

Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Envy & Contentment

Psalm 73:1-14; 21-28

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Part One—Envy: Feeling bitter when others have it better

I want to begin with a few general comments about our summer worship series and the structure of our services.

I know that some people might have reservations about an entire worship series devoted to a nasty topic like “sin.” I can appreciate this.

Perhaps you have experience with the word “sin” being used as a weapon, accompanied by the wagging finger of condemnation. Perhaps you’ve sat through one too many sermons outlining all the ways in which you are a miserable sinner and how displeased God is with you. There is no question that the church has not always spoken well about sin.

“Sin” is an unpopular word. I brought it up a few times during staff orientation sessions at Camp Valaqua this week and there was some noticeable squirming.

I don’t like talking about sin either. I’m no more eager than anyone else to be told that I’m a sinner, that I’ve missed the mark.

But I think we need ugly words for ugly realities.

And I think that corporate worship should be a place where we can be honest about who we are, where we can confess our sins, and speak words of assurance and forgiveness.

I think it’s important to note the way that the creators of this worship series describe things in the introduction:

This worship series will explore these sins as a disorientation of love. The seven cardinal

sins usually stand in contrast to the seven holy virtues. And so the seven holy virtues will be explored as the right orientation of our love.

I like it that they included the virtues alongside the sins. We often find it easy enough to focus on the behaviours we (and others) should avoid; we don't as naturally focus on the attitudes and dispositions that we want to cultivate in their place.

And I think the question of how to rightly understand and practice love is an essential one for Christians at all times and places. It is the canopy that extends over all the other virtues—each of these can be understood as an expression of love.

The structure of our services this summer will reflect this conviction that talk of sin and virtue always takes place in the broader context of love.

We begin our services by looking at the ways in which our loves can become disoriented, selfish, and unhealthy. We then have a time of confession and prayer where we orient ourselves toward God's love and forgiveness. We conclude by moving on to the virtues that we would like to cultivate in the "reoriented love" part.

During this series there are two mini-sermons instead of one longer sermon which is different. But I think that the way in which these services "move" can be an important teaching tool and can lead to a meaningful worship experience.

Last week, Joani looked at the sin of pride. Today's focus is on envy.

Psalm 73 takes us on a guided tour of envy.

The psalmist is having something of a pity party. He looks around at the arrogant and wicked and sees lives lived on easy street!

They have no struggles, their bodies are strong and healthy, they aren't affected by the same sorrows and struggles that everyone else has. They are wealthy and free of cares!

"What's the point of trying to be righteous," the psalmist asks himself? "I try to do the right thing and all I get is trouble and affliction. And people who don't give God a second thought just merrily skip through life without a care."

In the first part of this psalm, the writer sees the life he wishes he had. He complains that it's not fair that there isn't a more straightforward connection between righteousness and reward.

We recognize ourselves in this envy, don't we? The target of our envy might be different, but the psychological dynamic is the same.

We look around and we see people who we are convinced have it better than us. Maybe we think they have a better job or a better marriage or better kids than us. Maybe we cast a covetous glance (or two or three... or ten) at their house or their car or their church or talents they have that we don't or their bank account or the vacations they take. Maybe we envy people who seem more well-connected or are in better shape or who never seem to have any physical ailments.

We can be envious of almost anyone for almost anything.

And of course, the Internet and the world of social media gives us a vast, constantly updating catalogue of people displaying their best selves to one another, seeking admiration and affirmation. Envy is, in many ways, the fuel that drives social media (and probably our economy, more broadly! The best way to keep people spending is to keep them dissatisfied with their lives).

And so, we do what the psalmist does in the first half of Psalm 73. We tell ourselves that everyone else has it better than us, we convince ourselves others' lives are perfect while ours are depressingly ordinary, we tell ourselves that our goodness is wasted.

And we become bitter, angry people who find it difficult to look beyond ourselves. Again, the writers of the worship resources put it well:

Envy strips us of our ability to love... [E]nvy's love is devoted only to the bittering of oneself because of what one doesn't have—eventually leading us into our own individual exile.

