

Now is the Time for Love

Love is not Jealous

1 Corinthians 13:5

Sunday, January 23, 2005

I have a simple message this morning: love one another. Love is the heartbeat of the church, the heartbeat of following Jesus. Sadly, sometimes we're so religious, dutiful, busy, efficient and opinionated, we don't love. So for the fourth week in a row we're exploring what it means to love by looking at the "love chapter" found on page 813 in the Bibles in front of you. I invite you to turn there at this time – as you do that, I also invite you to put a finger in page 414 or Psalm 73. Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-4.

"Love does not envy." Or love is not jealous. Jealousy is a wound against love. Envy is as old as humanity itself. One of the first stories in the Bible and one of the first recorded murders occurs in the 4th chapter of Genesis: Cain murders his brother Abel in cold-blood, brother pitted against brother, and the motive is envy. Of course every parent could also tell you that jealousy develops naturally and early in the human heart – "How come he got a sucker and I didn't? How come she gets to sit in the best seat? Why don't I get to play on the X-box? How come his piece of cake is bigger than mine?"

Jealousy Defined. What is jealousy? About 800 years ago the brilliant philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas defined envy as "sorrow at another's good." In his book entitled **Envy** New York contemporary author Joseph Epstein defines jealousy with a question: "Why does that son of a 'bleep' have that and I don't?" Someone else defined envy as the "consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are" (Frederick Buechner).

The Bible describes the opposite of envy this way: "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12: 15). So when people are weeping God calls us to come along side of them and offer comfort - not in an attempt to fix them or tell them to get over it (remember two of the most loveless words in the English language – "hurry up!"). Believers in Jesus we are called to a profound *ministry of presence*, at times even a ministry of tears, a ministry that says, "I will walk with you. I may not have all the answers, but I will join my heart to your heart and I will stay with you." This ministry of presence is so rare and so needed in our world today.

That's the opposite of envy. Envy happens when your neighbor prospers, when she rejoices or receives a gift from God, and we don't rejoice. As a matter of fact, we grow sad, angry and resentful and then we start muttering, "Hey, how come she gets that gift and I don't." The Germans – as only the Germans can do - have a long tortured word for it – *schadenfreude* or joy at the suffering of another.

Psalm 73 recounts the story of a man who almost lost his faith due to his deep struggle with envy – and it is that serious. Look at verses 3-4 with me. What did he envy? He fumed because some people – and they weren't even good or dedicated people like him –

had great bodies, great wealth, and a great life. Envy equals wanting someone else's life (or aspects of their life). And the driving force behind envy is resentment.

Symptoms of Jealousy – In many respects envy hides in the corners of our heart. We don't know it's there and it often disguises itself. So how do I know if I'm envious? Let me give you four signs of a jealous heart.

- 1) Ingratitude – envy begins with an ungrateful heart. Deep down the ingratitude is directed at God: “You ripped me off. You cheated me. You gave me the short end of the stick.” Envy will not embrace what is God-given; it rails against God; it despises His providence; it does not accept the goodness and generosity of God right in front of me. It only sees God's goodness out there, in other people – the gifted people, the lucky people, the beautiful people, the truly loved people. So rather than living under the grace and mercy of a loving heavenly father, we live under a cloud of “not good enough” or “not loved enough.” →
- 2) Dejection – or a bitter regret that he has what I can't have. It's a dejection and sadness often tinged with self-pity – I have it rough, my life is harder than yours. See Psalm 73:13. Envy always carries a sense of being victimized – You owe me, I deserve this. Tim Keller calls it “comparisonitis.” It literally poisons us because we can't enjoy our own life; we always want someone else's life. All of which breeds something rampant in our culture: self-hatred. So because you hate your body, you'll do anything – take steroids, get implants, develop a secret fantasy life – to get someone else's life.
- 3) A critical spirit – the envious person must bring others down, especially those we deem superior or more gifted. A critical spirit is often displayed in backbiting and gossip. Let me ask you this: if you have a critical spirit (and many of us do) is it rooted in envy? I know that has been true in my life. Do you NEED to see something wrong with others? Samuel Rogers, a 19th century British poet, attended a gathering of society leaders who were praising a young duke who had everything – good looks, wealth, fame and women. Rogers commented sourly, “Well, thank God he has bad teeth.” Do you see how envy sours your life? It sucks joy out of your life.
- 4) Discord and disunity - It tears us apart. As with every sin, it's ludicrous to say, “Well, as long as I don't hurt anyone.” It doesn't work that way. Even envy – the deepest and most hidden sin in our hearts – stabs, leaks and spills out into the community at large. That's what happened to the church in Corinth when Paul wrote this letter (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-4). Last week I said that kindness is the Superglue of community (it bonds us together); jealousy is the anti-bond of community. It pulls us apart. And so Paul warns against it: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will destroy each other ... Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another” (Galatians 5:15, 26). Envy is anti-community.

