

God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Jesus and Jealousy

Romans 7:7 – 8

Introduction: Jealousy – Its Apparent Triviality, Its Devastating Seriousness

I remember when I was 10, I was in swimming practice with the team. And my coach said, 'Ok, now we're going to do relays.' I loved relays, because they took up a lot of time and you only had to do one or two laps of it!! Then my coach said, 'We're doing butterfly relays.' And my heart sank, because I hated butterfly. It's that stroke where you lift your head up like this and I always swallowed water sometime during the lap. Our coach picked two team captains: my friend Jack and another kid I didn't really know that well. Now I was a little disappointed because I wasn't picked as a captain, but I figured if there was status in being a captain, maybe there was status in being picked first. I was ready, and I was excited, because Jack was my...friend. So I was sure that he would pick me first because he was my...friend, right? Well Jack didn't pick me first. He didn't pick me second. I was picked next to last, and the guy who was picked after me had breathing problems – so you know how I was feeling! Well the relay started. Typically in swimming relays you put your fastest person last to be the anchor. My team decided to switch that and put me last. So by the time I was up, I had a pretty big lead over the other team. I dove into the pool. I didn't take one breath – I didn't want to lift my head and choke. So I didn't see until the end that the guy next to me had actually caught up to me and just beat me to the wall. I looked up from the side of the pool, and saw that the opposite team was cheering, and some were cheering me! They were having their own little party! My teammates, though, were disappointed with me. We would have to pull out the lane lines and cover the pool. I didn't even want to look over at my mom. I began to discover what it all meant. What did it all mean? What did I learn from this? It meant that friendship didn't mean a thing. Friendship didn't mean a thing, and it didn't, did it? The fact that Jack was my friend didn't mean a thing. And I learned that other peoples' success is based on my failure. And conversely, that my success is based on other peoples' failure. So I went through much of my younger life hoping that other people would fail more frequently than me. I was jealous of their successes.

I was also jealous of other people's good looks. In 5th grade, I started getting pimples. It was a real bummer. I would wake up in the morning and dread looking in the mirror. How many new pimples this morning? My mom would try to be helpful, and say, 'See Mako, you have to wash your face at night.' I would say, 'Mom, I swim in chlorinated water everyday. If that doesn't clean my skin out, not to mention dry it out completely, I don't know what will!' So I would go to school, just trying to forget about my dilemma. Then I got to high school. I remember wishing I were more handsome, wishing my face looked a little different. I was jealous of people who were better looking than me. I'm especially sensitive to this now that I've become a father of a little girl. Have you seen the ads on television? Like the Pantene commercial, where a woman just whips her head around and her hair falls magically into place. And she says, 'Don't hate me because I'm beautiful.' As if you, too, by just buying Pantene can be the woman men want and women want to be. When I was a teenager – you're probably too young to remember this – there was an ad on television. It was for Cross Your Heart bras. The ad goes like this: A man is waiting for the elevator. The elevator doors open. An old girlfriend steps off the elevator to walk her dog. Then he looks at her breasts, as if there's nothing better to look at! And he says, 'Jane! Is that really you?' And she says, 'Cross my heart.' For Cross My Heart bras. They do not do that kind of thing to guys. I mean can you imagine a woman waiting for the elevator. The doors open and an old boyfriend walks out. She looks at his crotch and says, 'John! Is that really you?' Then he says, 'Cross my jockey strap,' or something! For girls, your appearance so easily becomes your identity, and jealousy becomes a daily trial. By the way, it may interest you to know that a number of years ago, the rate of suicide for women over the age of 35 was 6 times higher than it was for men over the age of 35. The rate of emotional breakdown and institutionalization was 11 times higher for women over the age of 35 than it was for men over the age of 35. Why? Because when you place your identity in looking young and attractive, then when you no longer look that way, what happens to you?

