

## **Habits of the Heart: 5. Dealing with Jealousy**

**Luke 15:11-32**

**January 30, 2022**

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Jerry and I find ourselves watching a lot more television than we used to prior to the pandemic. We just finished season 4 of the drama, *Yellowstone*. Let me start with a word of warning. This is not a family show. There's a lot of language and violence but the story line is so compelling. It's the story of the Dutton family. It's the Dallas of the 21st century. Instead of South Fork, there's Yellowstone. Instead of JR, there's John Dutton. Like JR, Dutton is willing to do anything to save his family ranch. There are several outside forces threatening his family and their land but the biggest threat to the Dutton family comes from within their family, their jealousy of one another. While this show is packed full of guilt, anger, and greed, it is their jealousy of one another that is the biggest threat to the Dutton family. While jealousy is good for a TV drama, it is one of the most destructive emotions to overcome in real life.

So that is what we are going to talk about today as we wrap up our series, *Habits of the Heart*. Over the past 3 weeks, we've looked at specific emotions that if left unchecked, infect our spiritual hearts, and destroy our relationships with one another and with God. We've seen with each of the destructive emotions are energized by the idea that somebody owes something. Guilt says, "I owe you." Anger, "You owe me." Greed is kept alive by the assumption that "I owe me." The fourth emotion is no different. Jealousy says, "God owes me." I think this emotion betrays the true condition of our heart more than any other. I can justify my efforts to conceal my past. I can make a convincing case for my anger. And my greed is easy to camouflage behind the virtues of stewardship and prudence. But how do you justify those incriminating feelings of satisfaction when someone you know (or maybe even love) suffers a setback or a loss of some kind? And before you know it, with no conscious effort on your part, there it is, that despicable feeling of satisfaction. Where did it come from? Straight from the heart. Today we're going to look at this destructive emotion of jealousy and the antidote to taking control of that emotion.

Let's begin by defining jealousy. Webster's Dictionary defines it this way, "feeling or showing an unhappy or angry desire to have what someone else has." When we think about jealousy or envy, we immediately think of the things other have that we lack-looks, skills, opportunities, health, possessions, inheritance, etc. We assume that our problem is with the other person. But let's face it, God could have fixed all that. Whatever God gave to your neighbor, friend or co-worker God could have also given to you. And besides, are you really upset that your neighbor has a new car or are up upset that God didn't provide you with a new car?

Here's my car story. When our son, Mark was in middle school, he played soccer, baseball and hockey Sometimes all at the same the same day. The girls and I spent a lot of time in our van going to and from his practices and games. And I started noticing that all the other soccer moms were driving really cool, new model, minivans and the green-eyed monster got a hold of me. I was driving a Ford Windstar van and it was a work horse, but it was not in the same class as what these other moms were driving. I would lay awake a night trying to justify why we should get a new van. When there's a will, there's a way. So, Jerry and I went to the dealership with the intention of getting a basic model, with just a few bells and whistles, but we walked out of there with an upgraded model with ALL the bells and whistles. I was pretty proud of myself. But that van turned out to be a lemon! It was in the shop over 13 times in the first year. When the steering wheel collapsed in my lap while driving on a family road trip, we decided enough is enough. We had it repaired in Michigan but as soon as we got it back to Minnesota, we traded it

in for guess what? A used, older model minivan. All along, I thought I was jealous of the other moms, but my issue was a heart problem.

Jealousy is really an issue between us and God. What God did for one, God could have done for you too. But for some reason, that's not how it worked out. So, your problem isn't with the person who has what you don't, it's with God. God owes you! But this jealousy doesn't register as a grudge against God, it rears its ugly head in our interactions with others. The irony, of course, is that the people we're jealous of can do nothing to remedy the situation. It's God who owes you.

I bet you're thinking, "Pastor Tami, that's absurd! How could God owe me something?" And you'd be right. As Christians, we've always been told that we owe God everything for who God is. Maybe that's why our jealousy is so easily misdirected and why it seems so impossible to conquer. As long as we deceive ourselves into thinking our issue is with our neighbor or co-worker, we'll never get to the root of the issue.

So today, we're going to try to do just that, get to the root of the issue, by turning to scripture and see what Jesus has to say about jealousy. Today's parable of the prodigal son is so familiar and so rich that you might not have noticed that it's incomplete. It's a cliff hanger. It ends with the father pleading with the older son to come into the celebration which he has arranged for the younger son. He says, "We must celebrate and rejoice." Yet the parable ends before we find out whether the older son in fact does celebrate and rejoice.

The best way to avoid jealousy in our own lives is to accept the love God has for us (like the father in the parable had for both of his sons) and acknowledge the gifts that God has given us. Even though our gifts might seem less than the gifts of others, we need to believe that the gifts that we have been given are valuable and important. God wants everyone to succeed. God is not going to respect one person over another.

