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EXPOSING ENVY

Just this morning I was devotionally reading through the closing chapters of the gospel of John and was again struck by a biblical character with whom I can't help but sympathize. He had a dilemma on his hands. Arguably the greatest one imaginable. He was certainly stuck between a rock and a hard place. Actually, he was wedged between the Cornerstone of God's redemptive work and the hardened angry crowd that was whipped into a violent frenzy.

I'm referring to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. One can imagine how his career would place him between strong competing interests. Trying to govern the first-century religious Jews in the streets of Jerusalem for a powerful Roman emperor who sat ensconced in his palace over 1,400 miles away always came with tensions. Even putting up the obligatory Roman insignias with Caesar's image around the city sparked protests and riots by the Jews.³

We are familiar with the scene from Pilate's life that kept him dodging back and forth between doing what he knew was right and appeasing the hostile Jews who were demanding that Jesus

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be crucified. Even his wife was pushing him to let Jesus go. Unlike the caricature of a Roman official in the arena dispassionately giving the thumbs down to have some poor guy thrown to the lions, Pilate was seriously torn. At moments he was so sympathetic to Christ, and so sincerely leaning in the direction of releasing Jesus, that church traditions are split on whether or not he was a villain and if perhaps he later became an ardent follower of Christ.⁴

Either way, Pilate had good reason to believe the Jewish mob was wrong about Christ. Insightfully, he looked past all the hostility and rhetoric and “perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up” (Mark 15:10). That may sound like a guess, but it is not meant to be read that way. The Greek New Testament word that is translated “perceived” is the common word for knowing, understanding, or learning something.⁵ Pilate, not unfamiliar with the struggle to acquire and maintain power, understood what was going on. He knew that the growing popularity of Christ, the crowds waving palm branches and laying down their cloaks on the road to honor the “Rabbi” as someone great—this was too much limelight for some upstart from Nazareth to steal.

It is astonishing to ponder that the most egregious and unjust act in the Bible—the violent and torturous death of the perfect Son of God—was identified by someone with a front-row seat as motivated by envy. If only the entire citizenry of Judea could have seen it for what it was. If only the Jewish leaders could have looked in the mirror and dealt with the fact that their lives, their teaching, and their leadership just weren’t as popular as the Messiah’s. If only their self-assessment could have been as clear and perceptive as that of the Roman governor.

THE MIRROR

I wonder, if we were able to go back in time to interview any of the teenage classmates of Pontius Pilate, or maybe chat with some of his political rivals, how they might rate the governor had we asked if he was the envious type. Would we be surprised to hear that his ambitions in the Roman aristocracy were marked by jealous contentions? Do you think we might hear of some underhanded political maneuvering that included ill-motivated slander or gossip? Do you imagine that we would have a few stories of Pilate stepping on some of his peers because he was envious of their lot? I'm sure we would. But, like most of us, I assume he was largely blind to the frequency of his expressions of envy.

Envy, like all other sins, is so much easier to detect in others than it is in ourselves. If there's one thing God continually points out in His Word, it's that we are naturally inclined to be irritated with others' transgressions long before we ever notice our own. We have a willful and massive blind spot that keeps us feeling just that much better about ourselves. Sadly, our ability to perceive the conniving, competitive, and resentful actions of others qualifies us to be people who, as God puts it, are "without excuse" for our sins. Note the convicting words of the New Testament:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom. 2:1–3)

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Recall the acute perception of King David when Nathan relays a story of a man coveting what was his neighbor's and then proceeding to greedily take it for himself. We are told how quickly David's "anger was kindled" and how he blurted out his swift verdict: "the man who has done this deserves to die" (2 Sam. 12:5). And who can forget Nathan's retort that allowed the king to see himself in his own assessment: "You are the man!" (v. 7).

Nathan, by the way, was a prophet. Now if only we had a nearby prophet to point out our double standards. Wait. We do. God's truth is dependably and "actively" sitting on our shelves, and digitally encoded in our phones, waiting to be opened to "pierce" our own souls with conviction over our sin and to dig deep into our lives to discern "the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). After all, we need to see ourselves the way that God does—without double standards. "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13).

That's a sobering thought. God sees with absolute clarity every secret festering sin problem in our lives. Our desperate need is to see those malignant moral problems as plainly as He does. Until we do, they will inevitably continue to cause damage. The solutions are graciously provided and are available, but before sin can be remedied it must be accurately detected.

God's written Word is the mirror in which we begin to accurately see our own reflection (James 1:23). But it requires that we look "intently." It will require that we look more often. And most importantly for us as Christians, it will require that we look with the resolve to do what it says (v. 22).

