



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## ENVY

When a colleague gets a desirable job offer, I may be happy for him, but I also think to myself that I really would rather have had it myself. This is almost a reflex. It is not that I have evaluated all the pros and cons of the job in comparison with the one I have now. When I do I may well find that I don't really want the other job. But the reflex is there: I want it.

Or it may be that we hear a friend tell of his spiritual experiences. They sound pretty exciting, at least compared to our own. It sounds as though he gets these revelations, these ecstatic experiences, while I get stuck with all the drudgery of the daily office and constantly distracted meditations. Again, I may be happy that he has the experiences, but I also wish that I had them as well (or instead).

The problem here is envy. We are capable of envying almost anything. We can envy someone for the apparent ease of their spiritual lives. It looks as though prayer comes naturally to them, when it requires vast and constant effort for us. We may envy someone's virtue, a virtue that we lack. We think that we ought to have it, that we deserve to have it at least as much as they do.

We envy not only spiritual things, of course. We are apt to envy people for their success, for their money, for their reputation, for the recognition that they have received, even for their good looks or nice clothes. We don't like to admit to ourselves that we are really so crass as to envy these things, but most of us do whether we admit it or not. We know we shouldn't envy other people, and we feel a little guilty about it if we do, but we do it nevertheless.

Whatever the object of our envy, envy is a spiritual problem. It is the desire that another person not have something if I cannot have it. It is thus one step beyond mere greed, for greed is wanting what he has. In the case of envy, I may not really want what he has; I just don't want him to have it. Think of two teenage brothers: one has a girlfriend, the other does not. The second may not even like the girl, but he can still envy his brother -- and do so passionately.

Thus envy can be extremely destructive. It is not so much a desire for something that I perceive to be good for me. Rather it is a purely negative desire that someone else be deprived of something that they have simply because I don't have it.

Envy always has the comparative element: it cannot exist in one person by himself. It is only as we compare ourselves with others that we lay ourselves open to envy. Unless we look and see that someone else has something we do not, there will be no grounds for envy. Moreover, envy depends on the sense that for one reason or another we ought to have what someone else has. We compare ourselves with them and find that we are at least as deserving of the thing as they are. We make the comparison, and find ourselves the winners. In spiritual things, this often takes the form of an evaluation of all the virtuous things that I do, and all the prayers that I say and so on -- all adding up to the conclusion that I deserve great spiritual rewards. Or, if not great spiritual rewards, at least the same rewards that Joe has, since he doesn't seem to do half the stuff I do. The comparative element is essential to envy.

In addition, envy often masquerades as justice. We want only what is due to us. This is always a comparative, human justice -- the justice of the competing claims of two essentially equal human beings. It is an earthly justice which has nothing to do with the justice and righteousness of God which is holiness. Much of the time, when we want to claim our "right" to this or that, it is just a mask for envy. We appeal to a false notion of justice to hide our desire that no one have something we do not. Envy is an attempt to enforce a diabolical equality upon humanity by depriving everyone of any blessing that is not universally shared. Since aside from the sun and the rain, no blessing is universally shared, this will in the end reduce humanity to a most wretched state. Envy attacks all that is good in us, on the grounds that nothing can be good if it is found only in certain individuals.

Spiritually, envy is a serious problem. It distracts us from the blessings that God has given us and focuses our attention on those He has not given us. The attention makes us want them all the more. It can be a consuming distraction, where we end up spending all our time in prayer accusing God of being ungenerous, asking Him, "Why haven't you given me this?" We are never satisfied with what we

have: in fact, we get so that we cannot even see what we have, but only what we lack.

So what are we to do about it? Since envy is a problem of attitude, of how we understand ourselves in relation to others and to God, our attack upon it must be one of changing our attitudes to reflect the truth. Envy is a false account of who we are. It needs to be replaced with an attitude that reflects the truth of who we are before God.

