

THE NEIGHBOUR'S GOODS (PEACH TREE)

BACKGROUND

The basis for this story is one of the ten commandments: do not covet your neighbours goods. So we are told not to look jealously at what our peers have. The exact original meaning, and the best translations from the ancient sources, are a bit murky. For example, it is said by some analysts that those goods might include slaves, or even wives, or even that slaves and wives are the only intended meaning.

However, it seems clear that there is potential harm in envy and greed inspired by what other people have got and we haven't, especially in a highly consumerist society. In the first place, envy makes us unhappy and probably badly disposed to those that possess what we want. And secondly, this resentment might lead us to harm the other person or treat them badly. But the interesting ethical point is in that gap between potential harm and action. So if I am actually nice to my neighbour and treat them well, is it bad for me to be jealous of her car or job or husband? In a way yes, but given that I have overcome my jealousy and treat her well, isn't that commendable? Or should I feel guilty about being 'two-faced'?

A simpler example, but with a similar distinction is in the area of bravery. Which person is braver: the one who feels scared but exposes themselves to danger through will power; or the person who feels no fear and exposes themselves to the same danger without anxiety? Many would argue that the person who is morally most admirable is the first one - the one who was scared but did it anyway, especially if their objective was to do something for someone else (such as jump into a river to save someone). That said, I am probably not alone in admiring the person who is simply 'made that way' - the danger just doesn't bother them. He is the one I would prefer to be.

Relating this back to the case of jealousy, and if I used the same reasoning, we would find someone who is jealous but nice morally admirable, because their moral beliefs have outweighed their desires. However, there may be some feeling that the person who is not jealous is... what? Luckier? A better person?

In this very short, simple, scenario the children are asked to put a value on refraining from stealing. To do this they have to think about the relation between what we desire and what we do.

STIMULUS

A mother had three daughters. Out at the back of their house was a yard, where the children played. In the next door yard was a peach tree. If the girls climbed up the fence they could easily reach into the branches of the tree and pluck the peaches off. The mother knew this and was very clear to them: they must never ever steal peaches from their neighbour's tree.

The mother decides that she will reward her children for not stealing. At the end of the week, each child who has not stolen any peaches that week will get money so spend on whatever they like.

One of the daughters really loves peaches. Whenever she goes into the yard she looks over at the tree and really wants to steal a peach. But she doesn't.

Another daughter also really loves peaches. But when she plays in the yard she forgets about the tree next door and never thinks about stealing the peaches. So she doesn't steal any either.

The third daughter doesn't like peaches. So obviously she steals no peaches either.

Task Questions

- ✓ At the end of the week, should the mother give all three of them a reward?
- ✓ Which is better: wanting to do bad but stopping yourself or not wanting to bad?

LESSON COMMENTS

I have worded the question above: 'Should the mother give all three of them a reward?'. So to begin with, the children may think in 'all or nothing' terms, so that one daughter may get a reward and one daughter may get nothing. An alternative form of the question is: 'Should the mother give all three of them the same reward?', which anticipates the possibility of each daughter getting something, but a different amount. I think it's important for the class to work from 'all or nothing' to what each daughter deserves (I mean: to think of that as a possibility rather than settle on that as the answer).

The reason I specify that the reward will be money is to make it easier to compare rewards (if the reward was a toy, the children would have to think about whether a yo-yo is half as good as an action figure etc).

One paradox here is that if the third daughter gets a reward, that will not be fair because she has done nothing to earn it. However, if the third daughter doesn't get a reward while the other two do, that's not fair either - because the actions of all three children have been the same (i.e. didn't steal).

What this could lead onto is a discussion on fairness itself. The basic conception of fairness, which all children understand, is that everyone gets the same. But in

real life, including the family and the classroom, people often get differently rewarded for the same behaviour, or the same reward for different behaviour. A developing understanding of the reasons for this - different starting points, expectations, capabilities, strengths - etc. is an important part of social/emotional maturity. It

is also good for teachers, parents and schools to reflect on what their own attitude is. For example, some schools try to make sure 'every child gets a prize' and may have good reason to do so. Another school may think it more important to instil a 'win some, lose some' mentality, which may be appropriate to their catchment, cohort, or over-riding educational philosophy.