

Envy

- I. Let's begin by taking a look at a tongue in cheek primer on how to improve our Facebooking with JP Sears in his *Ultra Spiritual Life* series. **(Video)** Among many things, JP in a blatantly ironic way is suggesting that social media can lead to the sin of envy...a sin most, if not all, of us have struggled with, including myself. I recall when I was in the 7th grade and on the cusp of puberty. My voice had not quite changed, so when people called our home they would ask me, "Am I speaking to the lady of the house?" That is never something a thirteen year old boy wants to hear. I was beardless despite the fact that I shaved on a regular basis, hoping that would move things along. Yet I had the pimples and acne of a sophomore in high school. And this is why I couldn't stand the site of Shane, my fellow middle schooler. Shane always had a 5' o'clock shadow, a voice that sounded like James Earl Jones, and wore some fancy man cologne that just seemed to fit. And the girls loved Shane. Even the female teachers favored him. That is when I discovered the deep profound truth, that life is not fair. So even though I never said anything mean to Shane, at least not to his face, I secretly hoped for an acne outbreak to occur on his chiseled chin...or for him to come down with a serious case of razor rash...or better yet, that he and his family would move to Papua New Guinea. Why? Because of the sin of envy.

- II. Before we go further, let's take a step back. Where did this whole "Seven Deadly Sins" even come from? Back in the 4th Century a gaggle of monks fled to the desert to escape the sins of this world. But what they discovered is that they packed them along. They were alive and well in their small little community. They decided to write about those sins they experienced and witnessed, especially those they saw as the most toxic. What Christians through the years have considered *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The sins that are most destructive to community and relationships. And Christians have been thinking about how to overcome them ever since. Today we talk about envy. So what exactly is it? A simple definition might be **"feeling ill will towards someone because they have something we don't."** Show of hands. How many people ever wanted your neighbor's car? Dog? Your boss's salary? Your sister's looks? Your brother's physique? Another pastor's sermon? Our best friend's girlfriend? I daresay that all of us at some point or another have been guilty of the sin of envy. In the original language of the New Testament, the word for envy is *phthonos*. It comes from a word that means decay, corrupt, or sickness. And this is exactly what it does to us...makes us sick inside. Listen to how the King Solomon, King David's son, put it plainly in **Proverbs 14:30 NIV**. I like how direct Solomon is...he doesn't try to dress it up but calls it what it is. A putrefaction of the bones...and of the soul.

- III. There was a really fascinating study that came out a few years ago. Researchers discovered that when people are feeling envious, the part of the brain that is most active is the same part that senses physical pain. So to envy, to feel negatively towards someone who has something we don't, mentally harms us. Shakespeare knew this five hundred years ago when he described one of his character as a green-eyed monster in his play *Othello*. Being green, unless you're The Jolly Green Giant, makes you ill. My girls used to watch the Bernstein Bears cartoon. Okay, so did I. In one episode Brother Bear gets a new bike and Sister Bear is ticked. And soon Sister Bear is possessed by the green-eyed monster, which is

illustrated in this cartoon by, well, a green-eyed monster! It frightened my girls for weeks. It truly looked scary. But this is what envy does to us. Whereas some of the other vices such as gluttony or lust can make us feel good temporarily, envy does nothing but make us feel worse and do ugly, even scary, things. I found it interesting that another study found that the more time we spend on Facebook, the more we feel unhappy and dissatisfied with our lives. Why? As JP pointed out, Facebook promotes this false belief that everyone else is living a better life than our own. How many of us ever experienced this? You are going through your Facebook feed and you see your cousin and how she is eating at some five star restaurant in Paris, your friends are at a party you were not invited to, your neighbors' smiling faces celebrating their 10th anniversary in Hawaii. How might that make us feel? Never mind that your cousin has no life except her job, your friends are bored out of their mind, and your neighbor's marriage is on the brink. We are envious, but often envious of an illusion...but feeling green and not so jolly all the same.

- IV. Envy has been around a long time...in fact, envy was alive and well in Jesus' day. Right towards the end of Jesus' life, right smack dab in the middle of the Last Supper, a fight breaks out among Jesus' disciples about who was the greatest. It's like they all had Kanye West syndrome. I mean after spending two or three years with Jesus, they still didn't get it. It wasn't about fighting their way to the top dog position, or wanting to be something they were not. Listen to how this unfolds. **Luke 22:24-26 The Message** In short, stop trying to get a position you don't have, and be happy with the one you are in. The leadership model Jesus was trying to teach them was bottom side up. Lead by serving, that is God's way of doing leadership.
- V. There are at least four ways we can be envious. First is to be **envious of a relationship**. This can be a romantic relationship, but not always. When I was in college I was envious of a friendship between my roommate and a guy down the hall. When they were together I felt invisible. At times I just wished the guy would move to an apartment, transfer schools, or better yet, flunk out. This kind of envy usually ends up hurting us as well as the object of our envy...who typically is someone we deeply care about. Second, we can be **envious of someone's stuff**. As Will Willimon points out, generally we are not envious of the uber wealthy like Mark Zuckerberg and his possessions. We see people like him living in a different universe. But we tend to be envious of the guy or gal next door (or in the cubicle next to us) and their stuff. Again, we feel ill will towards them because they have something that we don't...might be a Mercedes, a jet ski, or a hair plug. The "what" doesn't really matter. This type usually just hurts us. And third, **we can be envious of someone's position**. This is what the disciples were dealing with. Usually, this variety of envy stays hidden. But here is how it can surface. Let's say Sarah gets the promotion we were hoping to get. We say things like this to our co-workers: "I am happy for her and all, but the only reason she got that job is because she flirts with the boss." Or "The reason why the boss promoted Jimmy is because he felt bad about his wife having cancer." And so on. We justify to ourselves and to those who will listen why someone is being recognized or elevated and why we are not...that is green-eyed envy boiling to the surface. This kind of envy makes us look petty and small.

