

# A Courageous Stand against Poisonous Envy

Examining how we relate to others

In this month's installment on the seven deadly vices and seven holy virtues, we consider envy and courage. Like all the virtues and vices, envy and courage are the orderings and disorderings of our desires, which have been habituated over time by a series of wise or poor choices or encouraged by good or bad mentors. These two make for an odd pairing, perhaps, for neither is the obvious opposite of the other. Then again, our vices and virtues don't always relate as opposites, but rather as each other's enemies whose competition for allegiance in our soul sometimes rests on subtle yet crucial distinctions.

Let us begin with envy. Among the vices, envy is perhaps the most complex, insidious, secretive and, hence, least understood of the seven. First, we note that envy is a desire for something that one lacks, but the desiderata of envy can come in endless varieties. You can envy the wisdom of old age if you are young, the vitality of youth if you are old, wealth if you are poor, simplicity if you are wealthy, singlehood if you are married, marriage if you are single, charisma if you are dull, strength if you are weak, etc. But if envy has a definable shape, it is not in the content of what is desired,

or even in desperately wanting something you lack. Envy turns our desire for anything good into malice toward those who already enjoy what we don't have.

For an image of the envious person, there is no better description than that found in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf." Mrs. May is a thin, squint-eyed widow, who for fifteen years has worked alone at keeping a broken-down farm on the right side of ruin, a farm she never wanted in the first place, but within which she was placed by her husband to raise a family, and to which she is bound as her sole inheritance upon his death. Mrs. May's only fleeting consolation, as O'Connor describes it, is that "her city friends said she was the most remarkable woman they knew, to go, practically penniless and with no experience, out to a rundown farm and make a success of it.... Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I've worked, I have not wallowed."

So far, this could be the setup for the story of a strong-willed woman, who courageously works amid adverse conditions to better her life and the lives of her family. But it is not. Rather, it is a brilliant account

of self-destruction brought about by envy and resentment, the very poison of courage. Mrs. May came into this place and these obligations before her sense of self had time to mature, and so over time she has cultivated a deep-rooted envy toward those who seemed free to choose their fate, and eventually toward all those upon whom fortune has smiled. As the years go by, and as choice after choice settles the once occasional moments of spite into engrained habits of malice, she eventually can call only one thing her own: her empty resilience over a world that, in her mind, is set to bring her to ruin. "Everything is against you," Mrs. May says, "the weather is against you and the dirt is against you and the help is against you. They're all in league against you!"

Envious people require others on whom to cast their squinting and suspicious glances, living as they do in reaction to the lives others lead. O'Connor provides one such character, Mr. Greenleaf, an African American hired hand who, though legally the employee of Mrs. May, possesses a dignity that elevates him above her spite. Despite his social status as her inferior, he and his family fare well in the world and eventually, to the utter



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disdain of Mrs. May, become “society.” Mrs. May fights a constant and subtle battle against Mr. Greenleaf and his family, seeking any chance possible to belittle his success or to point out his failings, while all along secretly desiring the fortune Mr. Greenleaf has found.

The envious cannot help but cut down the goodness of others so that in comparison one’s blindness to one’s self-worth is less troubling. Dorothy Sayers notes the *leveling* that envy promotes in her book on the seven deadly sins: “Envy is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down.... At its best, envy is a climber and a snob; at its worst it is a destroyer—rather than have anyone happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together.”

Aristotle notes that the noblest pleasure in a virtuous friendship is

to take joy in the success, beauty, and virtue in one’s friend. One will courageously defend a friend, precisely because one so freely admires a friend’s virtues and seeks to protect and promote their cultivation. Envy, while maybe the most private and interior of the vices, is destructive of such friendship. As Joseph Epstein notes in his book on the subject, *Envy*, “Malice that cannot speak its name, cold-blooded but secret hostility, impotent desire, hidden rancor, and spite all cluster at the center of envy.”

Friendship becomes impossible to those caged in by envy. For those suffering from *acedia* (sloth), hell is being locked up with oneself; for the envious person, *hell is other people*.

