

Why God is jealous

What if the agreed daily wage is forgiveness and eternal life?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

I used to run parish family retreat weekends. My favorite icebreaker was to set out a hundred photographs, each one of a person showing a strong emotion. I'd invite each participant to choose a photo and say, in a couple of sentences, why he or she had selected it.

I've never forgotten a burly man, age around 30, who picked out a photograph of a smiling child who was tightly embracing a tub of candy. The man explained that he'd been married a year or two and felt he'd received the most fabulous gift in the world. It was clear he wasn't a high achiever or high earner or high anything much. But you couldn't match his smile. His wife looked pretty happy too. There wasn't a hint of boasting: there was just effervescent joy. When you're a pastor who's spent countless hours with couples who've come to see each another as a threat and a curse, you don't forget such a smile.

Later in the weekend I spoke with a man from the retreat who remembered the incident. This man seemed extremely restless and staccato of speech. He needed to share, so I said to him, "Go on, let it all out." What came out was this: "I hate that man for having what I don't have. It feels so unfair—I'm attractive, I'm kind, I'm hard-working, I'm even a virgin, if that helps—so why can't I smile with that kind of joy?"

That was the day I learned the difference between *envy* and *jealousy*. In everyday speech the words are often used interchangeably. But they're not the same. The difference is subtle, but vital. Jealousy is the anxiety of losing what you rightly have. Envy is the yearning to acquire what you don't have, but somebody else has. The smiling man was jealous: he loved what he had and was not the least bit embarrassed about it. My visitor was envious—he wanted what the smiling man had. Badly.

We frequently read in scripture that our God is a jealous God. If envy and jealousy were the same thing, that would be an absurd statement. What—God looking at other gods and thinking they do better miracles or came up with a better idea than creation? Don't be silly. But if jealousy means being like the smiling man, then yes, God is like that. God treasures us with that unself-conscious smile of effervescent joy and does not mind who sees and who knows. God will hold on to us with that strong embrace and, if we go missing or astray, God will go to any lengths to come looking for us. A jealous God is part of the wonder of grace: God doesn't want a hundred other things—God wants us.

But we are envious. We just can't be glad for what we have. We compulsively look at what others have and feel impoverished by the comparison. In so doing we objectify their lives, seeing them as a series of commodities we could somehow acquire or that we feel entitled to. Meanwhile we diminish our own lives by seeing only their scarcity, never their plenitude.

Witness the parable of the late-hired laborers in Matthew 20:1–15. The early-hired laborers are envious. They don't see why they shouldn't get more—a lot more—than those hired late in the day. Our sympathies are with them; whether you see them as Jews and gentiles, lifelong believers and deathbed converts, or as exploited laborers in many parts of the world today, the issue seems one of pure justice: if you work hard and long you get rewarded; if you work just as hard and twice as long you get doubly rewarded.

But what if the agreed daily wage is forgiveness and eternal life? The only response is overflowing gratitude and indescribable joy. God's grace can't be halved or multiplied. It's ridiculous to demand "double eternal life" or "triple forgiveness." There's only one reason we'd ask for such a thing—even demand it—and that's because our envy has so consumed us that we can't enjoy what we have for fear that someone else might have something better.

It's no small thing to have forgotten the difference between envy and jealousy. The economy depends on us desiring what we don't have and acquiring something similar or better of our own. Perhaps it's time for the rehabilitation of jealousy. If our sense of God's grace is so precious, we should guard it jealously, nurture it, foster it, and seek ways to deepen and enrich it. The time spent comparing ourselves with others is time wasted.

In the end we shall come face to face with God and say, "I took you for an envious God, constantly looking around at others, and so I became an envious person, restlessly comparing, assuming others had it so good. All the time I was looking here, there and everywhere, thinking you were the same. But now, standing here before you, seeing your piercing and utterly loving gaze, I understand I was wrong. You're a jealous God: all the time you were just looking at me."