

March 18, 2018

The Seven Deadly Sins
The Deadly Sin of Envy
Genesis 37:17-24

Opening words: Let me say this one last time. Here is a statistic you should never forget! 100% of people have sinned. That statistic did not come from the Barna Research group, or the Gallop Research group. That statistic came from the word of God, the Bible. Romans 3:23 says, "*All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.*" Sin is not just reserved for the bad people we see on the evening news. Sin did not just happen in another time or place. Sinners are not just found in the Bible. Sin is real, and sin is as close as your next breath. There is no way around it; you are a sinner! That fact is not open for debate. Here is the Good News:

Lent is a time of spiritual renewal. It is a time to rediscover the person God intended you to be from the very beginning. Lent is not just a time to identify your sins, it is a time to take steps to eliminate your sins. Never forget it, we live in the shadow of John Wesley. We are striving toward perfection. On Ash Wednesday, I began this new sermon series, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. On that night, I preached the first sermon in this series, *Taking Sin Seriously*. Since that night, I have looked at six deadly sins: lust, greed, gluttony, wrath, sloth, and pride. This morning I am going to look at the last one, envy. Our Old Testament lesson for today is Genesis 37:17-24. Let me call this message *The Deadly Sin of Envy*.

Genesis 37:17-24 So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸ But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹ "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. ²⁰ "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

²¹ When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. ²² "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing— ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

Envy has been defined as, *a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities, or luck*. The question you must answer is this one: How content are you with your life? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Today we find ourselves in the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis. The main character is Joseph. He came from a noteworthy family. His great-grandfather was Abraham. His grandfather was Isaac. His father was Jacob. Joseph had twelve siblings - eleven brothers and a sister. In birth order, Joseph was number eleven of the twelve sons. If you are a birth order person, then that must mean something. I don't have a clue. However, I do know Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. I do not consider myself a great parent, but I know this to be true: You should encourage your children's differences, but love them the same. There is no doubt about it: Jacob was a bad dad. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other children; Jacob loved Joseph more than his other eleven sons. Jacob's feelings for Joseph are not hidden. They are common knowledge and displayed when Jacob presents Joseph with the now-famous coat. Joseph himself is not the sharpest tool in the shed. He wears his coat and flaunts his favored status. That gift was more than his brothers could tolerate. Joseph may have been his father's favorite, but he wasn't his brothers' favorite.

In our scripture reading for today, we learn Joseph's brothers don't just dislike him, they hate him. How much do they hate their seventeen-year-old brother? They hate him enough to kill him, and they would have if it hadn't been for their oldest brother, Reuben. He is the one who creates a compromise plan. Instead of killing Joseph, they will rid themselves of Joseph by throwing him into a cistern. They will tell their father Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Each one agrees on the compromise, so Joseph is thrown into the cistern. However, in the end he is sold to a group of caravanning Arabs. The brothers believe no one could survive in their possession. Joseph's brothers grab that annoying coat and dip it in animal's blood to add substance to their story. Their father, Jacob, accepts the lie as truth, and Joseph begins a journey which ends in Egypt. I don't want to ruin the ending for you, but in the end, it works out for him. There are many lessons in Joseph's story, but this is the one I want to develop today:

Envy has the potential of robbing us of today's joy and blinding us to today's blessings. That is not a good thing. That is why James wrote against envy in the third chapter of his epistle. Just think about it for a moment. In the Bible, the brothers became blind to what they had, and they only saw what they didn't have. Let me make it more pointed. They only saw what they wanted. Their envy led them to do something immoral and ugly. They did two things. First, they believed for many years that they had killed their brother. How do you sleep at night? Second, they lied to their father, causing him great pain. Envy is an ugly thing. That is why it is one of the seven deadly sins. Marilyn Monroe once said, "Success makes so many people hate you. I wish it wasn't that way. It would be wonderful to enjoy success without seeing the envy in the eyes of those around you." Marilyn wasn't much of a theologian, but I think she had a point. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" The question you must answer is this one: How content are you with your life?

Several weeks ago, I was shaking hands with people at the close of one of the services. One of the saints, who had heard every message to that point, made an observation:

Each one of these deadly sins has a good side and a bad side. In moderation, everything is fine. It is when they become extreme that there is a problem. I think he is right. Just think about it for a moment. Sex is a great gift from God, until sex becomes the driving force in your life and people get hurt. Food is great; we need it to survive. It is great, until it interrupts our relationship with God. Sloth is not all bad in moderation. God gave us a Sabbath day to rest, but too much rest is called laziness. Last week, we talked about good pride and bad pride. The same thing is true of envy. Uncontrolled envy can be destructive. That is what happened in the scripture lesson for today. However, controlled envy has a way of calling us to be more. The question is, how contented are you? Can I make a confession? As I worked on this message for today, I learned something about myself. I am really blessed because I am content with my life.

