

Faith Envy

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1 Timothy 1:12-17

“...I received mercy, so that in me, ...Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example...”

Movement 1 – The Allure of the Super-Christian

Ever wish you were someone else? Have you ever found yourself looking over your shoulder at the person behind you, looking at the person next to you, the person in the car in front of you and wonder what it might be like to be that person. You wish you could be that person? Have you ever wished you were someone else?

It comes from a kind of envy of what others have. It comes from looking at others and saying, I wish I had that hair, I wish I had those eyes, I wish I had that personality, and so on and so on. It is an envy that causes us to look at the lives of others, the lives of ourselves and wish we were someone else.

Maybe it was envy that drove Saul to be so angry and bitter at David. In his day, Saul was considered a great king and warrior. In his day, Saul basked in the glory and the praise of his people, but then along came the young upstart, David. Along came this young whip who slew Goliath, who fought against the Philistines, who married his daughter, who sang with beautiful tones, who was handsome to look at, and maybe Saul got jealous. Maybe Saul looked at David and longed for his looks, his charisma, his abilities, and envy took over Saul’s persona.

Maybe we can relate to Saul’s experiences and feelings. Maybe we can relate to the envy that Sarah had of Hagar, that Esau had of Jacob and that Joseph’s brother’s had towards him and his dreams. We have seen the person who has everything, and we say aloud that we are happy for that person, but under our breath we are wondering, “why not me?” We have seen the Christian who is perfect in his or her faith, the Christian who always says an encouraging word, who always knows the right verses to quote, who prays eloquently, and who exudes piety, and we say how blessed that individual is to have such a strong faith, and yet mutter under our breath, “why not me?” Even when we find ourselves in the lull of the day, watching the home cooking network, and observing the beautifully displayed, the succulent dishes and find ourselves saying what a gift to put together such treats, but mutter under our breath, “why can’t I have a nice kitchen, an abundance of ingredients, and the skill the put together such immaculate dishes?” We can relate to the feelings and the experience of envy, the green monster has a comfortable place in all of our lives. We all find ourselves looking at that perfect person, “Gaston” in the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, who can shoot, spit, throw darts, and has a great cleft in his chin like no one else can wishing we had a piece of that pie. We know what it is like to be envious.

Some have accused Paul of being jealous. Some have accused Paul of being envious of Apollo's' preaching, of Peter’s leadership, and of other’s conviction in their faith. Some of the early churches claimed that Paul was bitter when he would pump up his own reputation, his own person in response to the claims of others. Members of the Galatian church tried to write Paul off as someone who was trying to compete with these perfect apostles. Some claimed that Paul did not have the faith that others and projected a

faith envy upon him. It seems in places when Paul is boasting such as the one read today that Paul is trying to prove that he does not have to be jealous, which suggests that he probably is; or one could read such a statement. Yet today we read about Paul, and Peter and James, and John and wish we could have such faith. We read about some of the Christians who have preceded us, like John and Charles Wesley, like John Clarke, Obadiah Holms, or Horatio Gates Jones and wish we could have such faith. We look at other Christians today who seem to be so sure, so right, and so strong in their faith and we wish we could have those convictions and that faith.

It is like we are all in a painting class trying to paint that perfect picture, and we look over at the person next to us. They are painting a landscape that rivals Monet, Titian, or anyone from the Hudson school while ours looks like a finger painting of a three year old. We wish we could paint that well, we wish we could make our painting look perfect and we yearn for that level of skill and faith. We all look over our shoulders to the person behind us, next to us, in front of us and wish we were someone else.

Movement 2 – Getting it Right

Maybe we could force our lives into something other than that which it is. Maybe we can make ourselves into the person we envy. Maybe we can shape and mold our faith. Maybe we can change and become the person we desire to be.

