

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm
Part 2: Parable of the Vineyard Workers
Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
January 14, 2024

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

I. The Second Hardest Parable

In my experience, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers stands as the second most challenging parable in the Gospels, surpassed only by the Parable of the Dishonest Steward we discussed last week. The difficulty with the Vineyard Workers parable lies not in its interpretation, but rather in its acceptance.

We talk a lot about equity in our society these days, and our sense of equity and fairness is directly challenged by this parable. Is it fair to pay those who have barely worked the same wage as those who have labored extensively? When those who have worked the hardest protest that they have made no more than those who have hardly worked, their employer doesn't just remind them that they received the exact wage they'd already agreed upon but accuses them Envy.

What is envy, anyway? Envy is often confused with jealousy. While they are related, Envy has the dubious honor of being listed among the Seven Deadly Sins for fifteen centuries, whereas Jealousy never made the cut. Jealousy is an excessive longing for what someone else has. Envy, on the other hand, fixates on the person who possesses it.

For example, let's consider our church President and choir member, Mark Musser, who is blessed with a voice so enchanting that even the nightingales seem to listen and learn. His voice is so melodious and vibrant it's like a rainbow made audible. Mark's voice is so warm and bright it could dispel any storm, and so comforting that it's like a velvet blanket to the ears on a wintry night. If I express a wish to have Mark's vocal cords, that's jealousy.

However, if I were to say I want Mark's vocal cords *in a jar*, that would be Envy at its darkest! Now you understand why Envy is classified among the Seven Deadly Sins and Jealousy is not? Jealousy might drive me to join the choir and improve my singing, perhaps even seek a vocal coach, aspiring to match Mark's talent. Envy, though, would have me wishing not for self-improvement but for Mark's misfortune. [Rest easy, Mark your voice is safe with me!]

Envy is the reason we might hesitate to share news of financial success with even our closest friends. It can lead us to speak more readily of losses than gains. It's a curious phenomenon, isn't it? In theory, our closest friends should be the ones rejoicing in our

fortunes. Yet, such is the strength of Envy that it can sour even the sweetest of friendships if left unchecked.

Do you wrestle with Envy? If we're honest, it rears its head from time to time, particularly if we're not vigilant. How often do we find ourselves feeling a secret satisfaction at the misfortunes of those who seem to 'have it all' – fame, fortune, good looks, and celebrity? This type of Envy is usually harmless, unless, of course, our Envy is the cause of their misfortune. But typically, these individuals are so distant from our everyday lives that our Envy poses little real threat.

The most perilous Envy is that which strikes closer to home. It flares up over the neighbor's greener grass, their more opulent home, their extravagantly pricey car, or when someone we know seems perpetually luckier. It's this kind of Envy that we need to guard against most diligently, for it has the power to corrode our contentment and community ties.

Curiously, it doesn't require a significant disparity in fortune to generate a sense of Envy. Studies show that when individuals must choose between earning \$100,000 a year in a community where the average income is \$75,000, versus earning \$125,000 in an area where the average is \$150,000, the majority opt for the lower salary that exceeds the community average. This is fascinating, isn't it? The pleasure of earning an extra \$25,000 does not compensate for the unease that arises from being amongst those who earn \$25,000 more. One can only imagine the feelings that would emerge if everyone else was earning \$100,000 more!

In the United States, one of the richest nations in the world, there are plenty of people who make hundreds of thousands or even millions more than we do. These individuals might not be our next-door neighbors, but they are ever-present in our lives – through television screens, during our daily commutes, and yes, even within our church community. For those prone to Envy, the constant visibility of such wealth can turn even the most contented soul miserable.

Envy often works its way into our lives in subtle, more covert ways. In our society, Envy can even hide behind a facade of righteousness and virtue. I know numerous clergy in our denomination, for instance who, despite modest incomes, vehemently criticize the wealthy, insinuating that any form of wealth is inherently the result of wrongdoing. With fists raised, they call for justice for the underprivileged and endorse economic policies aimed at 'leveling the playing field.' It's not that there aren't glaring issues with our economic system, or that disparities in wealth aren't harmful, or that advocates for social justice are merely veiling their own Envy. Yet, it's all too easy for Envy to intensify the flames of righteous anger. If left unchecked, Envy focusses a 'social justice warrior' more on tearing down the rich than uplifting the poor.

