

Surely There Is a Future

Proverbs 23:1-18

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Good morning. If you don't know, I'm Tobias. I'm the associate pastor here at Christ the King and pennies away this week, and so I have the privilege of getting to open up God's Word with us this morning. This summer, we're looking at topics addressed in the book of Proverbs. Last week, we looked at friendship, and this morning, we come to the topic of envy, which is a topic the church fathers took very seriously, seriously enough to call it the peculiar fault of the devil, and that's because they thought it was envy that brought about his fall and our subsequent fall through him, and with such primordial depth, you'd think we'd be more alert to envy, and yet of all the vices, envy may be the hardest to see in ourselves. I mean, we all know that hatred has a sort of heat to it. Greed has this insatiable pull, and when we give into these vices and others like them, we feel it, and we know what we've done, but envy's different. It's sneaky. It rarely shows up as envy. Instead, it comes dressed as something like righteous concern. We're only worried, of course, about someone's growing pride, or it masquerades as an innocent sense of fairness: "It's just not right that they have what they have, God", and by the time we recognize envy for what it is, if we ever do, it's usually been at work in us for a long time, and the passage we're going to focus on this morning knows it, and it's going to expose it.

So let's go ahead and read Proverbs chapter 23, the first 18 verses. Proverbs 23, 1-18:

"When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite.

Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.

Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist.

When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven.

Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy; do not desire his delicacies, for he is like one who is inwardly calculating. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, but his heart is not with you.

You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words.

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words.

Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.

Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die.

If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.

My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad.

My inmost being will exult when your lips speak what is right.

Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day.

Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we thank you that we have your Word. What a gift it is to us, and we thank you for Proverbs. We thank you for that gift in particular. We recognize that we are people who

need wisdom because we lack it, and we recognize too that you are the fount of all wisdom, and you say to us, come and ask, and I will give you wisdom. Lord, that's what we're doing. That's what we're doing particularly this summer, and we pray, Lord, that you will give us wisdom, your wisdom, not the world's wisdom, but yours. Help us to have eyes to discern it, ears to hear it, hearts to receive it. Father, may your Spirit guide us this morning as we look at this proverb and consider the topic of envy, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, the 1985 film *Amadeus* won a bunch of Academy Awards, and to me, it's a masterpiece. I don't know about you. I've watched it many times, and I love it, and not because it gets the history exactly right. It doesn't, but Peter Shaffer, the screenwriter, wasn't trying to write an exacting biography. He was trying to capture what envy does to a person, and in that, I think he nailed it. The film, if you've seen it, you'll remember it opens with shrieks piercing through the night coming from the house of an old man named Antonio Salieri. He's attempted to take his own life, but he survives, and when a priest comes to visit him in the asylum where he's been confined, what follows is the old man's recollection, his account to this priest of a life devoured. It's almost a confession, but not really, and to understand what had brought him to this place, I want us to hear his childhood prayer.

He offered it up secretly, he tells the priest, the proudest prayer a boy could think of: *"Lord, make me a great composer. Let me celebrate your glory through music and be celebrated myself. Make me famous through the world, dear God. Make me immortal after I die. Let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote. In return, I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life."* Salieri was only a boy when he prayed this, and he meant every word of it, but look closely at the bargain. His devotion wasn't the point, it was the price, the thing he'd pay to get the thing he actually wanted. God wasn't the end he was after, he was only the means, and for a time the arrangement seemed to work. Salieri was disciplined, industrious, church-going, and soon he rose through the courts of Emperor Joseph to become the most celebrated composer in Europe, the court composer of Vienna, the most prestigious musical position in the world, and he liked himself, he tells us, he liked himself very much. That is, until Mozart arrived. You see, what Salieri feels the first time he truly hears Mozart's music isn't envy, it's awe. He comes across an early composition expecting something merely competent and hears instead something he can barely describe, a high oboe lingering, a lower clarinet sweetening the harmony. "This was no composition by a performing monkey," he tells the priest. "This was music I'd never heard, filled with such longing, such unfulfillable longing, it seemed to me I was hearing the voice of God."

