

Amadeus

God at the Movies 2021...Pt. 5

[Amadeus Trailer 2:15]

What an odd trailer! I went back to YouTube to make sure I had the right one...I did! The first dozen seconds are nothing but black screen and then all that weird whispering in dark. Trying to make a movie about 18th century classical music sound like – what? – a horror movie, a scandal? And then the tag line: “Amadeus: Everything you’ve heard is true.” The marketing team liked it so much they put it on the poster as well. The only problem is...it isn’t. *Everything* you hear and see in this classic award winning film is most certainly *not* true.

You ever see a movie that states, “based on true events”? That’s code for, “Well, we didn’t make *everything* up.” Amadeus is not a true biography of the composer; it’s historical-*ish*. Some things are absolute fabrications. For example, his obnoxious laugh, so crucial to the film that it is literally the last sound we hear. One music historian said there is, “absolutely no historical evidence for this idiosyncrasy. We simply have no contemporary testimony at all as to how Mozart sounded when he laughed.”

And then there are things like his vulgarity and love of scatological humor and phrases – he was quite fond of the “S-word” – that are absolutely born out in his surviving correspondence. But there’s a lot we *don’t* know. There’s even debate about what he looked like. His brother-in-law, Joseph Lange, began an unfinished portrait of Mozart in 1782. It’s the perfect metaphor for the famous musician. He is well known, yet ultimately unknown – to this day there is still great debate about the cause of his sudden death at the tragic age of 35. So we might call *Amadeus* the film a work of “historical fiction”.

Now, that clarified, I love this film. I have loved this film since I saw it in the theatre when I was 13 years old. I would say that this and *Chariots of Fire* are the two movies that first opened my eyes to what film could be beyond mere entertainment and escapism. Films that *meant* something. True art. It was a necessary stop on the journey to God at the Movies – so it’s a fitting selection for our classics edition series.

But, I also love Mozart. You can argue over who is the greatest in the high trinity of composers, but Mozart is right in there with Bach and Beethoven. My favorite theologian, Karl Barth, was a huge Mozart fan. He listened to him every morning before he began writing his lectures. He said that in his study he kept a portrait of Mozart and John Calvin...and at equal level!

On the occasion of Mozart's 200th birthday, the newspaper asked Barth to join other prominent figures in writing a "Letter of Thanks to Mozart". I love what he wrote, "What the state of music is where you are now I can only faintly surmise. Once upon a time I formulated my notion in this way: it may be that when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille* they play Mozart and that then too our dear Lord listens with special pleasure."

Yes, I suspect God is a fan of Mozart. This movie certainly surmises as much. In fact, that's the reason for the odd title. I mean, seriously, what a terrible title for a film? Before this movie came out, I promise you that nobody but the geekiest of music geeks knew what Wolfgang Mozart's *middle* name was. Other one word film titles, like *Jaws* and *Titanic*, have immediate name recognition. But *Amadeus*?

And yet in a way it encapsulates the basic conflict of the film brilliantly. Two Latin words put together: *ama* – "beloved" - and *deus* – "of God". Put them together and you have Wolfgang "Beloved of God" Mozart. Well, *Amadeus* was certainly beloved of film critics in 1984. It was nominated for 11 Academy Awards. The composer who won for Best Original Score that year joked in his speech that he sure was glad that *Amadeus* wasn't nominated for Original Score – of course the score is all Mozart so...

But the film did win 8 Oscars – that's a lot – including Best Costume and Makeup, Best Director, Best Film and Best Actor...but *not* by Tom Hulce for his portrayal of Mozart. This is one of the rare films to have multiple individuals nominated for Best Actor. And in 1985, the Oscar went to F. Murray Abraham for his performance as Antonio Salieri. And well deserved, he had to play both a young man and an old man in the film and would spend 4 ½ hours a day in the makeup chair to be transformed for the part.

But it's fitting in another way because this film really *is* Salieri's story. Again, highly fictionalized, but when you take the art for what it intends to be – this was first a British play – it makes the slanderous and dubious depictions of Mozart more palatable. After all, what we are given here is the composer's life through the eyes of...well, of a madman.