Jealousy is petty. Jealousy is an ugly sin. It suffocates joy and gratitude and contentment; it churns and pricks our heart. It does not allow us to live as ourselves, grateful and content for the qualities that God has given us. Instead, when we're envious

we look at someone else who has a better body, a better face, a better voice, a better brain, a better wife, a better family, better grades, a better church, a better love life, a better relationship with God, a better house, a better job. Ultimately, it is so utterly petty. Other sins give us pleasure; envy makes us miserable. As someone has said, “It has the ugliness of a trapped rat that has gnawed its own feet in its effort to escape.” That’s why we don’t want to admit it. See Psalm 73:21-22. Looking back on it, he said, “I was a brute.” That’s what envy does: it makes us a brute, a very small, petty brute. No wonder the Bible says “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones” (Proverbs 14:30)

At this point you’re probably wondering, “I came to church because I desperately needed good news today. Is there any good news in all of this?” Yes, because God wants to heal us of our envious and broken heart.

The story of an envious man: healing the wound of envy. In Psalm 73 we meet a man whose heart has been riddled with envy. We already looked at verses 2-5; his envy precipitated a spiritual crisis – see verses 13, 14. But then he went into God’s presence and got perspective – verse “until I entered the sanctuary of God.” He had a personal encounter with God’s presence. It could have been the worshipping community or his own personal prayer time – probably a combination of both. In that sanctuary place he gets gut-level honest with God about his feelings; he lays it all out there: anger, rage, resentment, bitterness, ingratitude, doubt, even the temptation to abandon his faith in the Living God. He’s so brutally honest. Verses 21-22 consist of what we call confessing our sins. This reality doesn’t just depress him; it liberates him; it is the dawning of light. That is where we start, but then he doesn’t leave it there – otherwise he would cut himself off from the presence of God and start to wallow in self-pity. He takes it to the next level: he brings it all to God, listening to God’s word and clinging to God’s promises. See verses 23-26 and verse 28. The cure to envy – the deadly poison of envy – is to place God at the center of our life, and then to live out of that secure center in God.

Now at first glance, that sounds so easy. If we’ve been a part of a church for a long time we’re familiar with that kind of language, perhaps it even sounds like a cliché. Put God at the center. Okay, I got that one down; let’s move on to the “deeper teaching.” Unfortunately, we are always building our identity and security on other things – anything but God. As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches that we have a built-in aversion to building our life on God. If you want to understand what you build your life on, identify your envy. For instance, let’s say that your envious because the Jones child got 1600 on his SAT and Johnny Jones is going to Harvard and that burns you up inside. Well, I could tell you that you’re building your life on the foundation of your children’s success. Or if another woman walks into the room and you realize that she is prettier than you, I could tell you that you’re building your life on beauty and appearance. Tell me what makes you jealous or tell me who you criticize or what makes you seethe with resentment, and I’ll tell you what you’re really building your life upon. If you want to know who you really are, follow your envy.

Do you remember the movie Rocky? At one point he tells his girlfriend Adrian “I want to go the distance (in a boxing match) ... Then I’ll know that I’m not a bum.” You fill in the blank: If only I could do or if only I had _____, then I would know I’m not a bum? What is it – money, a better house, a better job, success, beauty, successful kids, a guarantee of prosperity and safety (you show me where God has promised that at all times and in all places), the perfect spouse, a skinnier body, a more muscular body, a promotion, recognition? What is it that causes you to say if I only had _____, I wouldn’t be a bum?

You see the Gospel starts with this very bad news: in one sense, we’re all bums. We’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. For some reason we get in the church and we think that no longer applies to us. I have news for you: the church is filled with bums. But here’s the good news: you are a dearly beloved bum. As a matter of fact, God loves you so much, that he’s made you his son or his daughter.