But then he meets the man behind the music, vulgar, giggling, juvenile. You can't forget it if you've seen the movie and Tim Holtz's depiction. He meets a man constitutionally incapable of the reverence he himself spent his entire life cultivating, and as we watch this play out on the screen, we can almost hear the question surfacing: "Why him, God? Why would you choose this guy?" But the moment that really breaks Salieri comes later. Mozart's wife brings him a portfolio of her husband's compositions, and he begins to look through them, and he realizes with mounting horror that there aren't any corrections, not one. Page after page of finished music, written out as if Mozart were simply taking dictation, already complete, already perfect, in his head before the pen touched the page. I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink strokes at an absolute beauty, he says, and then he tells the priest what he said to God: "From now on, we are enemies, you and I. Because you chose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy, and gave me for reward only the ability

to recognize the incarnation, because you're unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block you. I will hinder and harm your creature on earth as far as I'm able. I will ruin your incarnation." And as he recalls these words, we see him in his bedchamber take the crucifix down from the wall and throw it into the fire.

Friends, that's what envy does at its deepest. It doesn't stay personal. It becomes theological. The man who wanted God's gift more than God himself ends by declaring war on him, because the gift went to someone else. And this is precisely the man Solomon is addressing in our passage this morning. Proverbs 23 is a chapter about appetite, and it starts with a table, a ruler's table, specifically, and a warning about what sitting at it costs a man who can't govern his hunger. From there, it moves to wealth that sprouts wings and flies away to the stingy man whose bread is a trap to parental discipline. And then finally, more than halfway through, envy appears only once explicitly. But Solomon's been building toward it from the beginning. Envy is appetite. It's the heart's version of what the stomach does at the ruler's table, reaching for what it wasn't given, craving what belongs to someone else. And when envy finally surfaces, Solomon's voice shifts. It becomes intimate and urgent. "My son," he begins in verses 15 and 16, and you can hear the concern of a parent who'd probably been down this road. "My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My inmost being will exult when your lips speak what is right." And then in verse 17, he gets to the point. "Let not your heart envy sinners." Six times in these 18 verses, the heart appears. It's the focal point that Solomon's been aiming at, not just an appetite in general, but the wanting heart.

And here he names its most dangerous form. And I want us to notice how strikingly specific his words are. He doesn't say, "don't envy in general", nor does he identify something we might expect, like, "don't envy your neighbor's house or your colleague's success." Instead, he just says, "don't envy sinners." And this raises a question for us, I think. I mean, why would we? But the answer is simple. Their way appears to work. Their way appears to work. The colleague who cuts corners gets the corner office. The classmate who cheats without getting caught gets the grade. The neighbor who's never darkened a church door seems to have everything you've been praying for. And the son who's been faithfully at real cost, fearing the Lord, looks at that life, and something stirs in him. It's not just resentment, it's admiration and resentment together, inseparably wound around each other.

Derek Kidner describes it exactly: "Envy springs from simultaneous admiration and resentment, fueled by an undue preoccupation with oneself and with the present." Thomas Aquinas gave it a Latin phrase, *tristitia de bono alieno*. I love it. It's grief, grief, a sorrow that lodges in your chest over alien, *alieno*, over a foreign, an alien good. Think about that for a moment. Envy's the only passion constituted entirely by someone else's good. Every other appetite in this chapter has an object it can actually reach. Food, money, comfort, feed it, and for a moment it rests. But envy is pain by something it can never possess, another person's good. There's nothing to consume, nothing to seize, nothing that would ever make it stop. And that's what makes it, as Proverbs 27 says, more dangerous even than rage. Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy or envy? You see, wrath burns hot, but it passes, right? Envy doesn't burn, it eats away at us instead, slowly, quietly, for years. Salieri's envy lasted decades.

But Proverbs isn't finished with the question that's raised because envy doesn't stop at wanting. If their way works, if the man who ignores God prospers while the man who fears him suffers, something's got to give. We know this. Either the books aren't closed yet, or our devotion, our fear of the Lord, is a bad investment. And envy, left unchecked, tends to draw,

draws toward the latter conclusion, doesn't it? This is what Solomon understands and what we so often miss. Envy of the wicked isn't merely a personal failing, it's a theological verdict. Envy is a theological verdict. When the son looks at the sinner's life and feels that pull, that admiration wrapped in resentment, he's not just coveting another man's portion, he's rendering a judgment on God's governance of the world. He's saying with the posture of his heart, if not with the words of his mouth, their way works, yours, God, doesn't. Salieri said it to God's face. Granted, most of us never do. But here's the thing. Once the heart reaches that verdict, it doesn't tend to stop there. If God's way doesn't pay, then we'll find another way. We start to scheme, quietly, often without admitting it, to get for ourselves what we've decided God won't give. And this is exactly what Salieri does. His envy doesn't stay in his chest, it metastasizes into a scheme. He watches Mozart's Don Giovanni. Through his connections, he sees to it that it plays only five times, and yet he goes to every performance because he can't stay away. And somewhere in those viewings a plan forms. He'll commission Mozart, cloaked in a disguise, to write a requiem mass. He'll drive him to finish it. And when Mozart dies from the exhausting pressure of it all, he'll claim it as his own, performed at Mozart's funeral with his own name attached. And in that cathedral, God would be forced to listen. Salieri would have his revenge.

