

September 18, 2011 - Envy vs. Mourn

We started a new series last week called “Battlefront”. The kind of premise of this series is that there is this war going on and we are all kind of right in the middle, right in the midst, in the centre of this war. In this war there are two sides and both sides are kind of giving the same message to us and the message they are giving to us is: “On our side life is good and it’s fulfilled and it’s happy and it’s everything you ever wanted. On our side, life is how it was meant to be. It’s as good as it can get. If you go to the other side, you’ll be missing out.” And both sides are sending us that same message. And even if we would like to, we can’t escape the battle because we are the battleground. The battleground is in our hearts and in our minds and we are what is being fought over. So, we can try and ignore it if we want to but it doesn’t change the reality that this is going on around us and so, over the next several weeks we are going to look at some of the battle lines that have been drawn in this war and kind of look at what both sides have to say on those battle lines.

So, we’re going to start by looking at two different characters. Similar stories, very different people. First comes out of Tim Burton’s “The Nightmare Before Christmas”. This is Jack, he is the pumpkin king and he is the ruler of Halloween Land. He is by his own admission, the very best at running Halloween. He’s very good at it and it all goes very well. But Jack is not satisfied, he is not content in what he is doing. So, he’s searching for something more and one day he’s wandering out in the woods and he comes to this tree that has this strange marking on it. The marking is actually a door and he opens this door and he walks through it and he finds himself in Christmas land. And so, he’s running through the snow kind of giddy as a schoolgirl and he’s looking at the lights and the presents and the trees and the decorations and he thinks “This is wonderful. This is everything that I’ve been looking for. And so, what I need to do is kidnap Santa and take over Christmas Town.” And if I do that, then I will be happy and fulfilled. So that’s what Jack does, but sadly it doesn’t turn out very well.

Second character, quite different, kind of on the other end, comes out of the Little Mermaid. This is the story of Ariel. Ariel is the daughter of the king of the ocean. She is a princess and she is beautiful and she has a lovely singing voice. She’s in this gorgeous environment under the sea. She has some good friends and she has this wonderful life. She even has this little, I think it’s a shipwrecked boat, but I don’t remember for sure, but this one little place where she has all these trinkets and treasures and wonderful little gadgets. She just has all this beautiful world around her. But Ariel is not satisfied. I will let her explain to you in her own words how she feels about it.

Look at this stuff, isn't it neat?  
Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?  
Wouldn't you think I'm the girl  
The girl who has everything?

Look at this trove, treasures untold  
How many wonders can one cavern hold?

Looking around here, you'd think  
Sure, she's got everything

I've got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty  
I've got who's-its and what's-its galore  
You want thing-a-mabobs? I've got twenty  
But who cares? No big deal.  
I want more

You see, whether you are a pumpkin king or a mermaid or just a regular old person, envy seems to somehow, seductively, sneak its way into our souls.

In some ways, envy is kind of the flip side of what we looked at last week. Last week we looked at pride. Pride says “I’ve got it all and I’ve got it all together.” That’s what pride is all about. But envy is the flip side of all that, because it says “You’ve got it all and you’ve got it all together and I kind of wish I was you, having it all.”

As I was looking at the different topics that we’re going to cover in the upcoming weeks, envy I think might make the strongest argument of any of the “Black Banner” topics and qualities. Because what envy does, is says “The way to find happiness, is you look around and you find someone who appears to be happy and when you find that person, you want what they have, because if what they have is making them happy, then if you get it, surely you will be happy too.” And to some extent, that seems somewhat logical. It seems to kind of make sense, it sounds rather rational. But, let me share a story with you about envy that might explain the concept a little better. It comes out of 1Kings, Chapter 21:1-7 starting in verse one, it reads:

