

THE BELIEVER'S LIFESTYLE: TAMING THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

By Andrew Wilson
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Psalm 37:1-6
Luke 15:11-31

In the late 1990s, the economist Robert Frank conducted a study of envy in American society. He posed this intriguing question to a randomly selected polling group: Would you rather earn \$85,000 a year and live in a neighborhood where no one else is making more than \$75,000? Or, would you rather earn \$100,000 a year and live in a neighborhood where everyone else is making at least \$125,000?

Most people indicated that they would choose the \$85,000 option. In other words, they would be content to make less total money so long as they made more than their neighbors. Conversely, they wouldn't choose to make significantly more than \$85,000 a year if the price for doing so was having to be the poorest person in their subdivision.

Robert Frank's study only confirms what we already know to be true: it's important to most of us to feel like we're doing as well or better than our neighbors. That's true with regard to money, but it's also true with regard to other vital areas of life where inequalities reign. Most of us harbor at least a degree of smug satisfaction when we're in the presence of people who aren't quite as beautiful, or talented, or powerful, or intelligent as we are. Conversely, we feel at least a twinge of envy when we're in the presence of people who are more attractive, more gifted, more influential or more brilliant than we are.

The TV documentary "Quest for Beauty" featured an interview with the woman whom many consider to be the most influential model agent in Hollywood. Nina Blanchard discussed the feelings of animosity that professional models arouse in other women. She said: "There is anger about beauty... I think that beautiful women provoke anger when they walk into a room." A more accurate word would be envy.

Nancy Beech serves as the programming director at Willow Creek Church outside Chicago. She spoke for many when she admitted to feeling envious of women she called "Martha Stewarts." She wrote [PAPER]:

...my brother married a "Martha Stewart." Not only can she mother four young children, create a fabulous home, sew everybody matching outfits, and cook like Julia Child, she also happens to be very nice. She's a godly woman. She's loving. She's generous, fun, pretty. In short, she makes me sick.

Envy is often experienced as a temporary feeling. The writer Joseph Epstein describes the feeling of animosity that he suddenly feels when he reads a story in the New York Times about a rising young novelist. All at once he begins to question his own value and relevance as an author. But the feeling quickly passes, and within a few minutes he's able to put the paper aside and enjoy his toast and coffee.

Probably everyone has been gripped by fleeting feelings of envy. The other day I was running in Crescenta Valley Park, as I do most days, when some of the girls on my daughter Holly's cross country team passed me. And I don't mean they slowly gained on me; I mean they blew by and

left me eating trail dust. I was immediately tempted to speed up and overtake them. Then it occurred to me that, even running at top speed, I'd never catch them.

My daughter helped me to get over my feelings of envy. I told her about the incident later that day and she said: "Dad, you should be proud of yourself. At your age you're lucky to be out there at all."

But some people seem to be unusually susceptible to life-long, debilitating envy. Rivalrous by nature, they regard their co-workers, their neighbors, and even their family members as competitors. They're always threatened by people who shine brighter than they do. They can feel happy only as long as they feel superior to the people around them.

When we envy others, we want what they have. But we usually don't envy those who have vastly more than we do. In most instances, the thing we want is something that seems just out of reach. That's because envy is fed more by rivalry than by a desire to have it all, or to be the very best. We don't want to be valedictorian of our class. Instead, we want to get better grades than our younger brother. We don't want Bill Gate's billions. Instead, we want to have the nicest house in our neighborhood. We don't want to be president of the company. We just want more responsibility and a higher salary than the guy in the cubicle next to ours. We don't want to play like Kobe Bryant. We just want to be able to smoke the other guys on our church basketball team on a Saturday morning.

Envy is focused on inequalities, yet feelings of envy tend to be most intense where inequalities are minimized. Any parent with two or more children understands that. Siblings find ways to compete with each other even when they have exactly the same amount of ice cream in their bowls, and exactly the same number of shirts in their drawers. Envy and competition are an inescapable fact of life for all families with children. Our biggest challenge as parents, therefore, is not to put an end to all the conditions that might lead to envy. Rather, it's to teach our children to think of other people's needs, and to celebrate when good things happen to their brothers and sisters and other friends.

Though we see it at work all around us, envy is a vice we seldom talk about. In that regard, envy is a lot like its ugly sibling, pride. It's embarrassing to admit to others, or even to ourselves, that we're feeling envious. When we confess our envy, we take off the "happy face" mask we've been wearing, and we come pretty close to acknowledging our inferiority to our rival.