I knew someone in high school who was determined to be a “successful” businessperson. He looked at the high-powered brokers, the white starched shirts, the fine suits, the flashy lifestyle and desired that life. He was determined to live that life, he wanted that life, and was going to claim it by any means possible. Someone in high school told him that a secret to success was to have a well-planned life, organized and carefully scripted out. So my friend bought a Franklin Planner, starting to attend the seminars, read the newsletter and shaped his life around his planner. The planner became his moral code to a successful life. If it were in the book then he would do it. If he did not schedule it then he didn’t do it. If he didn’t make a list of priorities than he was not organized. He lived his life around that book, that code thinking that such an approach would lead him to the successful life that he so desired. He was forcing his life.

We could do the same thing. We could adopt a strict code of conduct that emulates the life we desire. We could manicure every aspect of our live, the car we drive, the food we eat and the clothes we wear. We could try to force our lives to change.

Paul lived with a moral code for a time. Before his Damascus experience Paul (Saul) was trying to be the most zealous, the most pious Jew that he could be. He strived to follow the law to a “T.” He strived to be an example for all others. When the upstart group of heretics called Christians entered into the Jewish arena, Paul would not sit quietly by. His moral code would not allow such a group of people to spread such lies about his God. Persecution was only the obvious and fitting response to such people as Paul worked to be the perfect Jew that he so desperately wanted to be. He wanted to shape his life to get it right.

Paul was dealing with this environment in his letter to Timothy. There were some there who were offering teachings that were to make the people in the community right with God. They were dictating a moral code, a list of rules that would ensure a righteous life. They were offering teachings and doctrines that would shape a religious life. It was

as if the early Christians were a lump of clay and some in the community were trying to shape the clay in one specific way.

Jacques Ellul has traced this path of moralism in the Christian church. He argues that this is a response our fallenness – it is an attempt to decide what is good and what is bad, and then to make a list of rules and regulations to be sure that we get it right.

When we look at our faith and at the faith of others, it is so easy to find ourselves falling into a moral code in an attempt to “get it right.” We say if I only pray for 30 minutes every day then I will be more holy. We say if I only read five chapters of the Bible every day, then I will get it right. We say if I only speak with a sharper and surer tongue concerning doctrines and belief then I will get it right.

It is as if we find ourselves in the gallery, painting and say, I have to adopt a stricter technique, a more solid technique and then I will get the picture right. Force your hand to follow the specific strokes, to follow the correct color combination and to follow the right lines and maybe your painting will reach perfection.

If we work hard, if we strive and stay focused then maybe we can reach the pinnacle of faith, the example of righteous that we all desire. If we work hard, than maybe we can force our lives into something other than that which it is.

Movement 3 – Hubris in our Presumptions

But our efforts seem to lead to further frustration. Our efforts seem to be empty, to be without depth or life. Our efforts to force ourselves, to change ourselves ultimately become inauthentic and cumbersome.

Paul was working hard to be the perfect Jew before his conversion. He was working hard to live the holy life, the perfect life and took upon himself a morality that forced his piety and his faith. He was following a code that seemed to promise a righteous life, and he describes himself as a “blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence. This is not the result that Paul intended to achieve. His hubris in his presumptions of what a true and faithful life looked like led to a further life of despair and frustration.

I have a friend who has been struggling as a pastor. He lives with a kind of faith envy, looking at the “successful” churches, the large and powerful churches and wanting a piece of the pie. He studied the lives of the pastors of those churches; he studied the practices, the techniques and the approaches of those pastors and those churches, and then tried to adopt them in his own context. His life became a kind of checklist of prayers, and small groups, and power-point sermons. He preached the same kind of sermons; he dressed in the same way, and copied these mega-pastors to the “T.” But something happened, the church did not grow. His people did not relate, because what he was doing was not true to his context. What he was doing was forced and inauthentic to him, the churches he served, and the neighborhoods he was in. What happened was that his people became frustrated, the churches struggled, and he began to diminish as a pastor. His hubris in his presumption of what a church is supposed to look like only led to frustration.