“Now there was a man named Naboth, from Jezreel, who owned a vineyard in Jezreel beside the palace of the king, Ahab of Samaria. One day, Ahab said to Naboth “Since your vineyard is so convenient to my palace, I would like to buy it and use it as a vegetable garden. I will give you a better vineyard in exchange, or if you prefer, I can pay you for it.” But Naboth replied “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance that was passed down by my ancestors.” So Ahab went home angry and sullen because of Naboth’s answer. The king went to his bed with his face to the wall and refused to eat.” (That sounds like something one of my kids would do.) “What’s the matter?” his wife Jezabel said. “What has made you so upset that you are not eating?” [And in his pouty little child voice] he said “I asked Naboth to sell me his vineyard or trade it, but he refused.” Ahab told her. Jezabel said “Are you the King of Israel or not?” Jezabel demanded. “Get up, eat something and don’t worry about it and I will get you Naboth’s vineyard.”

You see, Ahab was the king. He had more than everyone else, but he was not happy. He had more than most could imagine, but he was not happy. Ahab looked out his window and out his window he saw Naboth in his vineyard and Naboth looked happy, and so Ahab thought “Maybe if I can get Naboth’s vineyard, I can get Naboth’s happiness.” And he wanted it so badly that

when Naboth said “No”, he went to bed, put his face to the wall and refused to eat.

And suddenly, what began as a logical rationale, quickly becomes an unhealthy obsession and in that moment, the thing that we hope will make us happy if we get it, becomes the thing that we are miserable without. Writer of Proverbs says in Proverbs 14:30”

“A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.”

Envy shines a spotlight on all of the good things that others possess and it whispers in our ear, that we will never, ever, be happy until we get what they have. Until we get a house as big as theirs. Or a car as fast as his. Until we get a body as attractive as hers or we can talk as eloquently as him. Until we get as many degrees as she has or get a job like he has. Until we have kids like theirs or friends like his. Until we have a spouse like hers or are as popular as him. Until we are as popular as him, or as respected as her or become as spiritual as them. And envy’s battle cry is “Why not me.”

Robert read for us the story out of Matthew 20, and in this story, the landowner goes out to hire some people. He hires some at the beginning of the day and says “Come and work for me all day and I’ll pay you 200 bucks.” They say “That sounds like a good deal”, they do the math and figure out what that is and say “Hey, that’s good, we’re happy. Let’s go. We’re going to make some good money today.” And so they go. Three hours later he goes out and finds some more people and says “Come work for me for the rest of the day.” And then, three hours later, he goes out and finds more people “Come work for me for the rest of the day.” He does this all day long until one hour before quitting time he goes out and finds some people and says “There’s an hour left until quitting time, come and work for me for that hour.” At the end of the day he goes around and pays everyone. He gives them 200 bucks, them 200 buck and them 200 bucks and them 200 bucks. All of a sudden, the people who were hired at the beginning of the day, the people who were quite happy to be making their \$16.66 an hour for that day’s work, suddenly they’re not happy anymore, all because somebody else got more than they did. The story ends with the landowner saying “Why should you be envious because I am generous.”

Maybe you’ve seen this commercial, or a commercial like this, it’s for a bank. There’s this man sitting with two little girls and he asks the first little girl he says “How would you like a pony?” And the girl says “Yeah, I’d love a pony.” And so, he gives her this cute little toy pony and she’s really happy about it, she’s playing with it and the other little girl’s not quite as happy, but she’s playing with this little pony and the man asks the second girl “How would you like a pony too?” And she says “Yeah, I’d love a pony too.” And so, he gets her a real pony and all of a sudden, the first girl, not so happy with the situation. The toy pony, which just a second ago was just wonderful, now, is not so great.

This is the message, I think, of every beer commercial I’ve ever seen. In these commercials you have young, beautiful men and women and they’re dancing and they’re smiling and they’re

laughing and they can't actually say it in the ad, but the message is, "If you want to be happy and beautiful and young like all of these people, drink our beer." And that's really the message of almost every magazine cover and T.V. commercial and billboard, that we come across. They paint these pictures of these happy people and say "If you want to be happy like these guys, buy our gadgets. Do our diet. Wear our clothes. Come eat at our restaurant. If you want to be happy, like these people that's what you do. And moreover, if you do not buy our clothes and our gadgets and our toys, you won't ever be happy without them."