We hide our envy in the same way, and for the same reasons, that we hide our lack of confidence. We hide envy so well, in fact, that we sometimes don't recognize it as the motive behind our actions. Envy can sneak up on us, and cause us to say and do things that are irrational. It can cause us to buy car we can't afford. It can cause us to pursue a high prestige job that we know is going to end all our pleasures and destroy our family life. It can cause us to disparage someone who deserves to be praised.

The play and the movie *Amadeus* offers a portrait of this kind of all-encompassing envy. Salieri is a competent composer who is admired by the Viennese court, and generously funded by his patrons. But Salieri has to share the limelight with Mozart, whose genius far outshines his own. Aware that his very best work will never compare even to the tunes that Mozart effortlessly produces while doodling at the keyboard, Salieri becomes a seething caldron of hatred. He tries in various ways to destroy Mozart, but only succeeds in destroying his own happiness. Eventually Salieri goes mad.

Though the storyline of *Amadeus* is historically flawed, its portrayal of envy is right on target. People who are driven by envy fall into a trap they lay for themselves. They see others who have something they want and can't have. And instead of counting their blessings, and training themselves to be content with the life God has given them, they become obsessed with the question: "Why them and not me?" Their envy breeds hatred, and they begin to lash out. They do everything they can to destroy their rivals. But whether or not they succeed in that effort, they always end up destroying their own happiness.

Envy is included among the Roman Catholic Church's list of the seven deadly sins. More than one theologian has argued that envy is among the most destructive vices, and that it ranks number one or two even among the top seven. Personally, I would place envy just a notch below pride, and just a hair ahead of anger.

The remaining four vices – lust, greed, gluttony and sloth (or laziness) – obviously aren't anything to be proud of. Any one of them has the potential to destroy us. But those "sins of the flesh," as we sometimes call them, are the kinds of sins that even the greatest of saints sometimes engage in. They're the result of indulging in things that are good to the point of dangerous excess.

Pride, envy and anger are what we might call spiritual sins. They have their roots in our tendency to turn away from God and disregard his authority. They're motivated by feelings of contempt for other people. When we're prideful, envious, and angry, we're alienated and cut off from those whom we were created to love. That's why pride, envy and anger have the potential to do the greatest damage to our souls.

Some people confuse envy with jealousy. The two are related but not identical. Jealousy arises when a third party enters into a two-way relationship. Jealousy is the fear that something that's rightfully ours will be taken away by someone else. My dog Chum is great with people. But she bares her teeth to any dog that I pet or speak to because she thinks I should direct all my affections towards her. That's jealousy.

The Bible tells us that God is jealous of our love for him. That's not just a figure of speech. God is jealous because he wants us to love him above everything. He knows that that's best for us, and what we were created to do. God is jealous, but he's not envious. When we envy we want something that belongs to others. God doesn't share that problem with us.

According to the Book of Genesis, the very first human family was tainted by pride, envy and anger. To borrow Joseph Epstein's marvelous image, those vices were checked through with Adam's and Eve's baggage as they headed out of Eden. Cain and Abel, the original sibling rivals, offer their sacrificial gifts to God. Abel, the shepherd, offers a sheep and Cain, the farmer, offers a portion of his grain. The trouble begins when God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's offering.

Why should God prefer one gift over the other? The book of Hebrews answers this question. In the eleventh chapter, verse 4, we read, "*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's.*"

In other words, it wasn't the gift itself that caused God to turn away when Cain laid his grain on the altar. There was something about Cain himself that wasn't quite right. Maybe Cain didn't offer to God the best grain he had, but instead brought the dusty leftovers from his threshing floor? Or maybe God knew that Cain was competing with his brother, Abel, for his favor?

Whatever the reason for God's rejection of Cain's gift, Cain is deeply troubled by it. He's so upset his body is hunched over. God shows fatherly concern for him. He asks:

"Cain, why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" [Genesis:6]

But at this point it isn't enough for Cain to be accepted by God. He also wants his brother to suffer. Every time he sees Abel with his smelly goats, he remembers his own painful rejection. His thoughts grow darker and darker. At first he dreams of humiliating Abel. Then he dreams of beating the tar out of him. Then, one day, he dreams of killing him.