The Apostle Paul had this to say about individual gifts. *There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to another... gifts of healing to another... performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another. All these things are produced by the one and same Spirit who gives what he wants to each person.* (1 Corinthians 12:4-11) We are all God's beloved with unique calls in our lives, so rather than be jealous of other's position or possessions in life, why not accept what God has done through their lives and work together for the common good?

The incompleteness of this parable draws attention to the decision which the older son must face. The decision, which is left hanging in the air, suggests that this parable is maybe not so much about sinning, repenting, and forgiving as it is about jealousy. Maybe it is not so much about forgiving the son who came home but the willingness to accept the brother who has come home. It asks us: Are we willing to celebrate in the good fortune of others?

I want to share with you something with you and it is hard for me to share this. It is what I dislike most about myself. See if you can relate. Occasionally, when someone fails, my initial response is, "yes!" Before I can even give it a moment's thought, a little voice inside of me says, "yes!" I hate that about myself. Maybe you've experienced this too. That initial emotion is "yes, that'll

show them,” or “yes, they finally got what they deserved.” And for a split second I may even feel a little bit better about myself. But then I catch myself and I feel horrible! I’m a pastor. I’m not supposed to have those feelings. But I am human, and I am broken, and this is a sign of my brokenness. Imagine if it was the emotion that controlled my life. Jealousy has the power to ruin what is most important to me and that’s my relationships with my family, friends, and co-workers. And I think a little of that resides in all of us.

King Solomon, the wisest man to ever have lived, said this about jealousy. “*A peaceful mind gives life to the body, but jealousy rots the bones.*” (Proverbs 14:30) In other words, when we are envious or jealous of someone else, how rich they are, how good looking they are, what a good athlete or musician they are, what great kids they have, Solomon says, envy will rot us from the inside out. And here’s why. It leaves us competing with people who do not even know there is a competition. And it makes us arrogant if we’re successful and accomplish more than they did, or it makes us depressed and insecure if we fail.

The day our son turned 16 was a big day for him. Not only did he pass his driver’s test, but he got his first cell phone. It was a rite of passage in our family. When you turned 16 you got a cell phone. But when our middle daughter, Elizabeth was just 15 years old, she became incredibly involved in dance at school and at the studio. Her schedule was complicated and could change on a moment’s notice. (All you dance parents out there know exactly what I’m talking about.) So, we got her a cell phone so that we could keep in better touch with one another. And that was just fine with her but when she went off to college and our younger daughter, Emily was just 14 years old and the only child still living at home, and was very involved in marching band, we got her a cell phone so that she could reach us at any time. Well, this did not sit well with Elizabeth. “It isn’t fair!” She was so jealous of Emily even though she had gotten her cell phone a year earlier than her brother had. “It isn’t fair!” Jerry and I tried to explain to her that fair does not mean equal, and we were eventually able to help her overcome her jealousy.

There is no upside to jealousy. It rots the bones. It ruins our relationships. But it is an emotion that we all experience at some time in our lives and so we need to learn how to manage it. So how do we do that? The first step is to take all your discontentment to God. Gather it all up in a big pile and give it to God. Let God know that you think God could have done better by you. And guess what? You’re right. God could have done better by you because he did it for your coworker and your neighbor and your friend. You can sum it up this way, “God, you owe me.” But if we read the New Testament, Jesus, along with a whole bunch of others, makes it pretty clear that we were goners, hopelessly separated from God. But God gave us mercy, and exactly what we did not deserve, forgiveness. The price? His son. So the truth of the matter is, we owed God a debt that we could not pay ourselves, so God paid it for us. The truth of the matter is, we owe God everything.

But at the heart of jealousy is the lie that God owes us. And ridding ourselves of jealousy requires that we face up to and expel this dangerous lie. Having done so, we’re free to move in God’s direction. God’s unconditional acceptance and grace is the very reason we can bring all our disappointments and dissatisfactions to God. And nothing is too small, we don’t have to qualify, explain, or feel guilty for feeling how we feel. The writer of Hebrews gives us this extraordinary promise, “*Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*” (Hebrews 4:16) When we come to God with our disappointments and discontentment we will find mercy and grace. Why? “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are... yet he did not sin.*” (Hebrews 4:15) We have a Savior who was touched with the same emotions that leave you wondering if you

can go on. You can come to the throne unapologetically, boldly, laying your burdens down at the feet of the only one who can do anything about it.

Three weeks ago, when discussing guilt, we said the antidote is to exercise confession. The habit that overcomes anger is forgiveness. Greed is overcome by generosity. And the habit that will enable you to strengthen your heart against jealousy is celebration. To guard your heart against jealousy you've got to celebrate the successes, lives, and stuff of others that you're jealous of. You need to go out of your way to verbally express your congratulations over their accomplishments. Celebrating the success of those you envy will allow you to conquer those emotions.