In the end, envy slowly and persistently gnaws at the soul. In the story “Greenleaf,” O’Connor embodies Mrs. May’s envy with a bull, actually

the Greenleafs’ family bull, which frequently breaks free from its stall and wanders onto Mrs. May’s property. Consider how O’Connor describes this bull’s invasion onto Mrs. May’s land, and you will get some idea of how envy infiltrates the soul. “[As Mrs. May awoke in her bed] she had been conscious in her sleep of a steady rhythmic chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything

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but the Greenleaves, on and on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleaves on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place.”

Sadly, envy, *by its very nature*, is not something its sufferer would want to admit. In its fullest bloom, envy becomes all that a person has left to call his or her own, which is precisely nothing because such a person is so distortedly caught up in the lives of others. The envious so lack, or are so blinded to, their own capacities and graces that they can live only vicariously—and resentfully—through other people.

It is here that we can see the relationship between envy and courage. As envy is perhaps universally despised across cultures, courage is no doubt the most universally admired. That being said, courage is so universally admired that it seems in danger of being morally indiscriminate. Courage, it would seem, can serve both good and evil ends. Are thieves courageous when they overcome their fear and hold up a convenience store? Were the German SS soldiers courageous when they didn't let their fear of death interfere with advancing the Nazi front? Is courage perhaps morally neutral like strength or intelligence?

Courage in the Christian tradition is not, however, morally ambiguous precisely because courage is a *virtue*, that is an excellence of character worthy of praise. This means that courage is not merely a human capacity (like strength) nor merely an emotion (like self-confidence). As an excellence of moral character that is cultivated over time through habit, courage stems originally from an acute awareness of human vulnerability, the appropriate fear of evil or harm to one's own self, and the choice to act decisively on behalf of a just cause.

Joseph Pieper writes, “Courage presumes vulnerability...to be

brave means to be ready to sustain a wound.” The invincible do not require courage, whereas the truly brave realize all too well that the wound they risk receiving when they enter the fray is an evil. Though the heart of courage is being prepared to die for the just cause, the courageous person neither loves death nor despises life. The envious, on the other hand, can indeed despise life and savor the wounds they inflict on themselves, to the point even, as we see in the climax of the story “Greenleaf,” of relishing death itself.

A clever way to note the difference between the envious and courageous is that the envious love to “play the martyr,” publicly amplifying their wounds to evoke pity in others, while the courageous truly are martyrs, deflecting their suffering to point to the good, to God. To have the courage of a martyr is to be ready to suffer for the sake of the highest reality, and then to forego even the heroic. The crucial difference between a pagan conception of moral virtue and a Christian sense is the difference between being moral heroes and moral saints. For the Christian, saintly courage always points away from the self and toward God.

To be brave is not to be without fear. In the horrors of life's battles, only the foolhardy think there is no reason to fear, and thus they rush headlong into danger. Only those who have lost the will to live and have

foregone any attachments to persons and place in this life have no fear of death. Courage, then, *fears appropriately*. To that extent, the courageous person *is* afraid of evil, but does not allow him- or herself to be drawn by fear away from the just cause he or she seeks to accomplish.

In conclusion then, we can consider how the cultivation of courage bulwarks the soul against envy. Both envy and courage hinge on how one relates one's self to others. They are both other-oriented moral perspectives. Envious persons desperately long for a self that they lack. But they don't allow themselves to admire the gifts of others who might then inspire them to become better, nor do they sacrifice their own desires for the sake of bettering another. The courageous person makes the reverse movement, and realizes that virtue comes from risking one's self, in the face of a real threat, for the sake of the friend, the neighbor, and ultimately God. The truly courageous possess an acute awareness of their gifts and vulnerabilities, and are admirable in the face of this, because they risk being wounded for the sake of something else worthy of praise.

In Philippians 1:15-20, Paul indicates the difference between courage and envy. “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice....I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (TNIV). ■

### For further reading

*Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins*, by Joseph Epstein

“Greenleaf,” in *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O'Connor

*The Present Age*, by Søren Kierkegaard

*Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*, by Gail P.C. Streeter

*Ressentiment*, by Max Scheler

*Seven Sins and Seven Virtues*, by Karl A. Olsson