**Seven Deadly Sins: Envy**

‘He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.’ So says Iago, the epitome of envy in Shakespeare’s tragedy Othello, as he compares himself to his arch-rival Cassio (5.1). Envy is fundamentally destructive. It sees something good in someone else’s life, and wants to destroy their enjoyment of it, either by depriving them of what they enjoy or by turning their enjoyment of it to misery.

Envy can be deadly: Pilate recognised that the religious leaders who were calling for Jesus’ death were motivated by envy of Jesus’ fame and prestige (Mark 15:10; Matthew 27:18). Paul’s life was endangered by those who were preaching the gospel out of envy and rivalry (Philippians 1:15-18): they were deliberately preaching the good news of Jesus in a way that would antagonise the authorities and so to make things worse for Paul. The German language has a word for the nasty feeling of pleasure that we sometimes get when something goes wrong for someone else: they call this feeling Schadenfreude.

Envy is closely linked to the sin of covetousness, forbidden by the last of the Ten Commandments. Covetousness wants what someone else has; envy resents them for having it. The antithesis of envy is love, which actively seeks the wellbeing of others (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Thomas Aquinas put it well: ‘Charity rejoices in our neighbour's good, while envy grieves over it," (2. 36. 3). Envy actually deprives us of the capacity to enjoy our own lives. As Bertrand Russell observed in his book, *Conquest of Happiness*, ‘Not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune and do so whenever he can with impunity, but he is also himself rendered unhappy by envy. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, he derives pain from what others have.’ Gregory the Great put it quite bluntly: for the envious person, ‘self-inflicted pain wounds the pining spirit, which is racked by the prosperity of another’ (*Moral* 5.46).

Writing in *Psychology Today*, Seth Meyers observes that we can be moved to envy when we see other people getting what we deem to be unfair credit or recognition while we ourselves feel undervalued and unappreciated. That means that we are less likely to be pleased if other people are happy or we see them doing well, particularly if they exude a degree of confidence that we don’t have. A lack of security on our part drives us to make unfavourable comparisons between ourselves and others, to resent them enjoying success at our expense. He invites us to reflect on seven questions:

1. As a rule, when others get special recognition for their positive traits (not just people you like), how do you feel?

2. Do you give out compliments frequently or infrequently?

3. Do you tend to be self-conscious or not focus so much on how others perceive you?

4. When you think about people with significantly more money than you, what do you tell yourself?

5. How easy or difficult is it for you to come up with a list of your positive attributes on the spot?

6. How much do you think about what you post on social media and how others may perceive it?

7. What would you say in response to the argument that envy is a natural experience everyone feels from time to time?

McConnell Memorial Baptist Church also has some useful questions to consider:

1. In what areas are you most inclined to be envious of others?
2. What currently triggers the strongest feelings of envy for you? Is it social media, work, family, or something else?
3. Are you competing internally with anyone (e.g., a parent, sibling, or friend)? How is that envy affecting you and your relationships?
4. Read Ecclesiastes 4:4–8. • What stands out to you?
   1. The preacher writes that envy is like chasing after the wind. What are some ways this comparison is true?
   2. How would you answer the questions that the person in verse 8 asks himself?- For whom am I toiling? (Who am I really trying to prove something to?) Why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? (Why am I letting envy rob me of the satisfaction of what is happening in my life?)
5. In an effort to decrease envy, is there someone you could celebrate, congratulate, or thank? How would doing that help?

*Envy*, by Mary Lamb

This rose-tree is not made to bear

The violet blue, nor lily fair,

Nor the sweet mignionet:

And if this tree were discontent,

Or wished to change its natural bent,

It all in vain would fret.

And should it fret, you would suppose

It ne’er had seen its own red rose,

Nor after gentle shower

Had ever smelled its rose’s scent,

Or it could ne’er be discontent

With its own pretty flower.

Like such a blind and senseless tree

As I’ve imagined this to be,

All envious persons are:

With care and culture all may find

Some pretty flower in their own mind,

Some talent that is rare.