You may be thinking, well that sounds great but that's not how I actually feel about the people in my life. Am I supposed to celebrate their success if I don't mean it? The short answer is yes. If your sister looks good in those jeans, tell her so. If you like your neighbor's car, tell him so. Did your co-worker do a good job on that presentation? Tell them. You're not being insincere, you're being honest. Expressing the truth will help free you from the emotional bondage of jealousy. You are behaving your way into a new way of thinking and into a new way of loving.

Here's Paul again. 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. *Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails.* I think Jesus left the parable of the prodigal son unfinished because he invites each of us to finish the story for ourselves. It's up to each one of us to decide if we choose to stand outside, all alone with our jealousy being right, or give up our jealousy, go inside, take a seat at the banquet table, join the celebration and love one each other.

Here is a question for you to think about this week. Whose success have you been hesitant to celebrate? Who deserves a pat on the back? A letter? A phone call? A text? It's time to develop a new habit of the heart refusing to give into negative emotions that well up inside of you when others succeed. What if you made it the habit of your life to publicly celebrate the success of others? I guarantee you; this is one habit that will change everything.

Let's pray. God of wisdom, we recognize the destructive emotions that invade our hearts, and our human tendency to ignore these emotions. In doing that, we have allowed guilt, anger, greed and jealousy to control our lives. We've made excuses for past actions, we've gotten angry with others and said things we wish we could take back; we've allowed greed to grab hold of our hearts and we've felt satisfaction in the misfortune of others. You remind us that our words and our actions come from the heart. Cleanse and restore our hearts to health, O Lord so that we may live the full and abundant life that you desire for us. It's in the precious and powerful name of your son, Jesus, our Christ that we pray. Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 30, 2022**

**Weekly Prayer:** Have mercy on me, O God, according to your faithful love. Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion. Wash me completely clean of my guilt, purify me from my sin! Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me! Please don't throw me out of your presence; please don't take your holy spirit away from me. Return the joy of your salvation to me and sustain me with a willing spirit. Amen. (Psalm 51)

**Monday, January 31**

**Scripture: Psalm 73**

Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those who are have a pure heart.  
But me? My feet had almost stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped  
because I envied the arrogant;  
I observed how the wicked are well off:  
They suffer no pain;  
their bodies are fit and strong.  
They are never in trouble;  
they aren't weighed down like other people.  
That's why they wear arrogance like a necklace,  
why violence covers them like clothes.  
Their eyes bulge out from eating so well;  
their hearts overflow with delusions.  
They scoff and talk so cruel;  
from their privileged positions  
they plan oppression.  
Their mouths dare to speak against heaven!  
Their tongues roam the earth!  
That's why people keep going back to them,  
keep approving what they say.  
And what they say is this: "How could God possibly know!  
Does the Most High know anything at all!"  
Look at these wicked ones,  
always relaxed, piling up the wealth!  
Meanwhile, I've kept my heart pure for no good reason;  
I've washed my hands to stay innocent for nothing.  
I'm weighed down all day long.  
I'm punished every morning.  
If I said, "I will talk about all this,"  
I would have been unfaithful to your children.  
But when I tried to understand these things,  
it just seemed like hard work  
until I entered God's sanctuary  
and understood what would happen to the wicked.  
You will definitely put them on a slippery path;  
you will make them fall into ruin!  
How quickly they are devastated,  
utterly destroyed by terrors!  
As quickly as a dream departs from someone waking up, my Lord,  
when you are stirred up, you make them disappear.  
When my heart was bitter,  
when I was all cut up inside,  
I was stupid and ignorant.  
I acted like nothing but an animal toward you.  
But I was still always with you!  
You held my strong hand!  
You have guided me with your advice;

later you will receive me with glory.  
Do I have anyone else in heaven?  
There's nothing on earth I desire except you.  
My body and my heart fail,  
but God is my heart's rock and my share forever.  
Look! Those far from you die;  
you annihilate all those who are unfaithful to you.  
But me? It's good for me to be near God.  
I have taken my refuge in you, my LORD God,  
so I can talk all about your works!

**Observation:** Jealousy distorted this psalmist's perceptions and nearly led to spiritual ruin. Envy (jealousy) made the lives of others seem ideal—no troubles at all (verses 3-5). Envy looked only at current conditions and made serving God seem futile (verses 11, 13). When the psalmist brought eternity into the picture, life came back into clearer spiritual focus (verses 21-26).

**Application:** It was the prosperity of the wicked that nearly caused the Psalmist to give up faith in God. At what times in your life have you asked, "Does the Most High know anything at all?" (v. 11) How does the psalmist's way of resolving envy in verses 21-26 speak to your heart?