Time in God's Word is what we need. We need prayerful, reflective time, considering the whole counsel of God on this topic. And when it comes to the kinds of sins we so often tolerate, the need

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is urgent. The festering sin of envy is addressed in more passages of Scripture than we might imagine. The problem surfaces often and we can find our own reflection in many narratives and texts of God's truth. We just need to be faithful to begin to look for it.

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR

You don't have to ask a seventeen-year-old girl what she's looking for as she spends all that time in front of the mirror every morning. She knows. She wants to find all the imperfections and swiftly deal with them. And she has an arsenal laid out on her bathroom counter to work on those disruptive little bumps, blotches, and blemishes.

The malignant disruption we are looking for is called envy. And most of us haven't been all that clued in to what that looks like. So let's examine Jesus' teaching on the matter and see if things won't come into sharp focus, beginning with the example of the day-laborers Christ enlists to illustrate the point.

The story I am referring to is recorded in Matthew 20. The opening line of this parable may raise images of guys in our neighborhoods who line up in the parking lots of hardware stores or local paint shops looking for work. In a town next to mine the city officials have even designed designated day-worker lots and day-laborer centers. Jesus sets the stage in defining envy by describing the verbal agreement of a landowner with a set of day-laborers at the break of dawn. The landowner agrees to give them a "denarius," which was the common wage for a full day of unskilled labor in that first-century culture.

The day-laborers contentedly agree to this fair exchange and head into the fields of the landowner to work in his vineyard. But just like a homeowner heading back to the hardware store

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mid-morning, the landowner heads back into the marketplace a few hours later and sees more unhired laborers standing around. He calls them to work and says he'll pay them fairly. So off they go to work. A few hours later the owner returns and sees more workers and tells them the same. More day-workers join the team. This happens again mid-afternoon and then just before sundown.

At the end of the day, as the sun sets over the horizon and the crickets start chirping, the foreman is called in by the landowner to line up the workers to pay them. With money bag in hand, the owner first directs the foreman to pay the guys who just showed up an hour before dusk. Surprised and with rising grins on their faces, the workers hold out their hands and receive payment for more than ten times the work they had done.

The workers down the line who had been hired at the crack of dawn also had astonished looks on their faces. But their eyebrows quickly went from raised to furrowed when they received the same day's wage. You can imagine just how zeroed in they must have been, as their chins tucked back to their necks. "What's with those guys?" "What's happening?" "Why are they so special?" "They didn't work a fraction of the time we did!" To quote the words that Jesus put in the mouths of these envious men, "these last worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matt. 20:12).

The landowner's response in Christ's parable doesn't seem to help. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go" (vv. 13–14). It was hard to argue with that logic. The verbal contract for their labor was kept. It was entered into in good faith, the workers worked, the employer paid what was promised, and all was nice and tidy. Or it would have been—except for the blotches on the human heart. This was the perfect storm to bring to the surface

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the ugly tendency for fallen creatures to say that “fair” isn’t “fair” if it seems “more fair” for someone else.

Then Jesus lowers the boom. He gets to a principle we will need to return to and explore from several angles. His punchline gets to the heart of the problem and helps us understand our English word *envy*.

He says:

“Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Matt. 20:14–15)

THE WORD ENVY

What is hidden beneath that last line is the origin of our word *envy*. If you were to examine the original language of the New Testament and see this passage in first-century Greek, you would probably have trouble translating it—even if you studied Koine Greek in college. The phrase is literally read, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

My eye? What in the world? Well, it is not a random observation that our eyes do funny stuff when we are in the presence of a person who has it more fair than we do. That furrowed brow and piercing stare is of course the way that our internal begrudging is expressed. Begrudging. There’s another word we probably don’t use much, but it captures the reason our eyes are looking so evil when someone is the recipient of more “good” from whomever than we are. The word *begrudge* is usually employed when we think of giving. Someone who is resentful about giving is said to be giving begrudgingly. They don’t like it.

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It makes sense then that the word *grudge* is stuck in the middle of that word. We all know what it means. When we hold a grudge against someone, we feel bitterness and dislike for that person. And I'll bet our faces show it. Our eyes in particular. To give the evil eye, as some of our grandparents called it, is to give a resentful and bitter look to someone who has a blessing or benefit we'd like, and we don't think they should rightly have. Which is why envy is more than just being covetous or jealous (more on that in the next chapter).

Envy goes further than just wanting what someone else has; it is the begrudging, frustrating consternation that *that* person has it. We start to look at them askance. It's what your eye does after working all day for a denarius and seeing the guy down the row get the denarius for only working a fraction of the day. You look at him sideways, casting the kind of glance that your mom used to say would kill someone "if looks could kill."

