

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses on the pretext of the Cushite woman he had married” (Nm 12:1). There was no reason to find fault with Moses or his wife. Miriam and Aaron are jealous of Moses’ authority. In attacking him, they have broken the tenth commandment against coveting what rightly belongs to another.

They are envious of the relationship that Moses has with God and sinfully they seek the power that he alone commands. God is right to call them out for their mortal sin. Serious sin has grave consequences, and we see the result in the scaly infection that turns Miriam’s skin as white as snow. Aaron is shocked to see the snow-white scales and immediately asks Moses for forgiveness. “Ah, my lord! Please do not charge us with the sin that we have foolishly committed!” (Nm 12:11). Moses, who has atoned time and again for the sins of the Israelites, pleads for mercy on behalf of Miriam and Aaron. After a seven-day confinement outside the camp, she will be clean and can return to the good graces of the community.

The tenth commandment requires that envy be banished from the human heart... “From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity” (CCC 2538, 2539). Rather than fall into this sin that comes from a false pride in our own merit, we are called to work at humility so we may rejoice in the merits of others.

It is no coincidence that this reading on the sin of Miriam and Aaron is contrasted with Psalm 51 and King David’s plea for God’s mercy. The backstory behind Psalm 51 stems from the sin of King David who coveted Bathsheba so much he was willing to commit murder to cover his adulterous behavior. It took the prophet Nathan’s wise counsel for King David to recognize the sinfulness of his ways. After the death of his illegitimate son, David fully understood the gravity of his offense and pleaded for forgiveness.

“For I acknowledge my offense; and my sin is before me always: Against you only have I sinned; and done what is evil in your sight... A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not off from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me” (Ps 51:5-6a, 12-14).

As we carefully reflect on the sins of others, it is helpful to take stock of our own lives. God call us to be detached from the desires of this world and to fix our hearts on God alone. “Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them ‘renounce all that [they have]’ for his sake and that of the Gospel” (CCC 2544). In the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:2). Let us cast aside our own desires for what rightly belongs to others and place our trust in God.