

# TURNING ENVY ON ITS HEAD

Sermon, September 20, 2020

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

*"Envy is the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own." -- Harold Coffin*

Mr. Coffin might be appropriately named, in light of this quotation ... for a lifetime of envy will lead you to an early coffin. There are two generally categories of envy which often overlap: hostile envy and depressive envy. Hostile envy leads us to want the other person to fail (*the Germans have a word, "Schadenfreude" ... it's the twisted pleasure one derives from another person's misfortune, from Schaden, "harm" and Freude, "joy."*); depressive envy leads us to feel sad and inferior when we compare ourselves to the other person. Envy often leads us to act in ways that eventually debilitate and undermine our own interests.

There is an old Jewish parable about the debilitating, destructive power of envy that involves a poor farmer who is visited by an angel of the Lord. The Angel says to him, *"You have found favor in the eyes of your Maker. He wants to bless you. Therefore, make any three requests of God, and he will be pleased to give them to you. There is only one condition: your neighbor will get a double portion of everything that is given to you."* So, after consulting his wife, the poor farmer prayed. *"Oh, blessed God, if I could just have a herd of a thousand cattle; that would enable my family to break out of the poverty we've lived in for generations. That would be so wonderful."* No sooner had he prayed than he and his wife heard the sound of animal noises outside. Lo and behold, all around the house were a thousand magnificent cattle! He was ecstatic, until he went up on a hill, looked across at his neighbor's field, and there standing on the neighbor's green hillside were TWO thousand cattle. The joy within him evaporated and a scowl of envy took its place. He went home in a foul mood, refused to eat supper, and couldn't fall asleep that night because all he could think about were his neighbor's two thousand cattle. After being consoled and counseled by his wife, he remembered he had two more wishes, so he prayed a second time: *"Gracious God, please give us a child that we may have descendants."* Sure enough, shortly thereafter, his wife was expecting their first child. But not long after that, he learned his neighbor's wife was expecting twins!

In an envious fit, he then made his third request: *"Lord, please make me blind ... in one eye."*

In verse 15 from our Gospel selection this morning, Jesus says, *"Are you envious because I am generous?"* In Jesus' parable, He tells of a vineyard owner who went into the marketplace early in the morning to hire laborers. There were twelve "hours" in the working day, dawn to sundown ... the first hour is approximately 6 a.m., the third hour would be 9:00 A.M., the sixth noon, and the eleventh hour, about 5:00 P.M., and the twelfth hour, quitting time, 6:00 P.M. The landowner finds his first set of workers at 6 A.M. and agrees to pay each one a denarius. Now, what we need to appreciate is that a denarius was a *very* fair wage for a day's unskilled labor. In fact, it was a *very generous* wage. A denarius was a standard day's pay for a *skilled* employee; in fact, it was the standard pay at the time for a Roman soldier. The typical pay for an *unskilled* laborer would normally be MUCH less. So, it was generous to be offered this kind of pay for unskilled labor.

The vineyard owner hires the first batch at 6 am, three hours later he saw he was going to need more workers, so he returned and hired more laborers, promising to pay "whatever is right." About noon, the sixth hour, he again found it necessary to hire more workers, then again at the ninth hour, three o'clock, then even again at the eleventh hour, five o'clock. Again, quitting time was six o'clock, so these last hires only had to actually go to work for just one hour. At six PM he had his foreman line up the laborers to be paid, and he began with those hired last who had worked only an hour. He paid them a whole denarius! Those who had been at work since six that morning saw this, and were probably thinking. *"Wow. If he pays them a denarius for working just one hour, think how much he will pay us!"* However, when the ones who worked all day also received the denarius, they were not happy. They had worked all day and they were receiving the same amount as those who had worked just one hour? *"That's not fair,"* they grumbled. The landowner insists he is not cheating anyone. He has paid the agreed wage, and it was in fact a very generous wage. Doesn't he have the right to do what he wants with his money? Now, I'll be honest ... on one hand I've always sort of sympathized with these grumblers; I can understand this on a human level. But on the other hand, *"Envy is the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own."* Grumbling ALWAYS happens when we give way to envy, we grow miserable and generally fail to realize and appreciate the really good gifts we have been generously given. Let me encourage the all-day workers to look at this from another perspective and perhaps in so doing turn unconstructive envy on its head!

The ones who started work in the morning knew early on that they had a generous wage coming. All day long they were working, all day long they had something productive to do; all day long they got to go to work in the vineyard; all day long they knew they would have money to buy bread for their families and/or pay off some debts when they came home that night. No matter what happened during the course of the "day," they had something productive to do, they had work, they had purpose, and they had real and substantial hope of reward in the end ... all the day long. Today you might call them "essential workers," who are the envy of all those our governments

