Seven Deadly Sins: Envy

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[0:00] Today we continue our series in the seven deadly sins.

If this is your first time with us or your first time in a while, this is the fifth of our sermon series during the season of Lent on the seven deadly sins.
So welcome, we're really glad you're here. For those who have been here for a few weeks, I don't know if you've made any observations about these seven deadly sins in general.
One observation you could make is these seven sins actually sound kind of fun. And we've talked about pride, it's fun being puffed out, we've talked about gluttony, lots of fun.
I had a lot of fun with that this weekend. We talked about confession, I guess. We talked about anger and how it's pleasurable to release that and take it out onto somebody, right?
[1:12] And we talked about lust, yes, that's pleasurable. Today is a little different. The writer Joseph Epstein wrote, Of the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all.

And I would know this personally. I struggle with envy a lot. I'm kind of wired to struggle with envy. I don't know if you've heard of what's called the Enneagram. It's like this ancient kind of personality assessment.
I'm a number four. And number four struggle with envy, apparently. I can testify. I'm also a musician.
Musicians struggle a lot with envy. I don't know if you've seen the movie Amadeus. That's like the tale of every musician is Salieri. There's always somebody who's just much better than you, and it just kills you.
That should be a homework assignment, by the way, after today. Anytime you read or hear a Christian talk or a write about envy, he's going to refer to Amadeus.
[2:19] So if you want to understand envy, watch that film. Great film. I'm also a pastor. It might surprise you that pastors deal with envy, but it's true.

This past weekend, our clergy and staff and some others from our church gathered for a regional retreat with other clergy from our diocese.
And it was a lot of fun going around the room and hearing all that is going on in these other churches. And there's conflicting emotions. Like, man, it is great that God is doing these things in Charleston, West Virginia, and other parts of D.C., in Charlottesville.
Man, I kind of wish that stuff was going on in my church, too. I mean, I know our church is really healthy and great, but man, it would be great to have that program and to be doing that and this. And that's just in our circle.
I mean, there's all kinds of things to envy with other pastors and other churches. Pastors deal with it a lot. It's a source of displeasure. It's no fun.
[3:29] No fun being envious. The other thing you may have noticed about the seven deadly sins is they're not all that deadly, right? I mean, I don't know if any wars have been started over gluttony.

They're kind of, they feel a little, like, petty, small. Maybe the seven deadly sins should be revised for our current age to include things that are actually deadly, like racism and sexism.
Genocide is a lot deadlier than gluttony. So why not that list? Why this list that we have? Well, remember, you may have remembered this from a couple sermons ago.
A better title for the seven deadly sins are what's called the capital vices. Capital meaning head. Like, these are the sources, like the sources for all kinds of other sins and vices and other things that are deadly and harmful.
We're going to see that today with envy. For sure. We're going to look at the definition of envy. We're going to see the deadly end of envy. And then we're going to go back and see where envy begins.

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[4:54] So the definition, its end and its beginning. First, let me pray. Father, we're grateful to be with your people.

And we would ask that you would be more than enough for us this morning.
In you we find more than enough. Would you be all we need, all we desire. For our good and for our joy and for your glory and for the peace of our community and for the flourishing of our city.
Help us to defeat envy. That sin that crouches at our door seeks to devour us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So for those of you who are unfamiliar with the Bible, today's account was the first reading that was read.
[6:04] This comes from the book of Genesis. It's the account of Cain and Abel. Genesis is the first book of the Bible. And Genesis begins with the origins of the universe and of humanity.

It is meant to be contrasted with the origin myths of the culture surrounding the one in which it was written. Now those accounts that come from Mesopotamia, they tell of the origins of the world.
And they say that the world was created out of chaos. And that the creation of humankind is more or less an afterthought of the gods. And then after the origins, the accounts are fairly optimistic about humankind.
They cluster into cities. Culture is created and developed, etc. Now Genesis, on the other hand, is the opposite.
Genesis explains that the world was created good. And that God loved what he made. Especially the jewel of his creation. Humankind.
[7:11] Humanity was to rule the creation and to bear God's image. They were to experience a deep tapestry of peace called Shalom.

It's a peace characterized by intimate relationship with God and with one another. Well, that's chapters 1 and 2. The 3rd through 11th chapters of Genesis paint a dire picture of humanity.
Humankind turned its back on its creator. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, aspired to be gods themselves. And at that point, everything broke.
Our relationship with God. Our relationship with ourselves. Our relationship with our environment. And our relationships with one another.
Mankind's plight is hopeless without the gracious intervention of God and his promises and his fulfilling those promises.
[8:19] And then we see how bad things get in the very first generation of offspring. We see the dissolution of Shalom in humanity's very first family. Let's start in verse 3 of chapter 4 of Genesis, please.