**Prayer:** There are times, Lord, when we look at the lives of others and realize what we don't have. It feels so unfair. Help us to be grateful for what we do have and to give for the blessings of others.

## Tuesday, February 1

### Scripture: Psalm 23:1-6

The LORD is my shepherd.  
I lack nothing.  
He lets me rest in grassy meadows;  
he leads me to restful waters;  
he keeps me alive.  
He guides me in proper paths  
for the sake of his good name.  
Even when I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no danger because you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff—  
they protect me.  
You set a table for me  
right in front of my enemies.  
You bathe my head in oil;  
my cup is so full it spills over!  
Yes, goodness and faithful love  
will pursue me all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the LORD's house  
as long as I live.

**Observation:** This beloved psalm never looks at what anyone else has. It rejoices in the abundance that comes from God's presence with the psalmist—a reality each of us can

experience. Envy, said Thomas Aquinas, grieves when something good happens to our neighbor.

**Application:** Verse 1 is traditionally translated “I shall not want.” Modern versions say, “I have all I need,” or “I lack nothing.” Since this psalm seems to reflect David’s days as a shepherd, rather than as King of Israel, how do you believe it defines “need”? How often can you honestly say you feel that you have all you need?

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, you are my shepherd. You are all I need. Give me the contentment of knowing that I am blessed by your presence and promise to be with me forever. Amen.

## **Wednesday, February 2**

### **Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn’t one part but many. If the foot says, “I’m not part of the body because I’m not a hand,” does that mean it’s not part of the body? If the ear says, “I’m not part of the body because I’m not an eye,” does that mean it’s not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? But as it is, there are many parts but one body. So the eye can’t say to the hand, “I don’t need you,” or in turn, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.” Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren’t presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. The parts of our body that are presentable don’t need this. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor so that there won’t be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

**Observation:** Paul described Christians as a body, with Jesus Christ as the head. Feet, hands, eyes and internal organs each have a unique role to play in our physical body. God calls you to fill the role(s) in the Body of Christ you are best equipped to fill. Being content with serving as the body part you truly are is the best way to find joy and effectiveness.

**Application:** Paul’s image of jealous, moping body parts was really happening among the Christians in Corinth. It’s been happening ever since. When have you seen jealousy limit a group’s, or a person’s, effectiveness? How do you feel when someone else is honored, especially if your role feels unseen?

**Prayer:** God, thank you for creating me with gifts and abilities that can accomplish your purposes. Help me to seek your will so that I may be ready and able to serve you with joy. Amen.

## Thursday, February 3

### Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

**Observation:** Love is not jealous. How could it be? Love does not delight in evil—but one of jealousy's worst qualities is the hidden delight we feel when something bad happens to a person we envy. Love keeps no record of wrongs—envy is fixated on keeping score. Love is kind—sadly, envy feels that it can't afford the luxury of kindness.

**Application:** In which of your day-to-day relationships are you able to live out most of the qualities of love that Paul lists readily and easily? In which relationships is it a struggle to show these qualities, even with gritted teeth? How can God's love help us to grow in our capacity to love more naturally?

**Prayer:** Thank you, O God, for your love and the ways in which we experience the depth of your love. Help us to reflect your love to others. Help us to be genuine and humble – to love as you have loved. Amen.

## Friday, February 4

### Scripture: Galatians 5:13-23

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this.

**Observation:** As we come to the end of this series on the heart, we turn to this passage where Paul describes the vast spiritual freedom Christ offers each of us. We can live free by finding our true selves, led by God's Spirit, and bearing the Spirit's fruit. "There is no law against things like this."

**Application:** Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") as summing up all of the law. How does jealousy keep you from that kind of love for your neighbor? How do the fruits of the Spirit create a way of life in which it is increasingly natural for you to love your neighbor?

**Prayer:** Lord, help us to see in ourselves what you can see in us. As we welcome you into our hearts, let the fruit of your Spirit grow in us and as others see that fruit in us may they also see that you are the source. Amen.

**Saturday, February 5**

**Scripture: Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 15:17-19**

Above all else, guard your heart,  
for everything you do flows from it.

“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

**Observation:** These verses provided the foundation for this series on the heart. “Above all else” says Proverbs, “Guard your heart.” Jesus says, everything we say and do comes from the heart.

**Application:** How has your understanding of the heart changed through this series? What is something you have learned that is helping to remove guilt, anger, greed, or jealousy from your heart? Do you know how it feels to be set free?

**Prayer:** O God who gives us all we need and more, thank you for the blessings in my life. Forgive me for comparing the gifts you give me with those you give anyone else. Help me to love others with a love that delights in the good things in their lives and bless them with my prayers. In Jesus name, Amen.