declared unessential and removed them from productive labor. Especially in light of the pandemic restrictions (*as we are now are in approximately day 195 of our "fifteen days to flatten the curve"*), we might better understand how the others in this parable weren't so fortunate. They had hours of enforced idleness to worry about what would happen to them. They had hours waiting around spent in direction-less, non-productive in-activity. Hours where their talents and strengths are rusting in idleness because there was nothing for them to do. Hours of quiet desperation, wondering if they would have anything at the end of the day to provide for their families or pay off some debt, hours to wonder about their self-worth, and so on and on. They also had hours in which they may be tempted to engage energy in useless and even self-destructive things because they had nothing else to do. There are few things worse than idleness. In idleness, worries fester and metastasize. In idleness, temptation often grows stronger and more enticing, and in idleness, self-esteem often plummets. (*Back in July I had cited the CDC study which stated some 11% of pandemic-discouraged American adults nationwide of all ages reported seriously considering suicide in June 2020, about double the percentage from June 2019. Interestingly, rates of suicide ideation were highest among 18 to 24-year-olds, 25%. The CDC report also found the prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety quadrupled compared to last year at this same time. In total, fully forty percent of Americans reported some mental health issue or substance abuse related to the pandemic ... no, they did not have the disease itself, but they have certainly been afflicted by it!*). These men in this parable **wanted to work**; the fact that some stood around in the marketplace with ever-dimming hope until five o'clock in the evening is proof of how desperately they wanted work. In the words of Albert Camus: "*Without meaningful work, all life goes rotten ... without meaningful work .... life stifles and dies.*"

*(During the preceding Time With the Children, I told a story about the late Beverly Sills, the great operatic soprano whose peak career was between the fifties and the seventies. She had a matinee performance one Sunday afternoon at the Metropolitan Opera. Afterwards she was signing autographs for a long line of fans. One couple waited patiently in line, and noticed on the back of the playbill that Beverly Sills was slated to sing at the 7:00 PM performance that same evening. When they got to her, they asked for her autograph, and she graciously engaged them in conversation, seemingly oblivious to the clock. The man said, "Miss Sills, it is a wonderful privilege to speak with you in person, and we are very grateful to you for allowing us to do so, but we don't want to take up anymore of your time. After all, you have to sing tonight." To which Beverly Sills replied, "I don't have to sing tonight." A bit baffled, the man said, "But here on the back of the program, it says 'Beverly Sills: 7:00 P.M.' You do have to sing tonight." Ms. Sills: "I DON'T have to sing tonight." Man: "But ... is there a misprint?" With a twinkle in her eye, Beverly Sills replied, "No, you don't understand. I don't have to sing tonight. I GET to sing tonight. Do you know what a privilege it is to sing at the Metropolitan Opera? I don't HAVE to do it. I GET to do it!")*

That's why Beverly Sill's attitude is so uplifting: What a wonderful attitude! Apply that across the board. "*No, I don't **have** to go to work, I **get** to go to work.*" "*I don't have to take care of my children. I GET to take care of my children.*" "*I don't have to preach every Sunday. I GET to preach! (but **you** have to listen, haha.)*" "*I don't have to take care of my ailing spouse, I GET to take care of him/her. I don't have to provide for my dependent parents, I GET to provide for them and repay some of the huge debt I owe them!*" And so on. We GET to do these things. It's a privilege! And We GET to work in the "vineyard" of God. Think of the vineyard in the parable being the Kingdom of God, and think of the "day" in this parable as the course of a lifetime. The earlier we get to go to work in the vineyard in the life of our "day" on earth, the better off we are! The sooner we learn to love and serve God in our lives, the better off we will be! We won't have the days, the months, the years desperately wondering what life is all about, wondering what we are supposed to do, wandering into all sorts of difficulty because we have no divine purpose, wondering if there will be anything at all, any point to it all, in the end. The luckiest ones are those who begin their "work" in God's vineyard when they are very young; they are "called to work" early in the morning, their tender years are seasoned with grace and the remembrance of their Creator, and they grow up knowing who they are, what they are called to do, knowing how to be more productive and useful and fulfilled, and all the while knowing there is a wonderful reward coming at the end of the "day!"

On a somewhat related note, and I only have a little time left to address this, but a question often raised by this story is this: Can a person live a life of sin and decadence right up until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of life and then on his deathbed repent, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and receive the "denarius", the generous payment of life eternal, as if he or she had been a life-long saint? Well, yes. That's the biblical teaching. If that's true, then why not go ahead and live a life of decadence and wait until the last moment to slip in and get the eternal "denarius?" There are lots of ways that question can be addressed, but what really troubles me about the question is that it is even asked by serious Christians in the first place! I mean, don't we believe living the faith-full life is the best way to live? Don't we believe Jesus meant it when He said He came that we might have life that is full and abundant? Why would we envy a person who missed out on a lifetime of blessedness? Do we really think that living life without a sense of destiny and purpose and calling, without any real and substantial hope, is preferable, more enjoyable than the life of faith? **God is good!** And His ways are good! They are good for us and they are good for everyone. The divine blueprint for life is sound, and it really is the best possible way to get the fullest enjoyment out of life. Sin may bring pleasure, but it never brings happiness and contentment ... the "pleasure" is fleeting and the consequences are disproportionately destructive and often life-long in comparison to the momentary "pleasure." I don't **envy** the scoundrel who makes a "death-bed confession." I **pity** him for having missed out on the best life has to offer, I feel sorry for him that it has taken him this long to realize how good and gracious and generous God really is.

To paraphrase the Westminster Shorter Catechism: We **GET** to glorify God and enjoy Him forever! And the sooner we learn that, the better our "days" will be.