In the opening scene, the guilt-ridden Salieri cuts his throat with a razor and is taken to an asylum. Soon thereafter he is visited by a priest who comes to take his confession. Their subsequent conversation frames the central conflict of the movie. Salieri is the storyteller and the priest is...us, the audience. And what a tale it is.

Sitting at a piano, the aged Salieri asks the priest, “Do you know who I am?” Which by the way – word of wisdom – there really is no context in which that sentence sounds good on anybody! But the priest replies, “Doesn’t matter. All men are equal in God’s eye.” “Oh are they?” the old man says with an eye-roll. He then picks out a couple of tunes for the priest, who’s never heard of them. “Can you recall no melody of mine?”, he asks, “I was the most famous composer in Europe. Here, how about this one...”

And as he plays the priest’s eyes light up with recognition as he hums along, “Oh yeah, I know that. It’s charming. I didn’t know you wrote that?” To which the old musician sneers, “I didn’t. That was Mozart. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.” And there the conflict begins to unfold. Remember what the word means? “Beloved of God”. Salieri’s life was driven by the bitterness of knowing that God had apparently loved the crude, hedonistic Mozart better than his own pious self. So when he asks, “Why would God choose an obscene child to be His instrument?” it is less of a question and more an accusation.

At the heart of this film is a lesson about the destructive nature of envy. And that’s what I want to focus our talk around this morning. What even is envy? The 73rd Psalm is written by a musician who came very close to being a Salieri himself. Listen to how it begins, **Psalm 73:1–3**, “*Surely God is good to*

Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. 3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

Now of course, he wasn’t envying them for their arrogance. He was envying their prosperity. The following verses go into detail about how well they appear to have it. They were good-looking, wealthy, they had a charmed life. Why do the wicked prosper, right? Therefore, what is envy?

First of all, envy is wanting somebody else’s life. You want somebody else’s life. You see they have something better than you and instead of rejoicing in the good they have, you weep over the fact you don’t have it. So envy, to start with, is wanting the aspects of somebody else’s life. But it goes beyond that.

In envy we don’t just want other peoples’ lives; we *resent* their lives. We begrudge them their lives. In “praise”, you notice people have things better than you or maybe they are better than you and you rejoice in it. You say, “Wow, you’re great! I could never do that. That’s amazing!” In praise, you recognize people who are better than you and you rejoice in it, but in envy, you recognize people who are better than you or have it better than you, and you resent it. You’re angry about it. You hate it.

Therefore, here's what envy is. Envy is being unhappy at other people's happiness. Envy is weeping because people rejoice. And of course envy works in reverse as well. When the people who are above you fail, you *like* it. Envy is happy at other people's unhappiness, unhappy at other people's happiness. To feel what they call *schadenfreude* – pleasure derived from another person's misfortune.

Envy weeps because of those who are rejoicing, and rejoices because they're weeping. A perfect example; the great British actor, John Gielgud, in his autobiography writes, "When Sir Lawrence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948 and the critics raved, I wept." See, when the critics raved for him, I wept. He was rejoicing, and therefore, I was weeping. That's envy.

Ok, so what's the big deal? I think most all of us recognize at some points we've experienced envy. I guess it would be natural, I think, for most people this morning to say, "But is it that big of a deal? Is it really that serious?" And the answer is, "Yes." The Bible wouldn't warn us against it if it wasn't. So let me give you some reasons why envy is so troubling.

First, because **envy disguises your true heart.** There are a lot of masks and disguises in this film. Hiding one's true nature is a recurring theme of the story. But you don't have to wear an actual mask to hide your true self – your true motivations and ambitions. There's a great scene in the movie where Salieri describes how badly he wanted to be a musician like the young Mozart – who was trotted all around Europe on concert tours starting at age 6! But Salieri's dad was a merchant, a business man with no time for the arts. So Salieri prays. Let's take a look...**[Prayer 1:28]**

Now on the surface that sounds like a fine prayer – all these things he wants to do for God. "Let me celebrate your glory through music..." But what's lurking underneath? "...And be celebrated *myself*. Make me famous...Make me immortal." He doesn't want to serve God, he wants to *be* God. But he's blind to the truth about his wicked heart. Even his bargaining chips..."I give you my chastity, my humility." You watch the film and there's nothing humble about this proud old rooster. And it's implied again and again that "chastity" wasn't big on his character list.