Then, there was another kind of jealousy I felt as a freshman: jealousy of friendships. When I was a freshman at Stanford, I roomed with two other guys. One was Jewish from New York. The other was a European-American guy from Louisville, KY. I must say, we were a pretty fun group of guys. Unlike how people here keep their doors closed, the standard Stanford thing was to keep our doors open most of the time. We were right near an entrance to our dorm, Branner Hall, so people would say hi to us in the window and visit us when they came in. I loved being

there. One of those days, a friend of ours named Diana came by. She was obviously upset and almost going to cry. I asked her what was going on. She looked around the room, and not seeing my roommates in, hesitated. It was clear she didn't really want to talk to me. Maybe she liked one of my roommates? In that moment, I felt invisible. I sat with her as she teared up. I said almost nothing. I wound up feeling vaguely jealous that this person I thought was my friend didn't consider me to be a crying buddy. Suddenly I wanted to have my own friends who I didn't share with anyone.

Relevance:

Jealousy. Do any of you relate to those stories, and those feelings? Whether you are a frosh feeling like you're competing for time with people, and perhaps friends, or whether you're an upperclassmen vying for success or a club office, jealousy is sometimes a background tune and sometimes the room is thick with it.

Proxe station: Jealousy slide

Now I'm not saying that jealousy is our only motivation. I think we desire love, meaning, and justice. It's just that jealousy is often intertwined with everything else. And yet we sometimes don't pause to consider how jealousy affects our friendships, how it affects communities like the one we're trying to foster here at InterVarsity's Asian Christian Fellowship, and how it affects our ability to participate in the greatest mission we can be part of: Jesus' mission.

Text

Throughout the long ages, God was helping His people Israel in the Old Testament to understand human jealousy and how dangerous it was. It was the driving sin behind Adam and Eve's plucking the fruit from the tree and eating it. They were jealous of God and wanted to be gods themselves. To be jealous of God – wow! Some people say it was pride, and pride was surely part of it, but jealousy or covetousness is the primal sin in my opinion and in the opinion of many others. Jealousy lies behind every other sin as well. In the movie *The Kite Runner*, an old Afghani man says, 'Stealing lies behind every other sin. If you murder a man, you steal a son from his parents. You steal a husband from his wife. You steal a father from his children. You steal a life from the man.' I think that is true, but I think behind the sin of stealing lies the sin of jealousy in some form. And now that humanity has fallen, there is some kind of corruption that has set into our human nature that resists God and is jealous of Him and others. Jealousy is a sign that we are corrupted and need Jesus' new humanity.

Which is why when I talk to you about friendships and alcohol in the context of jealousy, as I'm about to do, I'm aware that this is not just about ideas. There is a non-rational part of you that will emotionally resist what I'm saying. And I'm asking you to pay attention to that part of you, and turn it over to Jesus so he can kill it, and take it from you. For those of you who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus, I'm asking you to hear me out and consider what I'm saying, and then make a decision about whether you want to start a relationship with Jesus, if you are struck by how problematic our jealousies are.

Why is there a resistance in us? Partly because jealousy is a powerful motivation and we can get a lot done out of jealousy. Partly because we have trained ourselves to suck happiness out of satisfying a jealousy. There's a study that shows when people are stuck in traffic...as long as you are going faster than the people around you, you tend to be happy. So even if you're going 5mph, it doesn't matter as long as everyone around you is going 3mph. As long as we're moving a bit faster than people close to us, you tend to be happy. In many cases, the closer we are to the person, the more these feelings are heightened. For example, I tend not to be jealous of Bill Gates because I have no preexisting relationship with him. However, if Bill Gates was someone I went to school with, were friends with, basically 'on my level', I'd be swimming in jealousy. Envy, according to some definitions, is a more aggressive form of jealousy. Jealousy wants what others have. Envy can go the other direction. Envy would be happy if the other person lost that thing. 'If I can't have it, no one can!' That's envy. Why? We tend to be jealous of others because we make our happiness dependent upon the people around us. We are actually not in control of our happiness the way we think we are, but instead we tie our happiness to factors external to us. And we have learned to value grades and clothes and money and people and experiences mostly by what we have picked up from other people. We have seen other people value those things, so we mimic them. We learn to desire from others because we let everyone else but God tell us what is meaningful. We let Apple tell us that you need an iPad. Then we let them tell us that you need the new iPad2. Then, inevitably we compete with those around us. Our jealousies are a by-product of what the Bible calls idolatry, basing your life on lies and even the worship of false gods. We live in a

vicious circle of man-made, created meaning. Jealousy is a clue to you that you have based your life on a lie. And the reason why part of you will resist what I tell you tonight is because part of you wants to succeed in the web of lies that we all tell each other.

