

Envy is one of the “capital vices,” alongside pride, anger, gluttony, lust, avarice, and sloth.¹ Though also called “deadly sins,” they are not acts or deeds so much as *attitudes* or *dispositions*: entrenched mental or emotional states reinforced and hardened by rehearsal and rumination. All involve deep-seated convictions — about God, the world, and others. If not dealt with, each of them, eventually, inevitably, finds expression in some word or deed that “cries out to God.”

Cardinal vices co-opt positive goals. I desire something good and lawful. My desire goes unfulfilled. I may ask, “How have I contributed to my own frustration here? Can I do something different? Are my expectations reasonable?” If there are lawful, morally permissible ways to get what I want, I can pursue them. I can renew faith in God; wait patiently; I can give up wanting it; or I can re-focus my attention on the blessings I do enjoy.

But what if I notice *someone else* enjoying the good that I want? Regardless of whether they earned it, deserve it, sought it, received it, bidden or unbidden, by sheer good fortune or another’s kindness, or got it wickedly, they have it, and I don’t. Now I not only covet for myself the good this person has. Despondency, anger, self-pity, and resentment arise. I resent and begrudge them their happiness and success. The emotions are followed by distorted reasoning: “If I can’t have it, neither should they. If my initial desire was legitimate and good, so are all the emotions and thoughts that flow from its frustration. I am entitled to take matters into my own hand.” What began as a noble desire for justice ends in spiritual vandalism, or worse, in which everyone loses.

The classic example of envy (and thus, the oldest cardinal vice) is the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). Both work hard: Cain at farming, Abel at herding. Both sacrifice to God. But God favors Abel’s sacrifice, seemingly ignoring Cain’s. The depth and extent to which envy colors Cain’s personality cannot be exaggerated; it distorts his perceptions, clouds his reason, and erodes his conscience, sense of proportion, and priorities.

The manifestation of a cardinal vice can vary: murder is extreme (but not rare in envy). Short of that, I may plot to “teach them a lesson,” make their life uncomfortable, or destroy their reputation. Along the way I will likely lie (slander or bear false witness against another) or “spin” reality to exaggerate the rightness of my complaint, deceiving self and others, and rebuffing attempts to show me God’s better, clearer perspective. I may rationalize stealing and misappropriation. The other deadly sins emerge, promising at least momentary relief of my discomfort. I indulge in angry rants; I soothe myself with food, drink, other substances, and activities. I sink into lazy, apathetic neglect of compassion, generosity, and responsibility (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”).

Bad as the physical, psychological, social, economic, or political damage may be, *relationship* is the real tragic victim of envy. Not just the relationship between the envier and the (envy-ee?), but a whole constellation of relationships, *including with God*. Nothing destroys a family, a church, or community faster than a subtle, half-conscious wish to deprive another of some goodness I myself apparently cannot have.

In today’s parable, the envy of “the earlier-hired” toward “the later-hired” destroys the relationship with the vineyard owner (God, in this parable). The workers *who are paid justly* bite the hand *that fed them justly*, because (as the vineyard owner correctly remarks) they resent (envy) his generosity. They would have been content with their wages otherwise. Now they would be *just as satisfied* if he paid the others *less*. All because they presume to dictate to God that stingy technical fairness is better than inscrutable generosity.

God tells Cain that “sin is always crouching at the door, seeking to control you. *You* need to control *it*.” Here is a great spiritual truth: listening to your gut is good; being jerked around by instinct and impulse in the throes of emotion is not an expression of freedom, but of enslavement and vulnerability to further manipulation. The point of dealing with “cardinal vices” is to control (neutralize) them before they manifest as alienating, destructive, words and deeds.

Knowing this helps, but explanation alone will not change it. “Vice” (and “vicious”) comes from Latin *vitia* (as in English “vitate,” meaning “to enfeeble”). To counteract a vice, one must cultivate (actively develop and practice) the contrary virtue (Latin *vis*, “strength”).² The antidote to envy, if applied diligently, is the virtue of gratitude: the awareness that I have been given not less, but *more*, than I deserve.

The goodness we seek is promised and held in trust for us. The justice we deserve is meted out by God in the time frame of the eternity in which we, as heirs of Jesus Christ, already live. Let us master the sin that crouches, waiting, before it is too late, lest we become so obsessed with our own deprivation and others’ blessings that we fail to enjoy and rejoice in the abundant goodness already lavished on us.

Father Tom

1 Lists of “cardinal sins” or “capital vices” go far back in Christian antiquity to the desert monks, and have roots in classical Greek wisdom. Sometimes included are *vainglory* (the thirst for recognition and affirmation), *acedia* (the “Noonday Devil” of apathy, disinterest, being easily bored, fretful restlessness, self-pity, complaining, etc.), and *tristitia* (melancholy or obstinate sadness).

2 humility→pride; patience→anger; temperance→gluttony; chastity→lust; generosity→avarice; diligence→sloth