But he's blind to all that. More than any of the other sins, you don't want to believe envy is true of you. There's a terrific series of little books on The Seven Deadly Sins and Joseph Epstein - a secular man, by his own admission doesn't really believe in God - but he wrote a great little volume on envy - brilliant writer and professor of English. But in the book he says, "Most of us could still sleep decently if accused of anger, or pride, or lust, or even greed. But to be accused of envy would be by far the worst, so clearly does such an accusation go directly to character. The other sins, though all have the disapproval of religion, do not so thoroughly or deeply demean, diminish, and disqualify a person. But you see, the stigma of envy is its enormous pettiness."

Here is what Epstein is saying, and I think he makes a great case. As bad as being found guilty or being accused of having lost their temper or greed or lust or pride - there can be kind of macho braggadocios thing about those. But, to be accused of envy is to be accused of being so small, so shriveled, so ungenerous. There is nothing more humiliating than to have to admit to somebody you're envious. And because it's so humiliating, we don't want to admit it's true. So we mask our true heart.

Back in that Psalm, near the end when he's coming to grips with his envy, the writer says, (**Psalm 73:21**), "*My heart was grieved and my spirit embittered.*" That's what that hidden heart really looks like. An aggrieved bitter spirit, "It's not fair! Why do those people have this and this and this? It's just not fair!" So you're aggrieved. When you're envying, your heart gets small and bitter over the perceived unfairness of life. So Epstein says, "Envy might be the greatest Rorschach test of all. Learn what you envy, and you will know who you are."

So the first danger of envy is it hides your true heart. Secondly, you need to deal with envy because it sucks...joy out of your life. Ok, I shouldn't pause there. But envy poisons your ability to enjoy - and be grateful for - the things you have. Envy could be called "comparisonitis." There's nothing wrong with comparison, but envy is "comparisonitis". Again, Epstein words this so well: "Giving into sloth and laziness is rather pleasant. Giving into the loss of temper, losing one's temper, entails a release that is not without its small delights. Lust, greed, and pride bring quite a bit of pleasure for quite a long time. Only envy is absolutely no fun at all, draining all joy from you from its very first moment. We have all felt envy's desperate, deep, soul-destroying, lacerating stabs."

Envy stabs a hole in your soul and the joy just drains out. I want to show you another clip from the film. Salieri asks Mozart to come and see a new opera of his. You should know that during their lifetimes, Salieri was by far the more successful of the two men. He was the court-composer in Vienna to Emperor Joseph II, the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. And so the opera is a hit, the crowd cheers, the Emperor gives accolades, *but...* I want you to watch the subtle expression on his face as Salieri turns his eyes to his rival. [Emperor :52]

He's the toast of the town. But he can't enjoy it. It's hollow, because the true genius turns his back on him. Envy poisons your ability to enjoy the life you have. Here's how you know envy has you in its grip. Nothing is good enough. Your job isn't good enough. Your body isn't good enough. Your kids aren't good enough. Your friendships aren't good enough. Your marriage is not good enough. Your love life is not good enough. Nothing is good enough. You got a promotion...but she got a *bigger* promotion.

You're always finding fault. You're always critical. You can never just sit down and savor the moment. You can never just sit down and enjoy what's in front of you. There is always something wrong because you're comparing yourself to everyone else. Therefore, envy literally poisons us psychologically and socially. Don't you see it all around us?

For example, envy poisons and destroys your ability to appreciate your own body. We live in a culture that makes us envy the beautiful. It's a marketing strategy. It bombards you with pictures of beauty so when you look in a mirror, you can't enjoy what you see at all. And they do that so you'll buy all the various products and do all the various things, but it's never enough. You remember what Dolly Parton said, "It costs a lot to look this cheap!"