Jealousy is Sin

Jesus says jealousy is sin. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' 8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind...' There it is: Coveting. Another word for coveting is jealousy. And Jesus says it is sin. But it's also a symptom of a deeper sin.

Jealousy in Friendships

Let's talk about how jealousy might affect your friendships and this community that we call Asian Christian Fellowship. Let's say that you are Person #1. And you are friends with Person #2. But you can't stand Person #3. Person #3 gets on your nerves. You don't like being around them. Or maybe it's the other way around. Person #3 doesn't like you. But either way, Person #2 is friends with Person #3. For some reason you can't understand, they are friends. Now apart from the love of God, your response to Person #2 is probably something like this: 'I don't really understand how you can be friends with Person #3.' That's the befuddled response. Or, it could be: 'I don't think you should be friends with Person #3, for your own good.' That's the semi-parental response. Or, it could be: 'I'm mad that you actually spend time with Person #3.' That's the insecure, jealous response. Or, it could be worse: 'I'm not going to be your friend if you're friends with Person #3.' That's the *Mean Girls* response, right? But with the love of Jesus, you would look at that friendship more positively. You would say, 'I'm really glad that you're friends with Person #3, because I can't be that friend, at least right now.' Or, you would say, 'I admire you for being friends with Person #3. I want to get there, too.' Or you would say, 'I admire you, and I'd like to learn from you how are you able to be friends with Person #3 while I am not?'

If you choose to be in the love of Jesus, then he will shape your desires. If you choose to be in your own selfishness, then your jealousy will shape you. You will perceive that Person #2 and Person #3 have a really strong natural friendship, while it might be closer to the truth that they are working at having a friendship, intentionally. Your own lens will set you up to see things in a certain way. And then you'll feel excluded even if other people didn't mean to exclude you. Every year, there is tension among frosh on Upper and frosh on Newton in some form. 'Oh, you're wanting to be friends with them. Oh, you are better friends with them. Oh, fine, reject me.' And then, people start perceiving ACF as made up of only one or two groups of people. Then they feel excluded. Now sometimes there are dynamics like that, but to some extent, you will make superficial judgments about people and groups. My challenge for you is to give your jealousy up to Jesus. Relinquish it. Push through it and give Jesus and his mission, as it's expressed here, a chance.

Years down the road, this will help not only you but the world. About a year after the global financial crisis first hit us, former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan told the BBC that it was inevitable, and that we'll have another one. 'Speaking a year after the collapse of US investment bank Lehman Brothers, which was followed by a worldwide financial crisis and global recession, Mr Greenspan described the behaviour as "human nature"... Blamed by some for not doing more to prevent the crisis, Mr Greenspan denied any responsibility for the problems gripping the global economy. "It's human nature, unless somebody can find a way to change human nature, we will have more crises and none of them will look like this because no two crises have anything in common, except human nature.'" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8244600.stm>, Market crisis 'will happen again'). In this case, it was human nature to believe that banks were doing the right thing, that you can do as good if not better than someone else in the market, and so on. It is driven by jealousy. King Solomon wrote, 'I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor' (Ecclesiastes 4:4). And now, look at Europe, teetering on the brink of another financial meltdown, for the same underlying reasons. Jealousy for higher returns. Jealousy for more money. Jealousy for more power. If you allow Jesus to address your jealousy now, you will be a better person and the world will be a better place.

Jealousy in Alcohol

Let's talk about alcohol and jealousy. Why do I think jealousy is related to alcohol? If you or other students here just wanted alcohol, then you could probably drink alcohol with your parents, because many Asian parents do, and it's within the law. They might even let you get a little tipsy. But how fun would that be, with your parents? So

let's press beyond what we all know and go a little deeper. I don't think the core issue on campus is actually alcohol. I think it's jealousy of other people. Let me highlight several different groups of people and how I think they perceive each other *jealously*.