Conversely, Envy can also be seen among those far removed from the archetype of the 'social justice warrior.' Their anger is directed not towards the wealthy but at individuals

in lower socio-economic positions – those who benefit from government support through welfare checks, food stamps, affirmative action, and other forms of assistance. These beneficiaries are unfairly labeled as lazy, or parasitic. They are accused of being freeloaders who take more than their fair share of the American Pie, cutting in front of those who have patiently waited their turn to achieve the American Dream.

Again, this is not to say that there are no individuals who exploit welfare, or that concerns about government overreach are unfounded. But, just like my colleagues advocating for social justice, one must consciously guard against the more subtle fires of Envy. If left unchecked, Envy can feed a sense of righteous fury that becomes more about punishing those who receive aid than about forging a just and equitable social safety net.

The saddest thing about Envy is that, if left unchecked, it not only damages our relationships with others, but it robs us of our sense of inner contentment and satisfaction. Those vineyard workers in Jesus's parable were perfectly happy to receive the wage they had agreed to at the start of the day ... until someone who worked less hard received the same wage. Then, suddenly, the latecomers are perceived as lazy freeloaders, the vineyard owner is perceived as an unjust wealthy landowner ... and what they had considered a fair day's wage now seems grossly insufficient. Even insulting.

Caleb Colton, an English cleric and writer, aptly remarked, "Envy, if surrounded on all sides by another's prosperity, like a scorpion encircled by fire, will sting itself to death." Such is the destructive power of envy. It extinguishes the joy and contentment we previously relished, erases the humility and thankfulness for life's unearned blessings, and erodes our relationships, leaving us in ruin.

Do you ever struggle with Envy? Before moving on, I invite you to take a couple minutes to identify areas where the Deadly Sin of Envy may not be killing you, but may at least causing a bit of 'gastric indigestion.' You may also want to ask yourself what it is that helps you release Envy when you experience it.

II. An Attitude of Gratitude

Like many of you, I'm not impervious to the occasional stirrings of Envy. As an author in the field of religion, I must remain vigilant not to begrudge other writers who have garnered broader readership or acclaim. If I lose focus, Envy can tempt me into resenting those with more recognition. Similarly, as a preacher, it's a challenge not to covet the popularity of fellow preachers. Sometimes, I might even try to dismiss my Envy by telling myself that their sermons lack substance and their audiences lack discernment.

I have found one of the most effective ways to douse the flames of Envy—and to prevent even the smallest sparks from flaring up—is to cultivate a deep sense of

Gratitude. Ever since Envy was branded a Deadly Sin over fifteen centuries ago, Gratitude has been heralded as its most potent remedy. Indeed, Envy and Gratitude cannot dwell together in the human heart.

When I feel envious of another author, I shift my focus to the joy I derive from my own writing and the honor I feel to be published. If I catch myself envying another preacher, I remind myself of my gratitude for my congregation and the privilege to preach. Should the struggle with Envy persist, I make a point of finding and appreciating the merits in the other preacher's sermons and ministry.

Gratitude extinguishes Envy, whether it's being thankful for what we possess or for what others contribute. Give it a try! The next time you feel the heat of envy, turn to gratitude and watch the transformation.

Speaking of preachers whose excellence could easily incite envy, this weekend we pay tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I honestly don't think I've ever envied Dr. King, despite his immense popularity and rhetorical skill. His preaching engulfs me in such awe and gratitude—towards both God and Dr. King—that Envy finds no foothold within me.

Dr. King's sermons stir such goodness in me that, for the past thirty years, I have honored his legacy by re-memorizing parts of his iconic 'I Have A Dream' speech each MLK Weekend, presenting it during Sunday worship. As we commemorate this day and reflect on Gratitude, I encourage you to listen not with a heart focused on how far we are from fulfilling Dr. King's vision – but with Gratitude for the progress that has been made toward realizing his dream.

Excerpt from, “I Have a Dream,” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Originally delivered August 28, 1963

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day our nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi – a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and freedom.

I have a dream that one day my four little children will live in a nation where they are not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted. The mountains and the hills shall be made low. The rough places shall be made plains and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day. That will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia and Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – white men and black men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing together in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty! We are free at last!"