

“Sometimes Someone Else Gets What You Want”

Genesis 29:15-28

It is far too easy to fall into envy when others get what we want

One thing about the stories that make up the Bible. They are honest; today’s is a story about disappointment and envy. Jacob wants Rachel, but he gets Leah. Leah wants to be loved, but she must live in her sister’s shadow. Rachel wants a baby, but Leah gives Jacob sons. Whew...indeed, sometimes someone else gets what we want. How do we live with that? How do we overcome the temptation to envy?



Envy: “Feeling *bitter* when others have it *better*”¹

The key to grasping the potent danger of envy is the word, “better.” Envy is grounded in the comparison of ourselves to others. In our mind, we come up short and begin to hate the other person for it. Perhaps we lack the talent or gifts of another or perhaps we aren’t willing to put in the work or perhaps life got in the way or perhaps it was just luck. The reason doesn’t matter, envy poisons our heart and we begin to tear the other person down -- so we fare better in the comparison. We can’t be what they are, so we’ll just knock them down.

Envy is the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, in essence, shouts “Why not me!” when God accepts Abel’s offering but not his own. Cain’s envy gives birth to hatred and he murders his brother. To Cain, murder is the best—the only—way to eliminate the hated comparison that consumes him. God has warned Cain that “sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it (Gen. 4:4). In Cain’s case, this devouring beast manifests itself in Cain’s envy of his brother.

Envy is the enemy of love. As Rebecca DeYoung puts it in her book, *Glittering Vices*,

To love is to seek others’ good and rejoice when they have it. To envy is to seek to destroy others’ good and sorrow over their having it. The ‘greatest commandment’ instructs us to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22: 37– 39). Envy directly undercuts love of our neighbor.

As many wise people have noted, envy is the only one of the glittering vices that is no fun at all. Envy brings only pain. DeYoung again:

A poem by Victor Hugo recounts an opportunity granted to Envy and Avarice to receive whatever they wished, on the condition that the other receives a double portion. Envy replied, “I wish to be blind in one eye.”

The envious person resents another person’s good gifts because they are superior to his or her own. It’s not just that the other person is better; it is that by comparison their superiority makes you feel your own lack, your own inferiority, more acutely.²

The story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel

Isaac and Rebekah have two sons, Esau, the older twin, and Jacob, the younger twin. God had told Rebekah that the first-born would serve the younger and that is what came to pass . . . in a way. When the boys were young, Esau sold his birthright, his inheritance, to his brother for a bowl of stew. Esau, you see, was really, really hungry. Years later, Rebekah schemed with Jacob to steal Isaac’s blessing intended for Esau. It worked,

¹ From *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Brazos Press, 2009.

² DeYoung, p. 42

so Jacob had the birthright and the blessing. He would be the inheritor of God's promises.³ When Esau realizes what has happened, he is furious and threatens to kill his brother. So Jacob flees northward to his extended family to give Esau time to cool down and to find a suitable bride. At a well, he encounters Rachel, a cousin, and as the saying goes . . . the rest is history. And so . . .

Boy meets girl . . . and girl

He meets her. He kisses her. He loves her. Such is the stuff of many a Halmark hit.

Ok, so the kiss is one of those family kisses. Still, it soon becomes clear that Rachel is the girl who claims Jacob's heart. After all, we're told she is stunningly beautiful. All very Hollywood.

But there is a problem. Jacob is a bit short on cash and he knows that Laban, her father and Jacob's uncle, is not about to marry off a prize daughter for nothing. So Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years to earn Rachel as a wife and Laban agrees. We're told that though Jacob labored for seven long years, it seemed to him like only a few days. That's love!!

When the big day came, Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. On the wedding night, Laban slips Leah, Rachel's older sister, into the wedding tent in Rachel's place and Jacob never notices the switch. All I can figure is that there must have been a lot of veils, some of booze, and a very dark tent.

In any event, in the morning Jacob confronts Laban about the switch. What's been done cannot be undone. A marriage has been consummated and Leah is his wife now, not the beloved Rachel. But Laban still dangles Rachel out in front of Jacob, telling him that for another seven years of labor Jacob can marry her too. So Jacob marries Rachel also and then works another seven years, making it fourteen years total that he has sacrificed in order to be with Rachel.

Yes, Jacob is married to Rachel, but Laban has made a complete ruin of it all. Poor Leah was forced into a marriage she didn't want, knowing that Jacob's heart belonged to her sister. Rachel endured seven years of watching Leah as Jacob's wife alone. And Jacob gave fourteen years to the deceiving Laban. It is hard to imagine that envy did not begin to pollute the sisters' relationship, between the beautiful and loved Rachel and the plain, unloved Leah. For those first seven years, what was it like for Rachel to watch her beloved live as husband with her sister? Or for Leah to live as wife when she knew her husband loved Rachel. I imagine big family dinners were tense!

Further, out of all this there must come children, for Jacob is the bearer of the covenant and there must be heirs to the promise if Abraham's family is ever to be as numerous as the dust of the earth (the promise to Jacob at Genesis 28:13-16).

Sadly, it is the need for children that gives rise to another layer of rivalry and envy. This time it will be sister against sister, as Leah is able to have children but Rachel remains childless. The biblical writer tells us that God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb.

Leah gives birth to four sons and Rachel, none. We are told that "when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children she envied her sister (Genesis 30:1)." In her envy-born frustration and anger, Rachel sends her maid, a legal surrogate, into Jacob's bed to bear a child who will be Rachel's by law. When Leah proves unable to have more children herself, she also sends in a legal surrogate. It is a bona fide baby-making competition. If you've wondered how Jacob could end up with so many sons – here is your answer. It is Jacob's many sons who will be the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes.

In the end, Rachel herself is finally able to have a baby, a boy, whom she names Joseph. Knowing how much Jacob loved Rachel, we can understand why Joseph becomes his father's favorite and the envy of his brothers, who resent even a multi-color coat made for Joseph by his father.

³ See Genesis 25-28 for all this and more.

Take a few moments to reflect on Jacob and Rachel. What a love they must have shared. Fourteen years they waited to be married. Though tricked and swindled, they pressed on, determined to be together. Through all the twists and turns, they never lost their love.

This story reminds us that the best synonym for love is sacrifice. Jacob's love for Rachel goes far beyond mere feelings. He gives up many years of his life for her, for them. In this, Jacob's love foreshadows the love of Christ, who didn't just give up fourteen years of life for you and me, he gave up life itself. I think that if Paul ran into Jacob one day and said, "You want to know what love is, look to the cross," Jacob would know just what Paul was talking about.

And we can hope that the sisters were able to overcome their bitter rivalry, putting aside envy and anger as the years passed.

Overcoming envy

So what is to be done? How do we battle our feelings of envy borne out of our own self-hating comparisons with others?

Since envy is born out of comparison, seeking to value our worth by comparison to another, then overcoming envy is about coming to see that the worth that matters, true self-worth, lies in our worth before God. There is an abiding sadness in those who fail to grasp their worth in God's eyes. Yet, God gave his only son so that we might live. Jesus went to that cross for the sake of us all . . . yes, for each and every one of us. We hear the words but we don't absorb them and make them truly our own.

Sure, I would love to have some of N.T. Wright's gifts, but do I envy him? No. Would I want to be him? No. To feel otherwise would be to deny the gifts that God has given me, gifts that start with my wife, my family, all of you . . . envying Wright would be to reject what God has given me and obsess on what God has given someone else.

The next time you are tempted to value your worth in comparison to someone else, remember the words of the psalmist:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

(Psalm 8:3-5)