For some of you who are Christians, you look at people who get drunk and you feel more judgment than compassion. Now, it's true that Ephesians 5:18 says, 'Do not get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit'. But let me explain that. The verse says, 'But be filled with the Spirit' as the alternative to being drunk with wine, and yet we don't often reflect on that. Let me first tell you how I experienced being filled with the Spirit recently. A few years ago, there was a time that I was hanging out with a friend, sharing stories about our families. When we prayed, I saw a capital letter A in red. I told my friend this, and she said, 'You mean like *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathanael Hawthorn?' I said, 'I guess so.' A few days later, my friend told me that her parents were going through a tough time because her dad confessed to her mom that he had had an affair many years ago. He had been carrying around that burden of guilt for years, much like in *The Scarlet Letter*. He repented and asked for forgiveness, and things have gone well. Thank God. But my friend and I were struck by the fact that the Spirit of Jesus seemed to give me – or perhaps us – a word about that situation before it even came to light, perhaps to let my friend know that He loves her and is healing her dad. I do think that my ability to hear a word from God like that is related to choices I made to grow in Jesus' love. My dad was an alcoholic. There was infidelity in my family. One struggle for me was to love people who got drunk and to care about people even though it touched areas of pain in my life. I was jealous of their apparent carefree attitude so I had to also resist the allure of drowning my own pain in something unreal like alcohol and women, the very same things that hurt me. After years of choosing Jesus' integrity and love instead of my exasperation, Jesus cultivated in me sensitivities and abilities that flowed out of his love. Even just being a better listener was something of a miracle. And I'm thankful. Nowadays, people in my community in Dorchester are seeing God physically heal people miraculously. I want more of all that. I want that for us! I don't know how exactly that will play out for you. In some ways, I recognize that I am calling you into experiences, and abilities, and sensitivities that you may not have yet. But if you choose Jesus, over time, I think you will see the whole thing differently and you will be thankful you chose him. I desire more of him. I think you will, too. The biggest question for you is, 'Do you want to know what it means to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus?'

If you feel more judgment than compassion, you're probably jealous that you're missing out on something, and you're trying to reward yourself by telling yourself you're more moral. But self-righteousness is not the same thing as Jesus' love. People who drink excessively are usually running away from something, like pain or stress. You could be sympathetic to that possibility. At the very least, you could be sympathetic to the fact that a whole bunch of people want to join in this group experience where their true selves aren't even really interacting with each other. They think that other people are funnier than they really are, and they think they themselves are funnier than they really are. People playing a multi-player video game are experiencing more reality than a bunch of drunk people.

For some of you, you're drawn to alcohol because of the people who are drinking. You'd like to be like them, to be one of them. Or at least you think you do. In a sense, you're jealous. They step over limits, and you'd like to do that too. And the truth be told, you have probably spent much of your life trying to become someone else, because you're dissatisfied with yourself and you're jealous of what other people seem to have. But the question for you is also, 'Do you want to know what it means to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus?' What if there is a completely different way of life that is awesome and meaningful, and draws you into real relationships and truth and God Himself? Somehow you think that stepping over limits is what brings you real life, whether it be drinking before you're 21 or drinking until you're drunk. But what if Jesus has something else for you that depends on you cultivating abilities with Him? It's like setting in shape, and feeling awesome that your body can do new things. Or it's like eating healthy, and feeling better, with more energy and less sickness. What if spiritual fitness is like that? I've found that it is, and so have many others.

Why? Why is it so important to Jesus? Because of what might happen. A few years ago, at MIT, a frosh drowned in his own vomit at a frat party. I know a woman at BC who was raped when she was drunk. I know about men and women while they're drunk who make sexual advances on other people and it's just embarrassing for them. Racial incidents have happened here when people are drunk. It seems to me that the party scene is segregated, and it's that way for a reason. Can you imagine two parties right next door to each other having a racial incident? Back in CA, I helped pull apart two men in a bar fight. So this is not a joke. When people are drunk, their other jealousies come out, and they are vulnerable. So what does Jesus want to do? Jesus would go to some of these parties. He did in the Gospels. He drank wine, but he would stay sober, enjoy people, and listen to them. He would care about people in