This means first of all that we must get out of the habit of comparing ourselves with other people. There is after all, no necessity for this. It may be a deeply ingrained habit, but that doesn't make it right. To break the habit, we must first be aware that we are doing it. This may require some practice. At the daily time of recollection we should look at the particulars of our failures. This can show us some danger signs to look for as signals that we are about to go astray. This is something that conscious effort, by the grace of God, can overcome. The effort can make us aware that we are doing it, and then help us say to ourselves, "There is no reason for you to compare yourself with him. He has his own problems and virtues, his own life to live before God. You have yours. Surely that is enough for you to worry about."

The second step is to be content with what God has given us -- and with what He has given to everyone else. This task comes under the category of trusting God's providence. If we believe that He created the world, and that He still cares about it and is active in it (and we can hardly doubt this if we believe in Jesus Christ), then we must trust Him to give of His blessings to men in the best possible way. We need not second guess Him about giving one thing to one person and something else to another. We know that He is wise enough that He gives to each person in accordance with his real needs, so that each is helped along the path to salvation. Unless we think that God is impotent or stupid, we cannot doubt that the giving of His blessings is intentional and always what is best for each of us.

This means that we are freed from the burden of analyzing His gifts to particular people. We need not live their lives anyway. We need not worry about their sins or what they must do to use His gifts responsibly. We need worry only about ourselves, about what we are to do with our particular gifts. The matter of why we have them is of speculative interest (for our spare time) but not an immediate, practical concern.

We need to teach ourselves to be content with what we have, spiritually as well as materially. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we set ourselves to accept what God gives us. If we ask Him for it, we must be prepared to receive what He gives with

thanks, and to rejoice in it -- even if it is not exactly what we had in mind. It will nevertheless be what is best for us. The practice of this acceptance of God's gifts is the key to the peace and joy enjoyed by so many of the saints.

Third, we need to learn to leave matters of comparative justice to God. True justice is not that between man and man but the righteousness of God, which He gives to those He makes righteous like Himself. Justice on the purely human plane is between degrees of righteousness and of evil. It is essentially degrading, always lowering our sights. God's justice is His righteousness. There is no comparison in God's justice, since He is the perfect standard of justice. His justice is also a standard of aspiration. It draws us ever upward out of ourselves, leading us on to be satisfied with nothing short of the righteousness of God. A preoccupation with comparative justice can be the death of Christian life. Rather, in our prayer, we should concern ourselves with our own righteousness, recognizing our sinfulness, and daily seeking God's mercy without which we cannot live. We should avoid the distraction of comparing ourselves constantly with others. (If perchance we find ourselves in a profession where such comparative justice is an essential part of the job -- as a judge, for instance -- we must simply be the more careful that we do not confuse what is essential on the job with what is essential in prayer.)

Finally, we must learn in a practical way that all blessings are God's gift and absolutely unearned. This is at the very foundation of the Christian religion. We are saved by God's free gift, without deserving it in any sense. We resist this truth in practice, because it is a threat to our pride: we like to think of ourselves as powerful and good and in control of our lives. But unmerited salvation is really a most comforting doctrine. It means that our salvation is vastly more secure than it ever could be if it were in our hands. God is more trustworthy than we are. So we should rejoice that He wills to save us, sinners though we are.

As we learn this we recognize the greatness of what He has done for us. We are thankful. The more we see of His gifts, and the more we understand our unworthiness of them, the less we will be tempted to envy. For when we see that all Christian blessings are God's free gift, we will not question His generosity -- to us or to anyone else. We will be delivered from the attitude of the workers in the Parable of the Workers in the Vinyard (Matthew 20:1-16), and will instead rejoice in the gifts that He has given us. Recognizing them all as gifts from our Lord and Saviour, we will hold them precious, as gifts from the Beloved. And as we rejoice in what He has given us, we will also rejoice in what He has given to others. Freedom from envy brings with it the freedom to enjoy all of God's many gifts, to us and to all His creatures.