Envy is frustration. And the vivid way it is depicted is in the universal way we humans cast our eyes on someone we resent because of the blessings, advantages, and opportunities they have, but we don't think they have earned. That is the "evil eye." That is bad, illogical, and sinful resentment leaking out through the look on our faces. That is where the English word *envy* comes from.

The Latin word for staring or looking at someone or something is the word *invidia*. We get the word *video* from the second half of that word. We watch videos. We stare at the screen. The first component of that word "in" in Latin means "on." To look on, to gaze, to give the stink eye to someone in Latin is the origin of the word *envy*. Say *invidia* and *envy* out loud and you'll get it. There's the connection. And while I don't want you to think about staring at videos when you hear the word *envy*, I do want you to remember Christ's descriptive and probing question when

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He literally asks, “Is your eye evil because I am good and a generous provider for that person?”

You see what He is getting at. Where’s your heart? Are you envious? Do you have resentment and frustration because others have a blessing in their lives that you don’t or, as in the laborers’ case, you don’t think they have earned like you did? Are you angry at someone because you think God has been more generous to them than He has been to you?

SAUL’S EVIL EYE

Three thousand years ago in Israel, King Saul would have had to confess to all of those things. And why not? A young upstart named David had captured the headlines and the hearts of the Israelites that Saul was called to rule. Sure, David had hurled a well-placed stone between the eyes of the Philistine giant who previously seemed like an unconquerable foe. Yeah, Saul’s military commander was so enamored by this performance that he stayed late at the office trying to see how he could add this up-and-coming warrior to his elite team. And who wouldn’t be pushed to looking askance at this short, untested, slingshot-toting shepherd teen when all the women in the capital city started cheering, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7)?

If you were Saul’s confidant, I’m sure you’d nod your head in agreement when the king vented his frustration over lunch about what an unearned and unnecessary fuss everyone was making about this kid. To put Saul’s emotions in straightforward terms, the Bible says:

And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me

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they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?" And Saul eyed David from that day on. (1 Sam. 18:8–9)

There it is again—the eye. Here is the old expression that captures the meaning of the word *envy*. He eyed David from then on. He would look him up and down and mutter in his mind, “What do they see in this kid? What did he do to deserve all this praise? Do they really think this guy is a better soldier than me? How can someone have so much so quickly? Why does everyone fawn over this runt?”

These are the underlying grudges to which we are all susceptible. It is the recurring sizing up of someone who seems to be getting what we used to have, want to have, or wish we had more of. It is the attitude that involuntarily purses our lips, crinkles our brows, and squints our eyes as our minds mutter, “Why did that guy get the promotion? Why does that woman get all the compliments? Why do their kids get all the breaks?”

Our eye is on that person and our unsettled hearts are resentful, insecure, and frustrated at the injustice and seeming inequity of it all. But unfortunately, that is just the beginning. As I’ve already mentioned, our spiritual forefathers categorized the sin of envy as a “capital sin” or a “deadly vice” because it inevitably becomes the fuel for a slew of other ungodly things.

The Envy-Fueled Spears

It is important to note what comes right after the diagnosis of Saul’s heart in the book of 1 Samuel. The very next paragraph describes a scene I vividly remember from my days in Sunday school. Of course, our teachers would always have us identify with the young David, victor over Goliath, faithfully serving in Saul’s palace, just sitting there discharging his duties as a court

harpist. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, my teachers would describe the bearded, crown-wearing monarch erupting in anger and reaching out to hurl his spear across the room at the nimble young David.

As a kid I read that story several times and always thought, “What a terrible and unreasonable thing to have happen to the hero of the story!” But let’s be sure to get into Saul’s sandals, and at least see ourselves in the story—trying to keep our crown in place while this amateur soldier (and gifted musician) keeps collecting all the piled-on accolades and stealing the increasingly bright spotlight. We should be able to understand and maybe even sympathize with all the pain, frustration, and fear swirling around in the king’s heart.

Fear. That’s the word in 1 Samuel 18:15. Saul was in “fearful awe” of David. Let that one settle in. The more *wowed* he was at the gifts, talents, blessings, and success of David, the more nervous, unsettled, and afraid he felt. And when you feel like that you want it to stop. How can I stop feeling this way? I want them to be less successful. I want them to receive less applause. I want them to get less of the spotlight.

Picking up a spear seems so extreme—especially when I heard the account as a kid in Sunday school, and even now in some ways. But I get it. We want the person we envy to stop it. Stop being who they are. Stop having what they have. Stop taking all the stuff we want for ourselves. I’m sure we have thrown plenty of metaphorical spears at the people we have envied. We have hurled plenty of sharpened criticisms. We have sought to toss a wet blanket over our imagined and feared competitors. We have worked to direct whatever might be within reach to make a feeble and frustrated effort to keep them from being more of what we think they don’t deserve to be, and to have less of what we’d like to possess.