Our own hubris, our own efforts to be the Christians that we so desperately want to be leads to frustration and despair. We buy a self-help book and apply the teachings of the book in a matter-of-fact nature, and find ourselves not relating to all that the book offers. A church buys into a program and tries to follow it to the letter and finds the

people suffering and starving for a fulfilling grace that a program cannot offer. We may assume that all we have to do is follow the rules and we will get things right, but then we find ourselves feeling empty. We follow the rules of painting, hoping that we will get the picture right, but only find that we have a mechanical painting which is void of life, of passion and of power. Jacques Ellul claims that through a rule-following kind of life, a life of prescribed morality makes relationship based on duty and not on love. We worship God because we are supposed to. We pray because we are expected to. We follow the rules and live a duty focused life, but find ourselves frustrated and empty.

Movement 4 – The Foremost Equalizer

We need to remember that we are all fallen. We need to realize that we all have faults, that we all have wounds and that we all are fallen. Look around the gallery at the other pictures around us. Look around what other people are painting and realize that each picture holds an imperfection in its own way. Each picture is far from perfect and need to be improved. We all are painting flawed pictures.

Paul is almost boasting his faults by calling himself the foremost of sinners. He is bringing himself down as a person, reminding the people of his sins, his faults and his brokenness. The foremost is the first, the most notable amongst those who live in sin. Could we not claim the same? Could we not claim that we are also living with sin? Could we not claim that we also are the foremost of sinners? Whether it be through pride, through anger, through a hard heart, or through something else, we all can copy the end of the movie *Spartacus*. We could stand in the crowd and when the question is asked, “who is the foremost of sinners,” we can answer in one way or another, “I’m the foremost.” While I would not argue that all sins are equal in the eyes of the Lord, there is plenty of Biblical precedent that describes a universal aspect to sin. In James we read that whoever is guilty of breaking just one part of the law is guilty of breaking all of it. In Romans we are reminded that all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of the Lord. We all can claim to be sinners together, we all are equalized in our sin, on the same ground and need not be envious of one’s sins over another’s.

If you read any of Flannery O’Connor’s stories you find a great equalizing of characters. O’Connor is masterful of taking the characters that many would be envious of and showing their failings and faults. She takes the characters that think they are better than others and point out their flaws. The story *Everything Rises Must Converge* tells the story of a racist mother and her holier than thou “liberated” son. The mother is openly anxious and nervous around black people and is taken aback when a black mother refuses a penny on behalf of her child. The mother could see through the pity and condescending attitude. The son, on the other hand, believes that he is better than his mother because he has been educated, is beyond racism and is ready to teach his mother a lesson. But in trying to teach his mother a lesson, in lecturing his mother, he shames and hurts her, giving her a stroke. Both characters thought of themselves as holy, as pious, and both were flawed – living with their own sin.

Maybe we aren’t racist, maybe we don’t think of ourselves as better than others, but we all have our faults, we all have our failings. Theologians like Tillich, Niebuhr and others say that our fallenness come from the exit of Eden. Tillich describes it as leaving as the potential to achieve the fullness of our humanity. That in reality our lives are

distorted and finite. This is the great equalizer, that we are all fallen in the eyes of the Lord.

Movement 5 – The Mercy and Grace

In our fallen state we are ready to accept the grace of God. When we realize our brokenness, then we are ready to accept the grace and the mercy of the Lord. When Paul was hotheaded, when Paul was full of rage and self-righteousness could he have received the grace of God? When Paul was running in his murderous gallop could he have accepted the grace of God? It took a great moment, it took a great light to push Paul from his high horse to the ground, to the realization that he was fallen, that he was broken, that he was a sinner to bring him to the place where he could accept the grace and the mercy of the Lord. Paul reminds the people of Christ's grace in his quote, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and unless you are a sinner, you can't be saved (don't go out looking to sin, remember that we are all already sinners). And the grace is that Paul, who was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence, who was the foremost of sinners was made an example in the best and truest sense. Chrysostom calls people to imitate Paul and to not be afraid of such imitation because of what God did with him. Chrysostom is claiming that God can do with us what God did with Paul through the Spirit God can also do with us.

