Sunday, March 6, 1994
DEALING WITH ENVY (No. 5 in a Series: Living a God Directed Life)
Mark 7:14-23

The greatest enemy of living a God-directed life is envy. If you're envious, it means you are concentrating too much of your time and energy on what other people have and are doing, rather than appreciating what you have and can do to live the life God wants you to live. When you are always comparing what you have to what others have, you are in trouble because it inevitably leads to envy.

An example from the Bible is the story of Saul and David. Saul, the first King of Israel, was drawn to David and became fond of him, making him his chief assistant. But as Saul's health began to fail and David's accomplishments increased, Saul became more and more envious. Saul even tried to have David killed by assigning him to a place in battle where he was in the greatest danger. Saul's envy poisoned his life, and he became a bitter old man.

Here's a further description of envy: You are filled with envy when you resent God's goodness to others and ignore God's goodness in your own life. It can be one of the most destructive forces in your life. That's why it has always been listed as one of the seven deadly sins, second only to pride. It has been said that envy is the one deadly sin to which no one readily confesses.

Envy has two sides to it. One side is this: Few among us can suppress a secret satisfaction at the misfortune of others, particularly those who we think have more than their share of good fortune. The German language has a word for this side of envy, which I used as the title of a sermon a few years back—"schadenfreude." It is the enjoyable sin of taking pleasure in other people's misfortune. Most gossip is based on this side of envy. It's the reason that newspapers with lurid headlines at the checkout counters in supermarkets sell so well.

The other side of envy is being jealous of what someone else has that we do not have. Both sides of envy are based on the false assumption that everyone should be able to do, experience, and enjoy everything that everyone else can. People who have been content in their own nature and in their expression of it are suddenly persuaded that they have been missing something.

The idea that we are equal has been perverted into the idea that we are identical. When we find that we cannot all do, experience, and enjoy the things that others do, experience, and enjoy, we take our revenge and deny that they were worth doing, experiencing, and enjoying in the first place.

What we are unable to achieve, we bring low. What requires talent, training, and hard work, we will show can be accomplished without them. When we are filled with envy, we are scarcely able to admire, respect, or be grateful for what is better, lovelier, or greater than ourselves. What is exceptional must be pulled down or put down.

What is at the root of envy? Underneath its surface manifestations is the fact of inequality. In the sight of God, we are all equal, but in native endowment, we are not. One person is very good at math, another is not. One person has natural athletic ability, another has little. One person has not had a day's illness in years, another goes through life with one sickness after another.

Compounding the problem is another fact: About many of these inequalities, there is little that anyone can do. Here's a student who studies diligently and gets a B minus, while alongside her sits another student who, without straining herself, gets straight A's. Envy can be the result. We want to know why we can't have what others have, and then we become disgruntled because others have what we do not.

Here are some of the main reasons that envy is such a destructive force in your life and, therefore, hinders you from living a God-directed life. Envy benefits no one.

First of all, envy will distract you from your life's purpose. It will keep you from focusing on God's purpose for your life. When you are envious, you are always looking at the gifts and talents other people have and not concentrating on your own. Then you begin to make excuses for yourself: "If I only had her experience, her background, her talent, her intelligence, then I could be somebody." "If only I had their money or their education, then I could contribute something to the world."

Distraction, no matter what the cause, can keep us from living a God-directed life. I remember when the Summer Olympics were held in Los Angeles in 1984. Mary Decker was running the 800-meter race, and she looked back over her shoulder to try to see where her competition was, and it caused her to trip. Because she got distracted, she stumbled and lost the race. There are many things in life that can cause you to be distracted, and envy is at the top of the list.

People who are in marketing and advertising know that envy can be a prime motivation in getting individuals to buy things they don't necessarily need. Envy is frequently a double-edged sword. We envy others because of the things they have, and we buy them to keep up, to try to bolster our self-esteem, and at the same time, we want to have things that others don't have so that they will be envious of us. Isn't it strange that we want people to envy us? What benefit is someone else's envy to us?

I knew a man some years ago who bought a Mercedes, which he always thought he wanted. It was the only one in his neighborhood. Not long after that, he noticed that three other individuals in his neighborhood had the same kind of car that he did, and he was crushed. He sold his Mercedes.