- VI.** And the fourth type of **envy** is **over gifts or talents**. And this might be the form of envy we struggle with the most in our competitive society. You might think that this variety never occurs in a church community. And you would be wrong. Big time. Paul, the uber church planter of the first century, grilled the church in the city of Corinth because they were envious of certain spiritual gifts. Gifts given to Christ followers to help the church live out its mission. And this is still true today. Anyone know who this is? **(image)** Rick Warren. Named the top evangelical leader in the United States by *Time* magazine. Loved by most people and envied by all pastors. Thanks to social media not only pastors but almost all of us are now being measured against the most gifted in our field....which increases the temptation to this flavor of envy. I used to have one guy at another church who would come up to me almost every time after I preached and say something like, "Well, Ron, that was ok but you really need to listen to Pastor Rick"....and then he would send me the link to his podcast. That is like if you are surgeon and after the surgery the patient says, "Well, doc, thanks for removing my gall bladder and all, but you really need to check out Dr. Stillhands at Johns Hopkins. Now that guy knows how to cut!" This is not to excuse envy but it sure doesn't make it any easier in today's world. So do you tend to envy those in your field? Whether you are teacher, doctor, lawyer, construction worker, or candlestick maker? This form of envy rarely hurts the one we are envious of, but always and every time poisons us.
- VII.** Okay, by this point we might all feel like a big, green ball of envy. So what do we do about it? Let me tell you. I love my parents but I loathe going shopping with them. Why? Let's say my mom is going to get peanut butter. She won't simply pick the first jar of Jif she sees. She will do one of these numbers. Pick the jar up, look it over, read the label and then put it down. Repeat with a different jar of Jif. And again.... with all 15 varieties. Then she will do the same with Peter Pan. And then with Skippy. She will then return to Jif and look at the prices while making comments like, "Hmmm, that has too much riboflavin" (whatever that is) and such. Finally, after about twenty minutes, she will just grab the store brand that is 7 cents cheaper and move on to the next item. It's maddening. But comparison shopping is a smart way to shop. Comparison living is not. **Comparison is what leads to the sin of envy.** And it needs to be rooted out like the big nasty weed that it is in our lives. But how?
- VIII.** One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is the story of David and Goliath. It is found in 1 Samuel 17. **(image)** Quick summary- Teenage David is sent to the front lines to bring his older brothers some grub. He discovers his bros along with the entire army of Israel cowering in fear of a not-so-jolly giant name Goliath. None of the Israelite soldiers are willing to take the brute on. Not even the king with his mad warrior skills. But David, the shepherd boy, is. He goes to King Saul and throws his hat or crook in the ring, putting his faith in God rather than his sword arm. King Saul happily gives David his armor, his helmet and even one of his garments. Which wasn't only a means of protection but also signified Saul's royal position. He probably figures if he is going to send this boy to his death at least send him well dressed. David tries on the King's duds but they but just don't fit. Quickly David comes to the realization that he will have to go as is...in the shepherd clothing he came in. He couldn't be a King Saul. He couldn't pretend to be an experienced warrior. He

must be content in who God made him...a smallish teenage shepherd boy. And David knew the deeper truth. It really wasn't even his fight anyway. It was God's. He had to take on Goliath only with what he brought, a slingshot. And as you might already know, that was more than enough.

- IX.** The point of all that? We need to stop comparison living. Stop obsessing over someone else's stuff, someone else's talent, position or relationship. Be content with how God made us, what He has given us, our gifts, our role in life. Stop trying to wear someone else's clothes and trying to be someone we are not. **Comparison is the mother of envy but contentment is its cure.** Stopping comparison living and beginning to live contently is much easier said than done. So let's try this exercise this week. Every time we start comparing ourselves with someone, snap that rubber band on your wrist and pray for the object of your envy. For example, your best friend calls you and shares how her husband surprised her with a trip to Hawaii. You start thinking...my husband never does anything like that...snap that band and pray something like, "Thank you God for my husband and the way he loves my children and me." Or you look over and see a Lexus convertible in your neighbor's drive. Snap the band and pray, "Thank you God that I even have a car and place to live." Your fellow co-worker wins the salesman of the year award along with a healthy bonus. Snap the band and pray, "Thank you God that my wife is better looking than his." Joking! But seriously...when we are tempted to compare, stop ourselves in our tracks and give God thanks for what we do have, who we are, and for our gifts and talents. This will lead us to stop comparison living and kill the green-eyed monster lurking within.
- X.** Let me close with this... recently a generous family donated several shirts to me. I was so grateful for not only the money they saved us but also for saving me from the agony of shopping. I was wearing one of the shirts recently when one of my daughters said in a very disgusted tone, "Daddy, that shirt looks like a halter top. *That's not a good look on you.*" I quickly looked in the mirror and discovered she was right. I was exposing my belly and I can promise that is never a good look on a middle-aged man, or really any man for that matter. It turned out that I was wearing the shirt of the family's teenage son. No wonder. The point? Like David, we need to stop trying to wear someone else's clothes. Wanting to be someone else. Rather we must learn to be content with the man, woman, teen, or child we are. This is the only way we can eradicate envy from our life.