critical moments. So I know of lots of people who love Jesus who go to parties while they listen for him, stay sober, enjoy people, and wind up getting into good conversations there. People open up, and it's a way to care about people when they are vulnerable. If some people think you're awkward at first, so what? Are you jealous of someone else who seems to fit in? Why are you not satisfied with being with Jesus, and loving others with him? You can be like Luna Lovegood in the Harry Potter story. She didn't totally fit in. But so what? She played a huge role, and she was vital. The real problem is not in how other people are treating you. The real problem is you being jealous of others. Jesus might also spend time with people in quieter settings that are also fun, and I admire people who do that as well. That's a reason why your Core leaders have organized the Super 88 run tomorrow night. We need both approaches because Jesus takes both approaches.

God's Jealousy

So how does Jesus help us with our jealousy? It may surprise you to know that God is jealous for you as He once said to Israel in Exodus 20:5. He is not jealous OF you, but FOR you. For each of you. You might wonder what the difference is. The difference is HUGE. Why would God be jealous OF you??? What do you have that He doesn't??? God is not jealous OF you. HE IS NOT JEALOUS OF ANYONE OR ANYTHING. IN FACT, HE SUSTAINS AND UPHOLDS ALL LIFE AND GIVES US ALL OUR VERY BEING. SO BEING JEALOUS OF ANYTHING OR ANYONE IS UTTERLY AGAINST HIS CHARACTER.

Illus: He is jealous FOR you, in a similar way that I am jealous FOR my wife. I am not jealous OF her. But I believe I am right for her and she for me, so I am jealous FOR her and she is FOR me. Let me tell you a story, and then make the parallel. When my wife Ming and I were dating, she was in Boston and I was in the San Jose-San Francisco bay area. We had been introduced on a blind date and started dating long distance. Because of the three hour time difference, we had to figure out what worked for both of us. If we did a Friday or Saturday evening, when I got home from work, it would already be late her time, and she was tired. There was even one time she fell asleep on the phone with me while I was talking! So we decided that I would get up at 4:30am in the morning once a week on a weekday, so we could talk before we both went to work. I remember waking up and immediately jumping into the shower to wake up. That was a big sacrifice! But it was worth it because I was jealous FOR her. I wanted the little time that we had together to be the best we could have. I wanted to be totally present to her because that was the time she was most present to me. We would talk once on the weekends, and sometimes we would read a book to each other on the phone: C.S. Lewis' *Til We Have Faces*. It was a book that brought out some of our best personal sharing, because we were jealous FOR each other that we would know each other as much as we could even though long distance dating was hard. Tomorrow, we are going to a sushi place for dinner because someone gave us a gift certificate. I've been out four nights this week, and I get back late and we're both tired. I'm longing to spend good time with her.

God is jealous FOR you. He loves you. He doesn't want any distractions to come between you and Him. If you only knew how passionate He is for you, how jealous He is FOR you, that would help you to not be jealous OF other people. And He desires that you relate to Him as your primary relationship, live in His reality, share in His heart for others, and serve with Him in His world as He is reclaiming it from evil. He does not want you to just mimic other people's fallen desires and fallen jealousies.

God is so jealous FOR you and me that He helps us respond the way He wants us to respond. God became a human being in the person of Jesus to clean and heal and transform a human being of all jealousy ('what the Law was powerless to do, God did, by condemning sin in the flesh' of Jesus – Romans 8:3). Jesus as the Son of God perfected the human response to God the Father, so we can share in what Jesus has accomplished for us. Jesus lived his entire life not being jealous of anyone or anything, but responding in love to the Father's love for him. So God has not left us alone to wrestle with our endemic jealousy. He is not calling us to just 'realize an ideal' that He has in His mind. He gives us the new humanity of Jesus by the Spirit so we can participate in a human reality that He has already perfected in Jesus. God is jealous FOR us to be the best people we can be.

If that is a new thought for you, if this makes Christian faith seem alive and vibrant and challenging, it is! That is the truth. And if you are not a Christian but would like to talk more about your questions, come talk to me or any of the Core leaders here. Or if this sounds fresh and different and you'd like to figure out how to get more involved with us on campus, come talk to us about that, too. We would love it if we could walk together with you on this spiritual journey.