

Sermon — 8-9-20 — Love does not envy
Central Church
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Welcome to week 4 of our series 'Love Is'. As you may recall, we have been looking at what Paul had to say about love in 1 Corinthians 13. The first week, we learned that love is patient. Last week, we discussed what it means for love to be kind. We then challenged ourselves to practice both patience and loving-kindness.

After all, if there was ever a series that we needed to put into practice it is this one. After all, love is our primary witness to the world. As Jesus said in John:
I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. - John 13:34-35

Today, we will continue our look at Paul's description of love, as he adds one more descriptor to his list of what love is. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy. — 1 Cor 13:4

Love does not envy. I'd like to begin by asking you a question that I want you to ponder. It may sound a bit strange, but I believe its importance will become clear as we look more closely at envy. So, let me ask you, "How do you react when life's not fair?"

Have you ever said those three words, "It's not fair!"? I am pretty sure we all have. In fact, my kids had hardly started school before I started hearing those words all the time. "Tommy's parents let him stay up until 9 o'clock and I have to go to bed at 8:30. Tommy is even younger than me. It's not fair! All my friends got brand new bikes for Christmas, but I still have to ride this old beat up hand me down. It's not fair!" Nor has it stopped. The only difference is that these days, instead of hearing "It's not fair!" from my kids, I hear it from folks here at church.

So, let me ask you again, how do you react when life is not fair?

I am pretty sure that all of us struggle at times with life's fairness. Nor is that always a bad thing. At times, it may motivate us to try harder, to achieve more, to address injustices. But too often, such thoughts have a way of eating away at us

and destroying relationships. Why? Because, too often, at their heart is that four letter word Paul warns us against, envy.

So, what is envy? Basically, **envy is resenting God's good gifts to others, even as we ignore or downplay what God has done for us.** Another way of saying that is that envy is being so focused on coveting God's grace in our neighbors lives that we fail to notice God's grace working in our own.

Perhaps, that is why Paul says that love does not envy. Proverbs states it even more strongly, pointing out that "envy rots the bones." The desire for what our neighbors have can gnaw away at us until we lose all joy in what we have.

With that in mind, I would like to dig into what Paul meant when he said that love does not envy. First, by asking why envy is so destructive. And then follow up by asking how we can put out the flames of envy.

A good place to begin, if we want to take a hard look at envy, is with a parable Jesus told illustrating the dangers of envy. In Matthew chapter 20 Jesus began, **"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."** — **Mtt. 20:1,2**

I want you to notice a few things about this passage. The first is that God, who owns everything, is the landowner. He has work that needs to be done in his fields and so goes out looking for workers. When he finds them, he offers to pay them a denarius, which was considered a fair day's wage, for a day's work. This generally extended from the 1st hour (6 AM) until the 12th hour (6 PM).

However, it became apparent that more workers were needed. So we are told that: **About nine in the morning, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.**

He went out again about noon and also at about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one has hired us", they answered.

He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

— Mtt. 20:3-7

The first thing I want you to notice is that God has enough work for all of us. The landowner went out again and again, seeking those who were doing nothing, and called them to come and work for him. He called everyone he saw. He chose everyone. There is a great truth here. God has work for and wants you and me.

One of the shows that Lorraine and I like to watch is “The Voice”. The show starts off with what they call the “blind auditions”. They are called “blind” because the four judges begin with their chairs facing away from the performers so that they cannot see them as they audition. They can only hear their voice. It is the judges’ job to discern whether they want the performer based solely on the sound of their voice. If they do, they push their button and turn their chairs around so that they can see the performer, even as **the message “I want you”** lights up in front of them.

It is sad when a contestant auditions and no chairs turn, when no one wants them. We have all experienced that, feeling unwanted, rejected. On the other hand, it is fun to see the joy on the contestants’ faces when all four judges push their buttons indicating that they want a contestant.

The message of our parable is that God wants all of us. He rejects no one. God has already turned his chair saying, “I want you and you and you.” It may be the ninth hour or even the eleventh hour. It may feel too late. But God still wants us. He has turned his chair. You can stop auditioning because you have already been chosen for the part.

You have to love this part of the parable. But the parable does not end here. Jesus had more to share:

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.”

“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.” — Mtt. 20:8-9

I want you to picture the scene Jesus is painting in your mind. It is the 12th hour. The workday is done. The workers line up to get paid. The owner has them line up starting with those who were hired last. He paid those who only worked an hour first. To their delight, each of them was given a denarius, a full day's wage, for a part day's work. This story is just getting better and better. We all love to be wanted, and we love it even more if the reward we receive is far more than we had any right to expect.

Great story. Can you imagine what the workers at the back of the line were thinking? They had been working hard all day long. Can you imagine what must have gone through their minds when they saw that those who had only worked for an hour got a full denarius in pay? My guess is that they became excited. The math is not hard to do. If those who worked an hour received a denarius in pay, they, who had worked 12 hours, should get 12 denarii. Right? Right? It's only fair. They worked more so they should be paid more. Right?

