

CAN WE TALK ABOUT...ENVY?

Matthew 20:1-16

August 10, 2025

When it comes to the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all. The others may be destructive, but they are also seductive. We have to give them their due, bringing short-term pleasure or a momentary sense of satisfaction. We'll dive into that reality the next two Sundays, but you already know what it feels like. Envy, on the other hand, is the thief of joy—an involuntary and utterly unpleasant reaction to someone else's life. It is the precise inverse of Paul's instruction to the Romans to "rejoice with those who are rejoicing." Instead, it resents the joy of another, especially when that joy seems, to us, undeserved. Envy is in the eye of the beholder. The word itself comes from *Invidia*. To look upon with resentment. To give the evil eye. Envy's poison leads us to resent the good fortune of others.

It is a nearly universal human condition. The evil eye inflicts us all. We look at the success, the fulfillment, the happiness, the accomplishment of another and feel, unprovoked, the rush of resentment. *Why him? How could that happen to her?* We scan the photos of a neighbor or see the new purchase of a friend and wonder why they have all that. In my experience, even those who seem to have it all themselves find reason to envy. And always, always, lurking behind and beneath those exasperated questions, there is a deeper wondering. Not "why him?" But "*what about me? Why not me?*"

My teacher Will Willimon has written that, "to be a Christian is...to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world." In other words, we gather weekly for worship to be given a new perspective, a different set of lenses with which to see the world and our lives. This is difficult work, especially in our time. It is challenging to look at life through a different lens than the one that we are accustomed to

and acquainted with. To see through eyes of grace, not judgment. Mercy rather than resentment. We need that weekly reminder because so much of our life pushes us toward comparison, justifying our envy and resenting others' success.

Jesus used stories, parables, to unsettle his followers. These stories rearrange our mental furniture. They reset our clouded vision. And each one of them has a punch line, a moment of revelation, a surprise twist in the story that shocks or even offends listeners.

The turning point in this morning's parable is impossible to miss. You can picture it in your mind. The laborers all lined up at the end of the day, ready to receive their pay. Some are exhausted from a full day of work under the hot sun. Others are just finishing their single hour of labor. They haven't even broken a sweat. The landowner begins with those who arrived on the scene last, and he gives them, surprisingly, a whole denarius. That was the fair wage for a *full* day of work.

At this point, you can imagine the excitement building at the back of the line as news travels from worker to worker of this lavish pay, this generous owner. Those who started early are now eager to receive their reward. And that's when the punch line of the parable comes. "Each of *them* received the usual daily wage." Uh oh. What would have been an acceptable sum only moments ago is now an outrage. Those who worked all day receive the same amount as those who worked only one hour. Then, Jesus—being Jesus—raises the stakes. He says *this*, this story, this parable, this picture, *this* is what the kingdom of God looks like.

He can't be serious. This is the kingdom of God? There has to be a better metaphor.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The hot summer afternoon. I was eleven years old, and my brother was five. We had shared a room and bunk beds since he was a toddler. And that morning, that Saturday morning, our parents had given us our orders for the day, our assignment, our chore. They said, "Your grandparents are on their way for a visit. Clean your room."

Now, our room was a disaster. A total mess. And so, justifiably, we both resisted. After all, our grandparents wouldn't even come into our room if we just kept the door closed. They would be no worse off. But the expectation was clear and made clear again. And I, I the dutiful brother, I the elder brother, I the responsible party, I got to work. My brother—at least the way I remember it—did not. He lay in bed. He played our Sega Genesis. He met friends outside, the friends I was supposed to meet outside. And so, I protested. I complained. I cried. I pleaded with my parents for as long as I could. And then, out of options, I rage-cleaned, and eventually the task was complete. The room looked magnificent. When Grammie and Poppa arrived, first I showed them into our room. And then, we all went out for ice cream. My parents told me that I, I the dutiful son, I the responsible brother, I could order whatever I wanted. Surely my fair wage for all my hard work. And so, yes, I went big. 3 scoops, banana split. The first bites were delicious. Until... you guessed it. Little brother was also invited to make his order. Grammie and Poppa were paying, and he could order anything he wanted. *For what? How could they? No fair!* I remember the burning in my ears, and then filled with blinding anger, I took action. I grabbed that banana split, and in dramatic fashion, I dumped my tray into the trash can right in front of my parents. Meanwhile, Josh sat at the table enjoying every last bite of that Oreo Blizzard.