One of the fine people in my life is Jeff Harrison. He is the pastor of the West Austintown United Methodist Church. We are not from the same generation. Jeff is a few months younger than my youngest daughter. Our former District Superintendent, Dan Bryant, asked me to be his mentor. Instead, Jeff became my friend. At Annual Conference this year, Jeff will be ordained an Elder. That is a big deal, and I am happy for him. Working with Jeff has forced me to look back on my time in the ministry. It has been quite a ride.

I have been in the ministry nearly thirty-three years; thirty-two years working within the United Methodist Church. I started off as a Youth Director in Frankfort, Indiana. That was when I was a student at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. When I transferred to Asbury Theological Seminary near Lexington, Kentucky, I became the pastor of the Pleasant Grove Christian Church near Lancaster, Kentucky. I transferred to the United Methodist Church when I was nearing graduation, and served three small-membership churches: the Morristown Charge, including Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock, in the old Saint Clairsville District. When Kathryn and I got married, I served the Waltz United Methodist Church for a single year, in the old Wooster District. In 1989, I was appointed the pastor of the Hathaway United Methodist Church, in Garfield Heights. I stayed there five years. In 1994, I was appointed here and will finish my twenty-fourth year of service here in June. Of my thirty-three years in the ministry, twenty-four have been spent here. That means, I have spent 73% of my time in the ministry here with you. Do you remember the question of the day?

How content are you with your life? In May, I will be sixty-one years old. That is a good sample size, so I feel qualified to answer the question. I am content with the life I have lived to this point. There was a time in my life when I was more ambitious. There was a time in my life when I dreamed of winning the world for Jesus Christ, the bigger the better, but no more. Yes, I have turned down opportunities to advance my career. I have said it a million times. I came here for my parents, who were aging. I stayed here for my children, because this is a good place to grow up. I stay here for me, because I consider this place home. Each one of you is important to me. We have an odd relationship. I am not your friend and I am not your superior. I am your pastor. My only

regret is that I lost years in the ministry worrying about moving, and I refuse to lose any more years worrying about retiring. Someone once told me I committed professional suicide by staying here, but that never bothered me. Why? Because, the ministry is not a career, it is a calling. In my heart of hearts, I know that God wants me here, and I trust God will tell me when it is time to go. God has been good to me. I am a blessed man, because I have a contented life. The question is not if *I* have a contented life, the question is, do *you* have a contented life?

Years ago, this church had an employee by the name of Carl. He wasn't just the custodian, he was the most important person in the church. He had held that position for twenty-five years and everything went through Carl. Every meeting in those days ended the same way. Someone would say, "I will check with Carl." It was Carl who gave the thumbs up or the thumbs down. Don't get me wrong, Carl was a gifted man in many ways, but he was not the ultimate authority. By the time I arrived, Carl's performance was on the way down, but few complained, because it was Carl. No one complained until Carl never came to work, and we still paid him. (This is a good place to work.) He had his church friends doing his job. When the end finally came, it was awkward. The board voted to send him a registered letter. It was sent, and Carl was gone. However, Carl wasn't really gone.

A staff appreciation dinner was organized and everyone on staff, including Carl, was invited. Some wanted to thank Carl for his years of service. That was a nice thing to do. Everyone on staff was there. The long-time organist was there. The long-time secretary was there. The short-term choir director, before Mark, was invited. I was invited. Carl was invited, and Carl came. At the right moment, kind words were expressed, a prayer was uttered, and small gifts were distributed. When it was all over, I walked up to Carl and shook his hand. I said, "Carl, twenty-five years is a long time; you should be proud." I still think about his response to that statement. He said, "I would be proud, if I was proud of what I had done." What I heard Carl say was, he didn't live up to his own expectations. He didn't have a contented life, because he longed to do more. His body language told me, he felt like a failure. I felt bad for Carl, because contentment was a million miles away. This is the question you must answer:

How content are you with your life? I hope the answer is yes, but if the answer is no, it is not too late. What changes do you need to make in your life? Unchecked envy has the potential of blinding us to our daily blessings, but controlled envy has a way of calling us to do more. Do you remember the definition of envy? It is, *a feeling of discontented or resentful longing aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities, or luck*. Be careful. Envy is one of the seven deadly sins. This is Lent, a time to repent. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**