In verse 14, the psalmist says, "All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments."

This is what envy does to us when we give in to it. It becomes its own punishment.

This is who we are.

II. Contentment: Loving what's right in front of you

Halfway through Psalm 73, the psalmist shifts his tone. He has spent the first part giving free expression to his envy, but he now recognizes the folly of his ways.

When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
²² I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.

Those are strong words. “Envy and bitterness reduce me to a senseless and ignorant beast,” he says.

Envy does *reduce* us. It reduces us to less than we have been created to be and to do in the world. It reduces life to scorekeeping and trying to keep up.

There is all kinds of good practical advice for how to combat envy. Practicing gratitude is a good one. I seem to come across articles about this almost every day (ironically, on social media!). I am encouraged to not be picky, to find gratitude in challenges, to keep a journal, to meditate, to volunteer, to include acts of kindness in my day, to avoid negative media, to say thank you more frequently...

This is all good advice, for the most part.

Reminding ourselves that the lives of others are rarely as perfect as we think they are is another. This is true particularly in the world of social media. We all present ourselves in the most flattering light online. Nobody’s posting pictures of their cluttered houses or their ordinary weekend spend mowing the lawn and reading a book or talking about the fight they had with their kids or their spouse that morning—it’s all smiling faces and exotic vacations and inspiring thoughts. And this is the stuff that we compare ourselves to.

Nobody’s life is perfect. We’re all struggling in some ways. Remembering this helps us to resist feeding the envy machine.

Another strategy might be to remember that many of the heroes of faith that we look up to (including those who wrote the pages of the New Testament) had difficult lives that few people would have envied. Character is often forged in hardship and lack and suffering. Perfect lives free from difficulty (as if there were such a thing!) are not conducive to character formation.

These are good practical strategies, but I think that from a Christian perspective, the virtue of contentment goes beyond all this.

To be fully and finally content is an expression of trust in God. It is to say that no matter what our material circumstances might be, we believe that God holds our past, present, and future, that God loves us regardless of how well we’re performing at any given moment, and that God can be trusted.

We see this in Psalm 73. Contentment comes when the psalmist re-anchors his trust in God.

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,

and afterward you will take me into glory.
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.

I am always with you... You hold me... You guide me... you will take me...

The psalmist recognizes that the antidote to a life wasted on envy is a life anchored in trust in the God who made us and who will bring us home.

At the end of it all, we will face God with empty hands. It won't matter how much money we've earned, how much we've accomplished professionally, how big a profile we were able to generate online.

It won't matter whether we've taken enough trips or sculpted the body we wanted or any of the other things we use to measure ourselves against others.

Life has a way of stripping all of these things away, piece by piece, until we come to the realization that all the good things of this earth, the things that we strive after, will have to be left behind.

Our heart and our flesh *will* fail, as the psalmist says, but God is and will be our portion forever.

God alone can give us contentment, no matter our circumstances. God alone can give us security and worth that transcends the fleeting judgments of the world. God alone can reorient our desires and our loves, raising us up to become people of settled virtue rather than the sins that reduce us to less than we were made for.

True contentment, ultimately, is found in God alone.

I want to end with a quote that I've used before. It's a quote that I have taped inside my bible as an antidote to the envy that comes so naturally to me, and as a reminder of what contentment looks like. It comes from Yale theologian Miroslav Volf's book, *Free of Charge*:

A rich self has a distinct attitude towards the past, the present, and the future. It surveys the past with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given. A rich self lives in the present with contentment. Rather than never having enough of anything except for the burdens others place on it, it is "always having enough of everything" (2 Corinthians 9:8). It still strives, but it strives out of a satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving. A rich self

looks toward the future with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. Finite and endangered, a rich self still gives, because its life is "hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

May God help us to be people of contentment, people whose love is oriented toward God and neighbour instead of self.

Amen.