The early morning laborers, tired from a full day's work, are indignant at the injustice of their equal pay. It is no longer enough that they received what they earned, what they had agreed upon. Comparison has stolen their satisfaction. They are ready to trash their just reward.

The landowner answers. He responds to their outrage with a rhetorical question. "Are you envious because

I am generous?" I find this an interesting choice, to describe the offended workers as envious. Is it *envy* that they are feeling? It might help to know that the original Greek is even more pointed. The landowner's question literally reads, "Is your eye so evil because I am so good?" What a question! Reminds me of old Jonah who rails against God because of the divine decision to bless the repenting Ninevites. *Them? Those people?* Reminds me of every time I find myself resenting the good fortune of another and asking, "Why not me?" I think the insidious force of envy begins with the assumption of scarcity. Envy whispers that there is not enough to go around, and so we must be skeptical of those who get what we want—or what we think *they* don't deserve.

Envy steals our joy by insisting on scarcity. *There isn't enough. You better get yours.* Friends become competitors. Neighbors are turned to enemies. Strangers are a threat. We cease to see the humanity of others. Even our brother can be a threat to our happiness. Comparison crowds out compassion. *Those people, they got something for nothing. They were taking advantage of the system, happily receiving a full day's wage for only one hour of work. Why them? But especially why not me?* You can hear the grumbling across the centuries...maybe you even hear it in your own voice.

How is it that everyone on my social media feed has a perfect life, while I'm struggling to find joy?

Why do my hard-earned wages go to help those who don't deserve it...especially those who don't even belong here?

If they wanted to make more money, they could. They just need to work harder. Not my job to help them get ahead.

Oh, the durability of these stories that Jesus tells. They still sting, don't they? They force us to confront our own grumbling hearts.

This is the parable's key moment. The landowner does not defend his actions on the grounds of fairness. He pleads generosity. *Are you envious because I am generous?* Here we find the meaning of the parable and its clear picture of the kingdom of God. Jesus tells a story. Jesus—whose self-stated mission includes preaching good news to the

poor—tells a story not about a group of works, but about a landowner who chooses to be generous, who wants everyone to have a place in the vineyard, who cannot abide the thought of anyone left behind. I had missed this detail in the parable until this year. The landowner returns time and time again to find those in need of work and invites them—yes, *them*—to the vineyard.

And so those who had been waiting all day are given work to do. And not only that. They are given a fair wage. Not a lavish wage. Enough to get by for one more day. It seems this boss's concern is not his bottom line or a carefully tiered system of merit, but the workers themselves. Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God looks like.

A justice that sees people and not only profits. An open invitation to join the joyful work of the gospel. Radical hospitality for all who show up, no matter when they arrive. Justice redefined by compassion. Abundance in the place of scarcity. Grace. Grace. Grace.

Yes, envy is the thief of joy. It begins by assuming scarcity. It insists on comparison. But, the gospel invites us to see through a different lens. Listen. The wellbeing of somebody else need not diminish your own. In fact, in the kingdom of God, your wellbeing is utterly dependent on the wellbeing of others. God starts at the end, with those who are most forgotten and at greatest risk.

We know who they are. They are your neighbors. They are the children who go to bed with empty stomachs. They are the mothers who skip meals to keep their family housed. They are the workers whose wages won't pay the rent. And they belong to you. To us.

Friends, what if a life worth living is defined not by comparison but by compassion? Take it from a kid who missed the joy of a banana split — our obsession with comparison will spoil our fun, and over time it will corrode our hearts.

Columnist David Brooks wrote this week about a global Gallup survey on well-being. The headline is that more people around the world say they are thriving than ever before. Hope is rising in countries as diverse as Kosovo, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, and Paraguay.

But here's the shadow side: in nations with the highest standards of living, like ours, well-being is falling, and fast. Why? Brooks points to the gap between economic health and social-spiritual health. People flourish when economic well-being is matched by strong social connections and a clear sense of purpose. It turns out that societies that emphasize economic success without tending to community attachment or spiritual depth tend to see declines in overall well-being. Or perhaps more simply put: culture built on envy is drained of compassion and, ultimately, of meaning.

Jesus casts a different vision—a vision of abundance in which no one is left out, and the measure of God's goodness is not our standard of fairness but God's grace freely given.

So let me suggest the question for you today is not, "Did I get what I deserve?" But rather, "Can I rejoice in the generosity that allows another to thrive?" That could be the shift that moves us—even our nation—from a culture of comparison toward a culture of compassion.

The last will be first, and the first will be last. It is the ultimate parable punch line.

And, if we allow it to be, it is good news...for all of us. Amen.