You see, envy had driven him to possess what he couldn't produce, to steal from the dead, from Mozart, what he couldn't rightfully earn. Christopher Ansbury puts it plainly. He says, "the prosperity of sinners is a powerful advertisement for an alternative form of life." And we know how advertisements work. They don't argue, they allure. They hold up someone else's life and whisper, this could be yours. And our hearts, prone to wander, warm to that message. Friends, think of the beguiling perversity of that. You who've been praying, giving, living sacrificially, you look at someone else's life and something moves in you. It doesn't always feel like envy, it probably doesn't. Sometimes it just like, it feels like tiredness, an exhaustion with the gap between what you were promised, what you thought you were promised, and what you can see. And you begin to wonder if the life of faith is costing you something, it isn't costing others. Whether your obedience is invisible to the God you serve in a way that they're flourishing somehow isn't. You might not call it envy, you might just call it frustration or confusion, but underneath it, if you're honest, there's a question you've been afraid to ask directly. "Is this worth it, Lord?"

Friends, that question isn't unique to you or to me. Psalm 73 is the honest record of a man called Asaph, who nearly lost his footing over exactly this. "I was envious of the arrogant," he says, "when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." You see, he'd been watching them, they had no pangs until death, their bodies were fat and sleek, they weren't in trouble as others were, and he'd been keeping his heart clean, he says, for nothing. He'd washed his hands in innocence and yet been stricken all day long. It looked from where he was standing like faithfulness was a fool's errand. Asaph was standing in the same place the sun in Proverbs 23 is standing, the same place Salieri stood when he threw the crucifix in the fire, perhaps the same place some of you are sitting here today, and yet Asaph didn't stay there, and where he went made all the difference. Listen to what he says as he continues in Psalm 73, verses 16 and 17: "When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end." Did you hear that? It was God's sanctuary that restored for Asaph what envy had nearly stolen. It wasn't information, it was it was the right perspective, a long view. He'd been standing too close, seeing only the wicked man's present comfort and his present cost, but inside the sanctuary everything shifted. The wicked were on a slope and he could see it clearly now. Their footing was precarious, what looked like prosperity from the outside was a life being carried unknowingly toward its end.

Friends, Proverbs 23 is doing the same thing the sanctuary did for Asaph. It's restoring the long view. Notice how Solomon continues in verses 17 and 18, "but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day." He says, "Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off." What he's saying is that the antidote to envy isn't mere restraint. Suppress the desire, manage the craving, try harder not to want, that's not it. "Continue in the fear of the Lord," he says. The same intensity only redirected. We're people of appetite and passion by God's design. He's not commanding us to kill that, only to redirect it. Envy is misdirected zeal. When the cure isn't less wanting, it's wanting rightly. Surely, surely there is a future. There's a Hebrew word behind future here, *acharit*, A-C-H-A-R-I-T, and it's doing tremendous theological work in a little space. It means an end or an outcome, the place you arrive when the journey's complete. The sinner has no *acharit*. His lamp goes out. His story has no resolution worth having, but ours is secured. Our future is real. Our hope will not be cut off. And that word for cut off, *karat*, K-A-R-A-T, it's covenant language. It's the same root used for making a covenant. You cut a covenant. To be cut off is to be severed from the community and excluded from the inheritance. And Solomon says, "that will not happen, son. That will not happen to you."

Think back to where this chapter began. Verse 1, a knife to the throat. Put it to your own appetite before your appetite destroys you. There's a grim irony running from verse 1 to verse 18. We will be cut. The only question is what gets cut? Our appetite now or our future later. That's why there's such concern in Solomon's voice when he says, my son, such urgency behind it. It's the heart of a parent who knows what the covenant holds for his child and can't bear to watch him forfeit it. He wants his son to stand in his allotted place. This isn't merely good advice. This is a father mediating the covenant downward from God to son through the intimacy of a family relationship. And what the covenant holds isn't just long life and earthly flourishing. It's an inheritance that can never be lost or taken away. Daniel knew this, remember? At the end of his life, exiled and old, he received a promise, not of political restoration, but of resurrection. You shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days in *acharit* that transcends history.

Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off. Salieri couldn't see this. Not because he was unaware of the Lord's promises, but because envy had done what envy always does. It had collapsed his vision to the present. Mozart's gift now. Mozart's favor now. His own mediocrity now. And so he spent his life grasping for an inheritance that was never his and forfeiting the one that was. That is what envy costs. The inheritance itself traded away quietly, one envious glance at a time. And with this, Solomon has, I think, brought us right up to something he couldn't fully see. He's told us the inheritance is real and our future is secured. And yet we know something the son in Proverbs 23 hadn't yet been shown. We know the name of the one who secured it. We know what the foundation beneath the promise actually looks like, what it cost and who paid it. And we know that all of it, the cost, the price, the person, these were given to us as gifts to be received. Yet that's just what envy can't do. Envy can't receive a gift. It can only resent one. But the heart that knows what it's been given is finally free to be grateful.

The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 tells us precisely what we've been given: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich." That's the gospel in a single sentence. And it's the direct answer to the deepest wound that envy opens. You see, envy's deepest wound, I think, is the fear that God's way doesn't pay. That the man who gives his life to fearing the Lord will arrive at the end with less than the man who didn't bother. Salieri believed it. Asaph nearly believed it. And I think

there are moments where we feel this pull too. But the cross is something different. It says otherwise. Jesus, the one who had every reason to withhold, who possessed what we could never earn, and held what we had no right to want, he gave everything freely at a cost to himself we can't fathom. The one who deserved the inheritance, who was himself the inheritance, he was cut off, *karat*, so that we who had broken the covenant, who deserved the cutting off, wouldn't be. Friends, we will not be cut off because he was, but not because he failed but because in giving himself, he kept the covenant we couldn't. And the Father vindicated him. That's the ground beneath Solomon's promise in verse 18. Our future is secure because our names are written in the book of the one who conquered death to put them there. And that, that is the cure for envy. Not trying harder to want less, just this. Knowing what we have, knowing whose we are, knowing that the inheritance held out to us in Jesus Christ is so vast, so permanent, so far beyond anything the wicked man's prosperous life could offer, that to envy him isn't just a sin, it's an absurdity.

And this brings me back to Salieri. At the end of *Amadeus*, we find him back where we met him, in the asylum. Having told the priest everything, he's outlived Mozart by 32 years - 32 years of slowly watching himself become extinct. His music growing fainter until no one plays it at all, while Mozart fills every concert hall in the world. And in Mozart's final hours, delirious and dying, Salieri recalls being seated at his bedside. The man who hated him, who commissioned the requiem to destroy him, who'd spent years blocking him at every turn. And Mozart, who didn't know any of it, reaches out to him with warmth. His last words in the film are these, "I'm so ashamed. I was foolish. I thought you didn't care for my work or for me. Forgive me. Forgive me." Let the irony of that moment sink in. Mozart died asking forgiveness from the man who'd set out to destroy him. And Salieri said nothing. And here's the worst of it. Salieri had a gift. He had a real one. It wasn't Mozart's gift, but his own. He could hear greatness, which is itself a form of greatness. He had a position, a vocation, a life of music in the service of one of the most magnificent art forms human beings have ever produced. In other words, he had an inheritance, but he couldn't receive it because he was too busy coveting someone else's.

I've loved Mozart's *Requiem* since I discovered it in college. It's been with me for most of my life, but I didn't know until I sat down with this film what Schaefer does with it. That in the story, the piece I've loved was born in malice. That it was commissioned by a man who wanted to use it as a weapon and finished by a dying man who didn't know he was being used. Envy set the whole thing in motion. And what came out of it is one of the most transcendent pieces of sacred music ever written. Salieri couldn't stop the good he resented. Instead, he became against his own will almost like its midwife. And in the end, he got nothing. That's what envy costs. The very life we were given, unreceived, un-lived, and spent in the shadow of a life that was never ours to want. Friends, you've been given a life. You've been given gifts, a place, a calling, a name written in the Lamb's book. You've been given a future that will not be cut off, an inheritance that will not spoil or fade, held in heaven for you by the one who was cut off in your place. You've been given in Jesus Christ more than Salieri ever dreamed of asking for. Friends, don't spend it envying someone else's. Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for those precious words of Solomon. Surely there is a future and our hope will not be cut off. We praise you for Jesus who secured our inheritance. We praise you, Lord. And we ask, we ask, Lord, that you will help us to respond to that with grateful hearts, hearts full of praise and adoration for you and trust in you. Keep us, Lord, from envying what

you're doing with others. Help us to be thankful what you are doing in us. We pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.