In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground.
And Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.
So Cain was very angry and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, why are you angry and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?
More literally, it's that will there not be a lifting up? That is, your face is fallen, but I can lift it up. I can lift your head. There can be forgiveness and restoration.
[9:20] And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. It's desire is contrary to you. That is, sin is a crouching beast that wants to devour you.

But you must rule over it. So this is a good moment to define envy. It's easy to confuse envy with some of its cousins, which feel very similar and sound the same.
There's envy. There's also covetousness. There's greed. There's jealousy. Now, envy and covetousness differ from greed in this way.
Greed wants a thing. Envy and covetousness want that thing. Okay? So a greedy person sees a person in a BMW and thinks, man, I want a BMW.
I want a really nice car. Envy and covetousness. I'm going to be able to say that word by the end of this sermon. Envy and covetousness say, I want that BMW.
[10:32] I want that specific one. Greed and covetousness are focused on things or thing-based, material possessions.

But envy is focused on something more abstract, like status or prestige or reputation or worth.
So the envious person says, I want that person's BMW, not because I want a BMW per se, but I want the status and prestige and privilege of a person who can afford a BMW.

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Having that BMW will make me feel this way or that way. Okay? So here we can see Cain envious of Abel.
And we see specifically the approval that Abel's offering receives from God. That's what Cain is envious of. And why did God approve of Abel's offering?
[11:40] In the book of Genesis, we see God preferring the younger. We see him preferring the weaker, the less lovely. Later on in the book of Genesis, God placed his favor on Isaac, the younger of Abraham's two sons.

He placed his favor on Jacob, the younger brother of Esau. He placed his favor on Leah instead of Rachel. Jacob had two wives. Jacob preferred the lovelier one, Rachel.
She appeared prettier and lovelier, but God had compassion on Leah and favored her. And it's not a capricious move on God's part.
The firstborn, the lovely, would feel entitled to God's favor. Whereas the younger and less lovely are more likely to understand their need for God, more likely to go to him for intimacy.
Which I think is why Abel made the kind of offering we described here. It says that Abel brought the firstborn of his flock. This is verse 4.
[12:57] Abel brought the firstborn of his flock. He brought the choicest portions. He brought his very best. If a person understands they are nothing without God, as would the unlovely believe, then God's love and favor would be enough for them.

They would feel free to make a true sacrifice, a costly sacrifice, to withhold nothing from God.
However, Cain's offering is merely described as an offering of the fruit of the ground.
Nothing special about it. And why should he offer to God anything special? God owes him. He's the firstborn. So we would call this tokenism.
The kind of offering that Cain brought to God. It's an empty act of worship and tribute. And scripture has a lot to say about empty ritual. In Psalm 51, King David wrote, God, you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it.
You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, you God, will not despise.
[14:07] And God chastises the nation of Judah later in the book of Isaiah. He says, The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? I have more than enough of burnt offerings.

Of rams and the fat of fattened animals, I have no pleasure. And the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. Judah's offerings were meaningless because it was tokenism.
If they really loved the God they were making sacrifices to, they would have loved the things that he loved. They would have been defending the oppressed, taking up the cause of the fatherless, pleading the case of the widow.
They weren't doing those things. And so these acts of offering and worship were empty. They were tokenism. And Cain's offering too was meaningless. That's why God did not accept it.
[15:12] And it was probably detestable. But he was still offering forgiveness and restoration. But Cain spurned it. He was mastered and devoured by his own envy.

He didn't care about the reasons why God accepted Abel's sacrifice. He resented Abel, who received what Cain felt he deserved by right.
And this is where envy so often takes a deadly turn, as we see in verse 8. Cain spoke to Abel, his brother. It doesn't say what he said.
It's as if we're to zoom out the camera and we're to see the isolation of Cain and Abel. Not hearing, just seeing. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.
I mentioned that the envious person envies the position or status of the person driving that BMW. He also represents, he also resents the person who has the BMW.
[16:23] It's not enough to want his status, but he resents this person for having it. So not only would I like an elevated status, but I'd like that person to be knocked down a peg or two.