As we analyzed envy under the microscope, did you see how awful and petty and just plain wretched it is? Do you see how serious this is? And this is just one sin. Think of all the other sins in your life: the anger, lust, pride, greed, self-righteousness, the cruel words, the cowardice, the cruel thoughts and then all the things that you haven’t done. Do you see what a mess we’re in? I’ve had people say, “I never really understood sin – it seemed so abstract and antiquated – until I had children or I got married or I joined a small group at church. And then sin became a real concept to me. I felt it in my heart.” Now we’re ready for something radical, mind-blowing: Christ has paid for the debt of all of these things (see 2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

And because He has lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, we can flee to God, focus on God and hear his words of promise, “You are no longer a bum; you are my beloved child.” Colossians 3:12 – “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved ...” Ponder that for a moment. What children crave is not to be loved equally but to be loved uniquely. You craved that as a child – and most of us have a deep wound in our hearts because that wasn’t true. But God loves us uniquely – even the hairs of your head are counted. That is describing unique love – and not just knowledge of God’s love, but a sense of God’s love. We feel God’s love and experience God’s love.

And not only that, but the Gospel declares that those who received the unmerited grace of Jesus Christ also receive the Holy Spirit. In other words, the very life of God – the very life of the Trinity – dwells within your heart. The secret to overcoming our envy and every other sin that clings to our life is the explosive reality of the Christian life: Christ in you (Galatians 2:20). Christ lives within us. Ponder that for moment. The very life of Jesus is coursing through your body and your spirit. As you read the stories of Jesus you will notice something amazing about his life: He was never jealous. It did not exist in his heart. He is the only jealous-free person who has ever lived. “Christ is in you.”

As I start to live out of that center in Jesus Christ, as His life flows through me, He begins to break the bonds of jealousy. How? First, as I honestly confess the envy in my heart. Second, He breaks the bonds as I believe and receive His love for me. Third, as I find my

true satisfaction and joy and security in God’s love for me. Envy begins when I say, “I need to be like someone else or I must have something else in order to be happy and satisfied.” No, you don’t. God is your satisfaction; Jesus Christ is your sufficiency – and that is the basis of a life of joy and worship and contentment. It’s not a matter of demanding that this person or this worship service or this community or this leader or this spouse or child fill me up and make me satisfied and content. No, it is a matter of saying, “God you are good. Your salvation is good. At the cross of Jesus Christ all the blessings of the heavenly realm were poured into my soul – forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the adoption as your child, the gifts of the Spirit, I was chosen and adopted, embraced and accepted, Jesus Christ become my friend and my guide and my older brother and my trailblazer, he promised to be with me no matter who comes in and out of my life. All of those rich gifts flow from the cross into my life. And that is enough. All of that is my sufficiency, my satisfaction, my refuge, my joy.

Then I live free – on a very practical level. I don’t have to be someone else. I can admire someone else, I can be challenged and motivated by someone else, but I don’t have to live someone else’s life. This may shock you, but there are few professions filled with more envy and jealousy than the pastoral profession. How big is your church? How many people love you? How many people read your sermons? About two years ago I went through a period of deep envy in my life. I wanted to be like someone else. Everyone raved about him so I started thinking, *maybe I should be like him too.* I studied his sermons and I wanted to preach just like him. After about four months of trying to be like Pastor X, like the story of the envious man in Psalm 73, I realized that envy was destroying my spiritual life. So I started confessing it to God as an ugly sin against love – for God and others. And then I started turning towards the sufficiency of Christ and all His benefits. He is my sufficiency, my satisfaction and my joy.

When we can come to that place a profound shift occurs in our hearts – a shift towards joy, contentment, deep gratitude and a wild trust in God because we live out of our true center in Him. Why? Because God is sovereign and good. As Paul addressed the church in Corinth, he found the church riddled with envy, especially in the area of spiritual gifts: How come he got that gift and I didn’t. My gift is better than your gift. So Paul said, God is sovereign, God is in charge, God gives the gifts and He’s given you exactly what you need to belong and to minister. “All these are the work of the one and same Spirit, and He Gives to each (person), just as He determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11). That is freedom, friends. Freedom to let God be God. Freedom to be you and not someone else. Freedom to allow others to rejoice in their gifts without comparing yourself to them. So as we come to the Lord’s Table, let the Master Jesus truly set you free this morning. Confess your sin, receive His forgiveness and be filled with the Holy Spirit.