But that is not how Jesus' story played out. Let's read on:

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. — Mtt 20:10

Not quite what they expected. But, I want to remind you that that was what they originally agreed to work for. The landowner lived up to his end of the agreement. He promised a fair wage for a fair day's work and that is what he paid them. They received all they had been promised, so they really shouldn't have had a problem with what the other workers received. Right? Let's read on and see:

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These who were hired last, worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." — Mtt. 20:11-12

Truth be told, I probably would have reacted in much the same way. I too would have objected, saying, "It's not fair." So, what did the owner have to say to that?

But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" — Matthew 20:13-15

Ouch! So what was Jesus' message to those of us who think that life is unfair? He chides us, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Paul simply sums that up by saying, "Love does not envy."

Why doesn't love envy? One reason is because envy leads to conflict. The Bible is filled with stories that teach that lesson. We see it in the first book of the Bible. We see it in Cain's envy of his brother Abel. Envy was also the root of the conflict between Joseph and his brothers. Envy caused Moses' brother and sister to rebel against him in the wilderness. It was Saul's deep envy of David that caused him to go insane and lose his kingdom. Matthew even tells us that it was envy that led the Pharisees to crucify Jesus. Indeed, if you look deeply into any conflict, you will likely discover the flames of envy.

That said, envy does far more than just cause conflict. Envy also make us miserable. Proverbs reminds us, "**A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.**" — **Proverbs 14:30**

Proverbs is right. Envy can rot our bones. I once counseled with a man who had had a good life. He liked his job, lived in a nice home, had a good relationship with his kids, loved his wife, and went to church most Sundays. If you had asked him, he would have said that he had a good life. But then he went to his class reunion. While there, he learned that some of his former classmates were making a lot more money than he was. Not only did they make more money, their lives seemed more exciting. Their jobs took them to exotic places around the world. Their spouses seemed more attractive than his wife. Their kids were doing amazing things, whereas his were just average. Their lives just seemed better.

He began to envy what they had. But it got worse. His envy began to rot his bones. After he returned home from the weekend, his life did not seem the same. A deep sense of failure ate at him. He felt less attracted to his wife. His kids, who had brought him joy before, became a burden that kept him from doing what he wanted to do. He began to resent his classmates who seemed to have so much more. In short, he became unhappy.

Let me ask you a few questions. After the weekend of his reunion, was that man making any less money than before? Had his job changed? Was his wife less attractive? Were his kids any different? Of course not. His life was no different on Monday morning than it had been on Saturday before he went to his reunion.

The only thing that changed was his attitude. He allowed the flames of envy to steal his peace, to rot his bones, to leave him miserable.

Worst of all, he allowed envy to uproot his love. He no longer loved his job. He no longer loved his classmates. He no longer loved his wife or his kids. The problem with envy is that it drives out love. That is why Paul counseled that love does not envy.

Clearly, envy is a bad thing, but how do we put out the flames of envy? A good place to begin is to just stop comparing. What do I mean by that? In Matthew 20, the workers were happy and content until they compared what they received to what others received. It is never wise, and usually destructive, to compare ourselves and what we have to others. No good will ever come of comparing the way we look, our income, our job, our intelligence, our spouse, our kids, our church or anything else to others.

Indeed, when we judge ourselves by comparing ourselves and what we have to others, we are really judging God. Think about that. God created each one of us fearfully and wonderfully. God knit us together in our mother's womb. God created us to live the lives he made for us. He did not create us to live someone else's life. God never says, "I wish you could be more like them." God says, "I wish you were more like you." We need to stop comparing.

This is especially true in our age of social media. Advertisements, video blogs, and media in general, urge us to compare our lives with socially engineered lives that no one could possibly live up to. The photo-shopped lives we see in the media aren't real. But, if we are not careful, we will start comparing our lives to theirs, which will inevitably lead us to envy them. Too many people have fallen into the trap of judging themselves and their lives by the fantasies they see around them, and thereby fanning the flames of envy that destroy peace and rot the bones of our relationships.

We need to stop comparing our lives to others and start appreciating what we have been given. Instead of focusing on what didn't happen and what we don't have, we need to focus on what we have received. Instead of feeling envy towards the other workers who received a denarius for a short day's work, we should be thankful for the denarius we were promised.

Refuse to be taken in by the myths that marketers have created to take advantage of our envy. You know the myths I am talking about. They are the myths that tell us,

"You have to have more to be happy. You have to have something you don't have to be happy." People, God has given us what we need to be happy.

Don't you realize that when we think or say that we need something more to be happy, we are saying that God, who has provided all we need, is wrong or has cheated us. What would happen, if instead of envying what others have, we choose to trust in God's goodness. After all, God knows what we need. God will be true to his promises. Above all, God is generous in giving more than we deserve. Don't be envious of God's generosity to others. **Celebrate God's blessings. Celebrate the ways in which God blesses you. And celebrate when he blesses others, too.** The key to peace and joy is not in getting what others have. It is found in appreciating and enjoying what we have been given right now.

That is what Paul was getting at when he said that love does not envy. So let's add that to our memory verse as we continue to grow in our understanding of God's agape love. Will you recite the verse with me, and then carry it with you through the week allowing it to shape both your love for others and your appreciation for the life God has given you. Let us read it together:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy. — 1 Cor 13:4

Go out and love this week. And remember love is not just patient and kind, love does not envy.