And so schadenfreude is the other side of this same coin of envy. It's a German word. It's only like 13 letters, which is a very short German word. There's two words really.
Schade, which is damage. Freude, which is joy. Schadenfreude is the pleasure one feels. It's seeing harm come to somebody else. We get pleasure as an envious person from slandering our

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perceived rival or sabotaging them, belittling them, gossiping, organizing a collective antagonism from the person, teasing or bullying, highlighting their failures, or worse.
Now one curious thing about envy is that it usually doesn't operate from afar. One tends to envy the person who is close, either in proximity or relationship or in similar rank or wealth.
In 1994, Bill Gates was a year away from becoming the world's richest man. He had already been a billionaire for several years before that, when there were very few billionaires back then.
[17:56] But that same year, I was a junior at East Carolina University, majoring in trombone performance, a field that doesn't promise quite the same level of wealth as Bill Gates' chosen profession.

But I didn't envy Bill Gates. He wasn't even on my radar. I envied the trombonist sitting next to me in jazz ensemble. He was so good.
He came down from New York to study with the director of our jazz studies program. This guy had already released an album. This cat would play blazing solos on a trombone, right?
You don't think of a trombone as an instrument where you can have agility and quickness, but he did. It would just leave me in awe every time. After that year, he went back to New York, and he got a job playing his horn in a pit.
It's a job that any of us in Greenville, North Carolina, would have wanted. Meanwhile, I'm still in Greenville, still not able to solo my way out of a paper bag.
[19:03] And everyone knows it. But what I did figure out is I figured out these, what are called licks, that this guy would play. They're shortcuts.

Things to get in from one part of his solo to the next. Most jazz musicians have these licks in their pocket to piece together their solos.
So I figured those out. And so for the year, my senior year, after he was gone, I would play them in my solos. And I'd play them fast, play them slow, play them backwards, forwards.
And people would laugh. They started doing it, too. And it was clear what I was communicating. He wasn't that good of a soloist. He just relied on these licks, these tricks.
That was absurdly false, of course. He was amazing. But to distract from my own inferiority, I sought to diminish his star.
[20:14] And he wasn't there to defend himself. It sounds petty, right? It's not petty. It's a lot worse.

Jesus would have said that I was guilty of murder. You heard the gospel read earlier when Jesus said, it's not what goes into a person that makes him unclean, but what comes out from a person, from one's heart, the place in a person where the will resides.
When God gave the commandment not to murder, he forbade more than just killing other humans. He requires us never to get anywhere near the path that would lead us to a place where we'd want another human being to die.
Whenever we are envious towards another person, or angry, or resentful, we become something less than fully human.
And the rich tapestry of peace that we were meant to experience with one another becomes riven. It's not enough just to stop short of murder.
[21:28] Jesus said in the book of Matthew, you have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of fire. Does that sound extreme? Does it sound like the words of a religious zealot?
Jesus understood the human heart. He understood the brain, too. There was an episode of The Hidden Brain.
It's a podcast. It was just a few weeks ago, your other homework assignment. It's really good. And they were looking at, about two-thirds of the episode, they talk about a study that they were doing about envy, and they were looking at sports fans.
Sports fans, I think it was Yankees and Red Sox fans, enmeshed in this really tense rivalry. So those fans that reported the most pleasure in watching their rival fail were also the people who had the most activation in the small part of the brain called the ventral striatum.
[22:50] Those same people reported they were more likely to engage in activities like heckling, threatening, and hitting of other fans. In other words, the amount of pleasure you take in a rival's failure is a potent predictor of how far you might take matters into your own hands.

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If one's envy is particularly malicious, taking matters into one's hands could mean eliminating the source of envy.
This isn't from Jesus from 2,000 years ago saying that envy leads to murder, that envy can be equated with murder. This is a modern study. To take it further, University of Kentucky social psychologist Richard Smith believes that envy and schadenfreude may have been one of the underlying triggers of the Holocaust.
In the 75 years leading up to the Nazis taking power in Germany, Jews enjoyed a staggering increase in wealth, influence, and prominence, leading many Germans who were struggling financially to resent their success, especially in the difficult years after World War I.
If you have enough experiences of feeling good when someone suffers or some group suffers, then the next step, in a sense, is to actually, literally, engineer it fully.
[24:18] And that's what happens. This is why racism and sexism aren't in the list of seven deadly sins, because envy is the root of those things.

