on one elbow. At long last he would get his first look at all he'd been missing and, as he turned to gaze out the window, he found himself staring at a blank brick wall.

The Serpent's Strategy

At first Caiaphas, the High Priest of Jerusalem, must have felt he had an awful lot in common with the man from Nazareth who seemed to see the Kingdom of God so clearly. After all, both of them were in the same business. Both of them were out to turn the hearts of people toward

God. The Bible says that “many of the Jews... had seen what Jesus did, [and] put their faith in him... Some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin”—the Jewish ruling council.

If you didn't know this story well, you might naturally think that the agenda for this meeting had to be how Caiaphas and his colleagues could form an alliance with Christ. Here was a man through whom God was obviously working powerfully. Wonders were being done, the Word of God preached, hundreds coming to newfound faith. What could be better news to the Chief Priest of Israel? But what happens next shows us how the snake of envy begins its deadly work.

Envy always enters through the crack of commonality. It enters us at that place where we feel linked in common passion, interest, or ambition with someone else. It is so insidious precisely because it enters through the portal of a shared experience or concern—right at that place where we could be, potentially, most bonded with another human being. Let me give you an example. I have never been envious of Pavarotti! I admire him. There are moments when I think, “Boy, it would be great to sing like him.” But I've never been envious of him. Why? Because it is clear to me that we live in different worlds. I am obviously wired completely differently. And, as much as I think that singing operatically is wonderful, it is not my passion, it is not my gift, and it is not close to my central sense of calling.

But I've got some friends that I get a little green-eyed around. One is a magnificent preacher who never even uses a note and people just hang on his words. Another is a disgustingly gifted athlete who can take up almost any sport and make it look effortless and brilliant. Another is a leader who's made loads of dough and has all kinds of influence and has built a comfortable life for himself. And I think to myself, I'm not so different from them. I really like to preach, and do sports, and to lead. I work at these things but somehow don't see the results they do. It doesn't seem fair. Can you relate at all?

Os Guinness observes that: “We are always most vulnerable to envying those closest to our own gifts and callings.” And because of this, Envy turns people who ought to be our colleagues into our competitors. Can you see how that happened between Caiaphas and Christ? Instead of joining in common cause with Jesus... Instead of allowing him to teach and inspire them... Instead of praising God for the beauty, truth, and excellence He is pouring through Jesus... the religious leaders turn and look only at themselves and ask: “What are we accomplishing? “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” In other words, the witness of this other person's life makes me feel inferior and if I don't do something about it, I'm probably going to lose even more.

Envy is the child of pride, the Father of all Sins. It is the serpent of pride, that starts out like a little garter snake, made monstrous by hurt over the good enjoyed by or moving through others and not in the same way with us. As C.S. Lewis reminds us that: “Pride is essentially competitive... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next [person]. We say people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking,” but that's not really true, says Lewis. “They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.” And in this sense, says Karl Menninger, “Envy is the sister of greed.”

Some of you will say, “What's wrong with some healthy competition?” And I'd say that healthy competition—the kind of aspiration and ambition that drives an open society and a free market

system and the pursuit of excellence—is not the problem. The kind of competition Envy fosters—and which can too easily slip into our hospital room—is the sort that makes you sad at the success of others and rejoice in the thought of their failure. It is the very opposite of the impulse suggested by the Apostle Paul when he says that God's desire is that we “Rejoice with those who rejoice; [and] mourn with those who mourn.”

Some theologians maintain a distinction between the sin of covetousness and the sin of envy. “The covetous man wants to possess the good of his neighbor, whereas the envious man, first and foremost, regrets” the good of his neighbor. Along these lines, the famous actor, Sir John Gielgud, once confessed: “When Laurence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948, and the critics raved, I wept.” Thomas Aquinas said that the perversity of Envy is that it leads us to feel “sorrow at another’s good.” A French philosopher once suggested that: “Few are able to suppress in themselves a secret satisfaction at the misfortunes of their friends.”

Some will say that’s precisely the problem with our neighbors these days, but I suspect the problem is more universal than that. Have you never inwardly smiled when you showed up at the reunion and found that the homecoming queen had put on 40 pounds? Have you never gotten some pleasure when that guy who takes your money on the links winds up and drives a clod of turf farther than the ball? Have you never felt a little bit of satisfaction at the news that your high-flying friend or business competitor had suffered a loss more akin to the kind you’ve known yourself? Have you never felt these things?

This is how envy works: It enters through the crack of commonality. It turns people who should be our colleagues into our perceived competitors. Envy distorts our mind so that we start feeling sorrowful in the presence of others’ good and smugly satisfied in the presence of others’ failure. And then Envy leads us to wish for another’s destruction. As Dorothy Sayers observes: “Envy begins by asking plausibly: ‘Why should I not enjoy what others enjoy?’ and it ends by demanding: ‘Why should others enjoy what I may not?’” And in that sense, Envy can eventually become the parent of wrathful hatred.

If you’d like a contemporary picture of how Envy unchecked ultimately destroys, go out and rent the film *Amadeus*—the story of Antonio Salieri and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The reality of course is that we need look no further than the story of our own lives, or than that of Caiaphas and Christ. “Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ Mark’s gospel adds, It was out of envy that the chief priests handed Jesus over to [Pilate].”

Ultimately, Envy opposes the creative work of God. It becomes our way of saying, “If you will not gift me and use me in the way that I want God... If you choose to manifest yourself through others in ways I’d prefer for you to act through me... then away with you God, away with your work.” But, in the end, it is not the work of God in anyone but us that is finally destroyed where envy prevails. The Caiaphas in us might succeed for a season in crucifying Christ... We might

covet and envy the blessings of beauty, talent, gifts or unmerited favor God chooses to give to somebody else... We might actually succeed in getting our place by the window, but so long as it is the green-eyed monster through which we see, all we'll meet is a brick wall. So long as we're looking with hearts of stone, all we'll see is stone blocking our progress.

Which is why we have to keep asking Him for a new heart... asking Him to replace our hearts of stone with a heart of flesh, a heart like His. And it is why I invite you to let my words today be your prayer as well...

"Lord, show me the gifts you've given me. Even if I'm flat on my back right now, give me eyes to see the blessings I have and keep on cultivating them for Your pleasure and Your Kingdom's cause alone. Help me to see that my contentment depends not on what I have, but upon the fact that You have me. So grant me the power to truly rejoice in the way You have gifted others and weep with those who feel loss. Fill me with a "Love [that] is patient and kind, [that] does not envy or boast, [that] is not proud or self-seeking... a love that does not delight in evil but rejoices" in all that You are doing, in whomever you are doing it, and wherever and however Your grace is found. Through Jesus Christ my Lord, I pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Beloved in the Lord, as God continues His renewing work in us, may we be given the power to say with the Apostle Paul:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. For I can do everything through him who gives me strength...

So I say "Rejoice in the Lord always." I will say it again: Rejoice! Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God...

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—focus yourself on such things...

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Os Guinness, *The Call*, p. 132
C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became Of Sin?*, p. 148
Romans 12:15
William F. May, *A Catalogue of Sins*, p. 73
Attributed to LaRochefoucauld

Mark 15:10