We can be saved. Our debt can be paid off. Our life can become the life we so desire to live, but only by the grace of God. God will take our pictures and make them complete, make the perfect, but we have to be willing to give them to the Lord. If we hold onto our pictures, if we hold onto our lives and say, Lord it is good enough, Lord, I do enough, then how can God make things right? The grace is there through Christ. The mercy is there through Christ, all we have to do is accept it. All we have to do is claim that we are fallen, find ourselves at the cross and realize that we are justified through the Lord. We are justified to call ourselves children of God, we are justified to call ourselves blessed, we are justified to claim a place at the side of the Lord through the actions, through the grace of Christ. Remember last week I called us to be honest with God. I am calling you again to be honest with God. To name your stumbling blocks, to name your faults, to name those things which get in the way with your relationships with other people and in the way of your relationships with the Lord. Name them, claim them, and then let the Lord make them right with grace and mercy. We cannot live a strict enough life to make us perfect. We cannot live a holy enough life on our own to make us pious. We can only ask the Lord for strength, for sustenance and for grace. In our fallen state, then we are ready to receive the grace of God.

Movement 6 – Free to Be...

And then we can be the people that God has called us to be. Then we can start to live into the life that God wants us to live. This is where Paul is a great example. God had called him to do powerful work. God had called him to do profound work, to be an example for others to come and to believe in Jesus Christ. Paul had to receive the grace of Jesus Christ, and then he was called to live the life that God had wanted him to live. But here is the thing, God initiated Paul's life. God initiated the change. We can't say, "God this is who I want to be." No, instead we say, "God, who do you want me to be?" We say that we are ready to follow, ready to walk, ready to show others the faith that we have

and that gives us life. And through the grace of the Lord, we are free to live that life. It is not a life where we are held down by lists, by rules, by morals and by objectives. It is not a life where we are constantly checking and asking ourselves if we are doing enough. No, it is a life where we are free from such restrictions. It is a life where we do not have to be tangled in such doctrines and dogmas. We are free to be Christians, we are free to follow Christ.

Karl Barth claims that when we accept the grace of Christ, when we say yes to Christ, then we are free to say yes to the life that God has for us. We don't have to say no to this or that, but yes to the love and the grace of God. We can say yes, I will live a life of peace and mercy. We can say yes, I will listen to and follow the Lord. We can say, yes I will love my neighbor as myself. We can say, yes I will name and claim and confess the ways in which I have sinned and continue to sin, resting in the grace of God. We can say, yes, I will be the child that God has called me to be.

Church, this is liberating. This is liberating because we do not have to look at other churches when we consider how to be a church. This is liberating because we do not have to consider how things are "supposed" to be done. We do not have to consider what has worked for other churches in the past. We do not have to consider what has worked for this church in the past. Rather, we can fall before the Lord, a broken institution, asking for the grace of the Lord, and then responding with a yes to God's invitation. God is inviting us to be an example of faith. God is inviting us to be an example of glory, and all we have to do is follow the Lord into that grace and glory. We have all that we need, we are all that we need to be the presence of Christ for many in the here and now. Through the grace of Christ we are free to be the church that God calls us to be.

Two of the very first Christians who were martyred, Felicity and Perpetua claimed that they were being who God had called them to be. When the father of one was asking, pleading, begging them to renounce their faith, she pointed to a pitcher of water and said just as that pitcher cannot be anything else besides a pitcher, so she could not be anything else but a Christian. It was who God called her to be.

We will not look at other Christians. We will not look at other churches. We will look only at the cross and be the Christians that God calls us to be. We will follow the example of Christ and of none other. We will paint the picture that God guides us to paint. We will have no need for envy but only for grace. The grace of Christ will make us whole.

AMEN