So how do we overcome envy? We've defined it. We've looked at its outcome. How do we overcome envy?
Let's start with something simple. Get off Facebook and Instagram. Just do it. Just get off. That might sound prudish or maybe simplistic, but people who use Facebook are generally less happy than those who don't.
There's a constant comparison going on. We look on Facebook and envy those who are going on amazing vacations. You know, the people who are going on amazing vacations, they look at Facebook and see the ordinary events going on back in their own community, and they envy those people.
As Francis Bacon put it, envy is ever joined to the comparing of a man's self. And where there is no comparison, there is no envy. So get off Facebook. If you haven't given up something for Lent yet, it's not too late.
[25:37] You can give up Facebook. Another way to overcome envy is to name it. Explore it. Bring it into the light. Tell God and other people you're envious.

Ask God why it is so that you are envious. When we name our envy, we strike at its source, and at the source of envy, at its root, at the root of envy, is lack.
There's something missing in me when I envy something or someone. In Shakespeare's Othello, Iago says of Cassius, he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.
He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly. It's so easy to envy in D.C.
We can easily believe that he has a daily intelligence that makes me stupid. She has an easy eloquence that makes me unarticulate.
[26:41] He has wealth that makes me poor. She has a daily success that makes me a failure. He has a desire. He has a charisma that makes me repugnant.

She has a spouse which makes me alone. He has an easy virtuosity that makes me an imposter. She has a godliness that defiles me.
Naming our envy exposes the ways in which we feel that we are not enough. And that opens us up to deeper issues. We see that our lives become framed around the questions, where in my life am I not enough?
And how do I overcome not being enough? Do you, do you, probably don't think about those, but when I think about it, yes. That is almost how like my daily life is organized. Where in my life am I not enough?
And how do I overcome not being enough? So sometimes it leads to envy, but ways in which we overcome not being enough also include resentment, judgmentalism, addiction, workaholicism, busyness, order.
[28:03] Once we've named our envy, once we've asked God to show us the ways we feel we're not enough, then the ultimate thing to do is to believe the gospel. Believe the gospel.

Believe the good news. There's good news for the envious. And that is this, the root of my envy, my lack, points me to the truth about myself, that I am nothing without him.
Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches, whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. So when I experience envy, when I know, when I think I'm not enough, let that point me to the idea, the truth, the reality, that really, I am nothing without him.

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When we see that we are nothing without God, then he becomes enough. Then he becomes enough. His approval, his favor, his delight. You may not have seen it, but the gospel is found in Genesis chapter 4.
When we see the Bible in its entirety, when we understand that God is in the business of redeeming this world that has been broken, then we see that Jesus Jesus takes both Cain's place and Abel's place and he reconciles them to God.
[29:31] Cain said to God, after God asked him, where's your brother? Cain said, am I my brother's keeper? Am I the shepherd's shepherd?

Well, Jesus says, yes, I am my brother's keeper. Do you know the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus told about the two sons of the wealthy father?
The young one went away after having asked for his share of his inheritance, squandered all his wealth and was lost. Eventually, he came back. The father was waiting for him, and ran out to greet him, and embraced him.
The older brother was resentful. You know, the older brother's chief sin? Yeah, I probably shouldn't say chief.
One of his biggest sins is that it was his job to go after the younger brother. That was the older brother's job. He was to be his brother's keeper. And Jesus does go after us.
[30:38] He is his brother's keeper, his sister's keeper. He pursues us. He leaves the 99 and goes for the one at the very cost of his own life. He offered up the very best offering to his father.

And he offered himself on the cross, crucified, absorbing the punishment that our sins deserved, and imparting to us his status, which is the status of firstborn.
And now we are God's favorites. You are God's favorite child. Because you have inherited Jesus' status. It says at the end of Genesis chapter 4 that Cain was banished.
That he was given a mark. That banishment was intended for murderers. Jesus was banished for us that we might be accepted.
Cain had a mark to protect him. It was an act of mercy on God's behalf to Cain so that if anybody were to encounter Cain, they wouldn't touch him.
[31:56] And so God saved Cain's life and yet every time Cain realized this mark that, I don't know where the mark was, but this mark was also at Cain a constant reminder for the rest of his life that he was on the outside banished from the family of God.

God has given you a mark if you were baptized. He's given us a mark that will constantly remind us that we are in God's family.
But nothing can separate us from the love of God. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
That, that is enough. Let's pray. Father, as we come to participate in this meal together, to eat the bread, to drink this wine, would it be enough for us?
Would your grace be enough? So free us, liberate us from envy, liberate us from resenting the people around us. Would you be always and ever enough?
[33:22] we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand and behold the wondrous cross together.

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