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Yes, we throw a lot more than just daggers of dirty looks. When we envy, we declare an unspoken war of wishing, hoping, and subtly working to put those undeserving advantaged people in their place. If we were motivated to connect the dots, we could fairly easily detect that secret spear-throwing envy residing in our hearts, just by gauging how we feel when “that person” does get pinned up against the wall. How do we respond when she stumbles? When he loses that important account? When their vacation plans fall apart? When their kids get cut from the varsity team? Do we quietly nod in approval? Is there a sense of perverse satisfaction? Without thinking do we say, “Finally!” or “It was bound to happen!”? Think of how Saul would have felt, and how he would have reacted if it was someone else’s spear that wounded David’s shoulder on the battlefield. The quiet, or not-so-quiet, joy at watching a rival fall is a sure indicator that envy has been gnawing away at our sound judgment.

That is a big part of the problem with this undetected sin of envy. Even if it is never given full vent in some damaging action, it is always doing damage *in* us. It not only warps our thinking, but it also corrupts our affections. It decimates our peace and degrades our ability to value what is good and steals our opportunities to live truly productive lives. There is so much more to consider, but first let’s think back for a moment to the Roman governor who stood between an envious group of Jewish kingpins and the humble and fully composed King of kings.

PILATE’S DECISION

It was certainly an egregious injustice for Pontius Pilate to hand the innocent Christ over to be murdered on a Roman cross because of the envy of a bunch of insecure scribes and priests. But that is

what happened. A cowardly Roman official caved to a fearful set of jealous religious leaders and to the chants of a wishy-washy crowd of angry men and women. No one was without blame. Well, except for the one being beaten, flogged, and hoisted up naked to suffocate on a splintered cross of wood.

That is the good news. That is the gospel. That horrible injustice is the reason God can deal with envious sinners like you and me—justly treating us as though we’re not.

The reason for this book is to point out an insidious sin that causes a lot of damage—not just to ourselves, but most importantly to our standing before our Maker. He is the lawgiver and judge (Isa. 33:22; James 4:12). He is the holy rule maker. His rules are good and good for us. And His goodness is so good that He has provided a solution to the portfolio of sins that make us unacceptable before Him.

I do hope this book provides conviction and clarity regarding a particular and far-reaching wrongdoing. But more than that I pray this awareness will always drive us back to the injustice on that Good Friday two thousand years ago. It was good because the triune God dealt with our problem completely and forever. The faultless Father was willing to treat the sinless Son as though He were us. God’s justice was settled by that inequitable transaction for those who have been drawn and brought by the Holy Spirit to an honest realization of their sins, and to a sincere repentance that settles their hope in what Christ did that day.

The innocent suffering for the guilty and in place of the guilty—this is what can secure us the forgiveness we desperately need. Though we use the word *innocent* so often in a relative sense, I am speaking in absolute terms. The only reason the innocent suffering of Jesus of Nazareth is a perfectly adequate exchange for the truckload of sin in my life, your life, and an army of others, is because

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the only innocent one is also the eternal and ever-living One. The infinitely worthy and uncreated Christ, encased in humanity in space and time, is the One who can lay down His holy and righteous life for a multitude of sinful people.

Our awareness of envy, along with every other thought, motive, or action that falls short of God's righteous standards, should drive us to trust in Christ's finished payment for them all. Before we contemplate another aspect of the destructive sins of our lives, and before we prayerfully work to launch a biblically crafted counter-attack, may we right now and at every other step along the way thank God that we are enabled to trust in what Jesus accomplished for us the day He was crucified.

The price tag of sin is death, separation, and expulsion from God and His blessings, but the completed work of Christ in earning our forgiveness is the means by which we can be exonerated. We can be freed from guilt. Not just feeling guilty, but being guilty. Because He has lived in our place and died in our place, we can have an actual and full discharge of our criminal sentence. We can trust in a Redeemer who reversed the wages of sin and proved it by walking out of a dark, dank, and ghastly grave.

Fighting sin in our lives is important. But knowing that our sins are forgiven is of ultimate importance. Let's identify the problem of envy and all the ensuing mess that it causes. Let's fight temptation and shore up the weak points with the Spirit's wisdom and by the Spirit's empowerment. But let's do it as forgiven people. Let's attack envy as Christians who know and fully trust in the fact that the biggest fight was won the day Pilate sinfully capitulated to the angry mob and the Father saw us in the words, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

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