God warns Cain of the terrible sin that's lurking at the door of his heart. He assures him that he has the power within him to master sin, and to do well. But instead of exposing his feelings of envy and resentment to God, Cain continues to brood in silence.

Eventually, envy gets the better of Cain. He invites his brother to go with him to inspect his grain field, and Abel mysteriously disappears. Cain seems to think he can cover over his sin with a shovel, but Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground.

God give Cain a chance to confess, but Cain only increases his guilt by lying to him: "How should I know where Abel is?" he asks. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain deserves to die, but God spares his life. He curses the ground, so that Cain can no longer live the life of a settled farmer. He tells Cain he must wander the earth as a fugitive. That's when Cain breaks down:

"My punishment is greater than I can bear!" he cries. "...I shall be hidden from your face ... and anyone who meets me may kill me." [Genesis 4:13]

Call me callous, but I find it hard to be sympathetic with Cain as he snivels before God. But God is moved by Cain's anguished cry. God declares: "If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over" [Genesis 4:15]. Then he puts a mark on Cain that somehow identifies him as God's servant and shields him from harm. Later God blesses Cain and his wife with a son.

The story of Cain and Abel establishes a pattern of events that repeats itself in again and again in the Bible. The pattern is that God favors one person over another, and shows it by granting some kind of blessing. Then the other person responds by becoming envious. Finally, God chastises the envious person, but also extends to that person his love and grace.

Often the one who receives God's blessing is the younger of two siblings, or is the underdog in some kind of rivalry that has been created by the circumstances. That's what happens in the stories of Jacob and Esau, of Leah and Rachel, of Isaac and Ishmael, and of Joseph and his brothers.

The most dramatic example of this kind of rivalry in the Old Testament is the story of Saul and David. When they returned from battle, remember, all the people were saying: "Saul has killed his thousands, but David has killed his ten thousands!" Then the blessing that God had given to Saul was withdrawn, and was given instead to David. Saul's pride gave way to envy, and Saul tried to murder the man God had chosen to succeed him.

All of these stories deliver a two-fold message about envy. First, they remind us that envy has the power to ruin us. Second, they assure us that God stands ready to forgive us, and bless us, if only we'll confess our feelings of envy and live our lives on His terms.

In the New Testament the rivalry story is repeated in the parable we just read. It's usually referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but the story really focuses on three characters. There's the Father, who represents God; there's the prodigal son, who represents a repentant sinner; and there's the elder brother, who represents a self-righteous Christian who needs to learn a thing or two about God's grace.

If ever there was a guy who deserved some recognition, it was that elder brother. He was the straight-as-an-arrow kind of guy who didn't drink beer or waste his money. He was also the nose-to-the-grindstone kind of guy who didn't complain and got things done. Who could blame him for feeling resentful when his father welcomed back his good-for-nothing brother?

The parable has a lot to teach us, and I'm not going to attempt to summarize even the main message. Instead I want to focus on the father's words to the elder brother in Luke chapter fifteen, verse 31:

"My son" the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours..."

What the elder *wanted* to hear was that the father loved him more than his younger brother, and that, from now on, the younger would be sleeping out back in the wood shed. What he heard instead was the most wonderful affirmation that any father could give to a child. First the father declared his love for the son. He made it clear that he treasured him and would always hold him in the very center of his heart. Second, the father renewed his promise to him. The son's inheritance was secure because he, the father, had already given everything to him.

We don't know if these words pierced the elder brother's heart. What we do know is that, with such a father to love and support him, he had no reason to feel jealous and angry, and every reason to feel happy that his long lost brother had returned.

Rivalry, envy and jealousy are inescapable in this fallen world. But, as powerful as those emotions can be, we have the power to defeat them. We have a God who loves us, and accepts us. Our inheritance, as Christ's disciples, is already secure. And that knowledge, that blessed assurance, gives us the confidence to walk by his Spirit, and not by sight.

If you struggle with feelings of envy, know that you're not alone. God knows your heart already – we can't hide anything from him – and he stands ready to lift that burden from you.

LET US PRAY:

Holy God, so often we allow our lives to be ruled by envy and other vices that drive us away from you, and tear apart your church. And yet you love us still.

We ask you today to expose our lives to the light of your Word. Show us the sin that lies inside us. Teach us to pray, and not to harbor feelings of resentment towards you. Help us to love others freely, without expecting from them anything in return, that we may grow more and more into the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ.

We pray in his powerful name. Amen.