The spotlight of envy highlights the best of what everyone else has and what everyone else is. But not only does it highlight the best of what everyone else has and is, but it blinds us to the good things that we already possess. If we listen long enough, envy will try and convince us that because other people have what we perceive to be a better life, God must love them more. Or maybe He loves us less. Or maybe we are somehow unworthy of such blessings. Envy inspires us to say to God "The life you have given me, just isn't quite good enough."

(Video---Jesus giving Coke to three different people, in three different sizes.)

At the beginning, Laura was so happy, she was so pleased with her little 8 oz. of Coke. She was so thankful and she felt the love that Jesus had for her by giving it to her. But as soon as other people started getting bigger and bigger and bigger bottles of Coke, suddenly, Laura was not happy with what she had and move over, as He says at the end she was so focused on what she wasn't getting that she could no longer see the One who was giving it to her. Envy is the thing that insists that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Back in the early 90's Gatorade came out with an advertising campaign and their slogan was "Be like Mike" or "I want to be like Mike" and initially, I thought the slogan had some merit, until I found out it was about Michael Jordan, the great basketball player – not me. And so, their slogan was "I want to be like Mike" and what I quickly realized was, it wouldn't matter how much Gatorade I drank, I was never going to be like Michael Jordan on so many levels. That was never going to happen. I realized that if my happiness is dependent on me becoming like Michael Jordan, then I am going to live a pretty disappointing life. And really that is the fatal flaw of envy because you may never get what other people have. Envy convinces you that your happiness is dependent on things that you may never receive or achieve. And even if you do get those things, and even if those things make you happy when you get them, as soon as you get them, envy shows you something new that you're lacking. Envy is only contented when you get the very best or when you become the very best. But, I will never be as athletic as Michael Jordan. I will never be as handsome as Brad Pitt. I will never be as clever and creative and rich as Steve Jobs and I will never be as talented as Da Vinci. And the list of things that I will never be or can never achieve can go on and on. I will never be any of these things, and I'm sorry to tell you, you probably won't be, either. And in the end, envy offers us nothing but discontentment and depression. And that's the Black Banner's philosophy on how to cope with life when it's not the way we would like it to be.

Let's look at the other side of the argument for a minute. If envy is one of the strongest arguments for one Black Banner qualities, then the second Beatitude may be one of the toughest White Banner qualities to wrap our minds around. In Matthew 5, Verse 4, Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.”

And at first glance, this verse seems not only tough to swallow, but tough to really make sense of because the word blessed really means happy and mourn is what you do when you're sad and comforted means you're feeling better, so, really what that verse is saying to me when I first read it is: Happy are those who are sad because they'll feel better. And that doesn't really resonate with me. I can't really understand what meaning I'm supposed to get out of that. Well, part of the challenge in that is that our modern understanding of the word 'mourn' has been narrowed to one very specific context. Biblical mourning is much bigger than that. In the Bible, mourning is not just about being sad. It's about more than just grief about someone passing away, it's about recognizing all of our short comings and our insufficiencies and even our sins. In Isaiah, the prophet writes this: In Isaiah 61:1-3:

“The spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the broken hearted. To proclaim that the captors will be released and the prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn, that the time of the Lord's favour has come and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies. To all who mourn in Israel, He will give a crown of beauty for ashes. A joyous blessing instead of mourning. Festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks that the Lord has planted for His own glory.”

In Isaiah, God identifies the mourning as those who are poor, broken hearted, captive and in despair. A much broader definition than simply grief over death. Biblical mourning comes when a person is upset with inequity, unfairness, hurt, pain, loss, disappointment, failure or wrongdoing.