He bought the car for the wrong reason — so that his neighbors would envy him. Why wasn't it possible for him to rejoice that some of his neighbors could have as nice a car as he had?

Second, not only will envy distract you from your life's purpose, it causes conflict in your life. When I want what you have, that's envy, and it can cause conflict. The problem with envy is that I not only want my grass to be greener than yours, but I also want yours to turn brown. I not only want to have a nicer car, but I want you to have a wreck with yours. It causes conflict because I have what you want or you have what I want.

Do you remember as a child when you used to play the game, "King of the Hill?" I remember playing it quite a bit in grade school. It's based on the principle that there's only room for one at the top. Unfortunately, adults still play "King of the Hill." They do it in more subtle ways, such as in the kind of car they drive or by the color of their credit card. "I've got a gold card, what color is yours?" "Mine is platinum. I can be more in debt than you." We even try to use our children in the envy game. "My child is more gifted than your child."

Unfortunately, a lot of our culture is built on envy. We are taught from childhood to compare.

Third, envy not only causes distraction and conflict, but it also leads to other forms of destructive behavior. Envy can cause a person to lie. A young person comes back from vacation and says to his friend, “You’ll never guess what we did,” and then the friend tells a bigger story. Envy causes cheating, stealing, and every kind of evil practice. In the Bible story, Cain killed Abel because of envy. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery because of envy. And as mentioned earlier, King Saul tried to kill David out of envy. David was becoming too popular. I saw a sign that said, “When you’re green with envy, you’re ripe for trouble.”

Envy will distract you, it will cause conflict in your life, it leads to other forms of destructive behavior, and fourth, it makes you miserable. Envy is like having a deadly poison in your soul. The only thing you gain from envy is misery, not happiness.

Envy makes you miserable because it causes you to always question other people’s motives. A friend showers us with kindness upon kindness, and we say, “I wonder what he wants.” When the woman with the alabaster jar of very expensive ointment poured it over the feet of Jesus, one of the disciples questioned her motives and then complained, “This ointment might have been sold for a lot of money and the money given to the poor.” Envy exacts a heavy toll. It makes its victim jealous, spiteful, and mean.

How then can you get envy out of your life? What are some of the best remedies for dealing with it?

First, resist with all your might the temptation to compare yourself with others. As long as you compare, you are inviting envy into your life.

Rather than compare, learn to accept yourself and your gifts, however modest, and be grateful for them. Then take one step further in spiritual maturity and be thankful for the gifts that God has given to others. Remember above all that God does not compare you with others. God is only interested in what you do with the gifts you have been given.

Remember, envy is a choice. You can choose to compare yourself with others, or you can choose not to.

The second step you can take to resist envy is to recognize your own uniqueness. I’ve talked about this in previous sermons in this series. Concentrate on your own strengths, build on them, learn to manage your weaknesses, and remember you are a miracle. You are God’s creation. If you are unique, then so is everyone else. What use is there in comparing? Envy is an expression of inferiority, and in God’s economy, no one is inferior or superior.

The third step in resisting envy, and all of these steps are interrelated, is to rejoice. Rejoice in what you have, and also practice rejoicing with others in their gifts and in the good things that come to them. Too many people base their life on the false assumption that to be happy, one must have more than others. It’s related to another false assumption that I must be like you in order to be happy.

A fourth step in resisting envy is to respond to others in love. Love is the opposite of envy. St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious.”

When you practice this kind of love, then you are able to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” Envy does the exact opposite of this. It rejoices with those who weep and weeps with those who rejoice.

When you are envious, you miss out on so much happiness in life. Envy keeps you from participating in other people’s happiness. If you can learn to enjoy other people’s success, you’ll be happy most of your life because good things are happening to other people all the time. You can benefit even though it didn’t happen to you.

The fifth step in overcoming and resisting envy in your life is to refocus on pleasing and glorifying God in your life.

In other words, try to see and understand life from God’s point of view. Material things are only temporary. In the long run, all things pass away — only God is eternal. When you do this, not having what someone else has is irrelevant.

The ultimate antidote for envy is to be so caught up in fulfilling God’s plan, God’s purpose for your life, fulfilling your life mission, that other things become unimportant in comparison. Amen.