

In the tenth commandment, we are taught, “you shall not covet your neighbor’s house” or anything that belongs to him (Ex 20:17). When we envy what another has, we begin to think evil thoughts that may lead us down a dark path to robbery, violence, or injustice.

The story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates the point. Israel had 12 sons but favored one over the others. Joseph had a pure heart. He was ready and willing to forgive, generous to others, hardworking and industrious. Joseph’s brothers resented him. Rather than see his goodness and learn from his holiness, they were jealous of their father favoring him. They envied the attention that Israel gave to Joseph. And unbridled envy turned them into truly evil brothers. Jealous of their brother Joseph, the whole lot of brothers hated him. They refused to talk to him. As they harbored that hatred, they plotted to kill him.

Their plot to kill also involved lying. They knew they would need to cover their tracks and so before they even lifted a finger, they planned to blame his death on wild beasts who were so hungry they attacked and ate Joseph.

Rueben’s conscience troubled him and he tried to persuade his brothers not to kill Joseph. But he lacked in courage. He would not directly confront the evil desires of his brothers, so he offered an alternative plan that played into the brothers’ desires to harm Joseph. “We must not take his life. Instead of shedding blood . . . just throw him into that cistern there in the desert” (Gn 37:22). Rueben planned to come back later and free his brother, but lacking courage to confront his brothers directly, he finds he is too late from another scheme that is hatched. The other brothers decided to sell Joseph into slavery. “They sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver” (37:28).

While they have spared the life of their brother Joseph, the others still harbor ill feelings for their father and in turn tell him a lie leading Israel to believe that his beloved son has indeed been devoured by wild beasts. Wishing grave harm to Joseph and lying to cover it up, the brothers have committed two separate mortal sins.

We know the story of Joseph has a happy ending in large part due to his innate goodness. In slavery, he worked very hard and was given increasing responsibilities. He helped the entire nation of Egypt to prosper even in a time of famine. He forgave his brothers for their capital crimes and helped them to avoid starving to death. When someone does us wrong, we can turn to Joseph in prayer and ask for his help to respond in love and look for ways to convert hearts and minds.

We also need to be on guard against envy in our own hearts. We too may succumb to an unhealthy desire that leads us down a slippery slope to even greater sins. “When the Law says, ‘You shall not covet,’ these words mean that we should banish our desires for whatever does not belong to us” (CCC 2536). In Lent, we fast, and pray, and offer alms. These virtuous practices can help us to temper envious thoughts and desires. Instant gratification often leads us to envy all the more. The more we get without cost, the more we want. But when we can practice sacrifice, we learn to better appreciate that which we do have while at the same time, tempering the evil desire to possess what rightfully belongs to another.

My father used to say “Kindness begets kindness.” Instead of being envious, we can exercise a desire to help others. We not only build up our own self-esteem, but the kindness can be contagious. Last December in Brainerd, Minnesota one man went through the drive-through at the local Dairy Queen and paid for his ice cream and for the car behind him. The person in the second car was so impressed, they offered to help the car behind them. Like dominoes falling one after another, the kindness of one person impressed the kindness of the next and the next and the next. The chain of kindness continued for two and a half days with over 900 cars participating.¹ Kindness is the remedy for envy. When our act of kindness helps another person who cannot pay us back, they may very well return the favor by paying it forward.

¹ cnn.com/2020/12/09/us/pay-it-forward-dairy-queen-trnd/index.html