Remember the story of King Ahab, we left off when he was in his bed with his face to the wall, not eating, his wife says “Get up. I'll take care of it.” So what she does is she goes out and she hires some people to bring false accusations against Naboth and they do that and Naboth get's executed based on these false accusations. Jezabel says “Hey, now his vineyard is for sale, you can have it.” And so King Ahab gets to buy the vineyard. And I have an idea that he probably wasn't as content with that as he thought he was going to be. After all that happens, God sends the Prophet Elijah to King Ahab and Queen Jezabel and Elijah comes to the King and he says “Because of what you have done to Naboth, here is what is going to happen to you.” And if you read through the passage, it's not very pretty. And Elijah says “here's what's going to happen to you because of what you have done to Naboth.” And this is King Ahab's response to Elijah, 1Kings 21:27:

“When Ahab heard this message, he tore his clothes, dressed in burlap and fasted. He even

slept in burlap and went about in deep mourning.”

You see mourning is what we do when anything is not the way it should be. Mourning is the White Banner’s philosophy on how to cope with life not being the way we would like it. At first envy and mourning don’t seem to have anything to do with each other but when we understand the broader meaning of mourning, it becomes a little easier for us to connect the dots because in this battle, on this battle line, both sides are offering their answer to the question: How do you respond when life is not what you hoped it would be? How do you respond when money is tight? How do you respond when relationships are strained? When children rebel? When health fades? When jobs are downsized? How do you respond when life is not what you hoped it would be? Envy says ‘Focus on what appears to make other people happy.’ Mourning says ‘Focus on God’s ability to carry you through it.’ Envy says ‘Rest your hopes on what you may or may not be able to achieve or acquire on your own.’ Mourning says ‘Rest your hopes on what God has promised to do.’

Jesus tells His disciples “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yolk upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

How do you respond when life is not what you hoped it would be? Envy hides and conceals and isolates and exiles. Mourning admits, acknowledges, accepts and expresses. Envy emphasizes what separates you from everyone else. Mourning invites others to share our sadness, our suffering and our struggles. Paul writes to the Church in Romans 12:15 and says:

“I want you to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.”

Because Paul understands that mourning happens in community. Author Rob Bell suggests that the two most powerful words in our language are ‘Me Too’. On envy’s side of the battle, everyone else is a reminder of what you don’t have; where you’ve fallen short; and the fact that you are on your own. On Jesus’ side, you are surrounded by people who will stand with you and a God who will see you through. Envy’s battle cry is ‘Why me’. But mourning’s battle cry is ‘Me too’. And when you face those moments of life where things have not turned out the way you hoped if you turn to God and His people, you will hear the words “Me Too”.

Would you take just one second and turn to the person near you and say those words. Me too.

You may say, “Yeah, but you don’t know what I’m going through.” Maybe not, but whatever it is, me too. You may say “You don’t know what I’m dealing with”, maybe not, but whatever it is, me too. You may say “You’ve never gone through this before.” And I can say, maybe not, but if you’re going through it, me too. Someone may say “I have been hurt.” And we say “Me too”. And God says “I’ll see you through it.” Someone may say “I’ve been broken hearted.” And we say (“Me too”) and God says “I will see you through it.” Someone

might say “I’ve been treated so unfairly.” And we say (“Me too”) And God “I will see you through it.” Someone might say “You know what, I wrestle with some doubts.” And we say, “me too, but God will see you through it,” Someone might say “I am in mourning because life right now, is not the way I hoped it would be.” And together we say “Me too. But God will see you through it.”

Life does not always go like we plan or desire. You stand on the front lines. The battle is on. On the one side there is envy, on the other side there is comfort for the mourning. Which side will you choose?

I want to remind you, following service we have our prayer room through the doors over here. If you have been struggling with envy in your life and you would like to spend some time in a quiet place, talking with God about that, I invite you to go there. If you are mourning something in your life that just isn’t the way that you would like it to be, please go there, spend time talking to God. There will be people there who will pray with you and pray for you and realize that whatever you’re going through as God’s people, we want to say “Me too, we are with you, we will journey with you through it and God will see you through.”