But it's in every area of life. Envy makes corporate culture into a living hell. You ever see those medieval paintings of demons just climbing up one another in hell? It ever remind you of your workplace? It's the reason it's so hard to work. The jealousy and envy are horrible. "Ahh," you say, "maybe I'll just get out of the corporate world. With all this envy and back-biting. I'll go into something like teaching."

Well, before you do that, every professor I know in the academic world says you have no idea how the academic world is absolutely twisted and distorted by jealousy. Scholars are utterly jealous of who gets published where. Who gets what class loads and tenure and committee chairs. It's everywhere. It's in politics, it's in retail, it's in farming, you even find it among...you won't believe me...you even find envy among pastors!

And social media has just added gasoline to the fire. People get paid to make us envious. I follow a site on Instagram called “Van Life” – I used to think it’d be cool to get a custom van to go camping in. But as it turns out...I don’t have the body for it. The “influencers” in all these pictures have on bikinis or board shorts with chiseled abs. I’m not attractive enough for a van. But maybe if I bought the beard oil *he* uses...We’re so twisted with envy over other people’s lives. We want their life, his life, her life, that kind of person’s life. “I hate the life I have!” Of course it’s going to create all sorts of deep emotional problems.

Jonathan Edwards, in his famous sermon on envy, says, “Never underestimate the spiritual power of envy.” Adam and Eve...Do you remember what happened? They got *Paradise*! They had everything! Perfect. Immortality. No disease. No hunger. Beautiful Paradise. “Oh, one thing. You can’t eat that tree. Don’t touch *just* that tree.” Everything else is perfect...and yet it wasn’t good enough. Envy turned the garden of Eden into this broken, fallen world. Never underestimate the power of envy.

Envy disguises your true heart, it sucks the joy out of your life and then thirdly, **Envy sets you in opposition to God**. This is the real danger behind envy. If you hate the creation, you’ll eventually turn against the creator. There’s a powerful scene in the film where Salieri is so poisoned by his envy that he takes fearful measures. Let’s watch...**[Enemies :40]**

Pastor Tim Keller tells about watching that scene in a neighborhood theatre in blue-collar, Catholic Philadelphia and people audibly gasped when he put the crucifix in the fire! That’s pretty drastic. But it’s pretty realistic. “God owes me and if He’s not going to deliver, then what good is God really?”

A century after Mozart, the great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard wrote about this in a brilliant little book called *The Sickness Unto Death*. And in it, Kierkegaard talks about envy too. Here’s the context. He says that the chief aim of every human being is to “exist before God” – he was a Christian philosopher. That’s his terminology. Kierkegaard calls every human being to “exist before God.”

What does that mean? God calls every human being to build your identity on Him; center your life on God, make God the main source of your happiness. Kierkegaard says human beings are “offended” - that’s his term - by this invitation because they don’t want anyone superior to them. “Who is God to tell *me* not to touch that tree?” So instead of existing before God, we exist before other things. We exist before people’s approval, or we exist before money, or we exist before career or achievement. We exist before popularity. In other words, we build our identity on other things.

So Kierkegaard says if you want to understand what it is you look to instead of God for your identity, if you want to understand what you look to for your justification for your existence, figure out your envies. Let me read you a quote, “If one would learn to understand offense, let him study human envy...Envy is concealed admiration. And admirer who feels that he cannot be happy by surrendering himself elects to become envious of that which he admires. So he speaks another language, and in that language of his the thing which he really admires is called a stupid, insipid and queer sort of thing. **Admiration is happy self surrender; envy is unhappy self assertion.**” (Sickness, 217)

What does that mean? Well, it's just like Salieri. Look, some of you are musical. My son is in the band at school. I was in the band at school. But you know, there are people who are in band and then people who are *really in band!* So let's say that you actually went to college and studied music. You're a bonafide musician. But what if, almost everybody else who went to music school with you is doing better than you: producing more music, getting better gigs, making more money, getting more acclaim, putting out more albums, and so on.

How will you feel about that? Kierkegaard says it all depends on your relationship to God. Kierkegaard says if you're existing before God, then music is wonderful, music is important, but you'll still be able to admire people who are doing better than you. You'll be able to rejoice in them doing that.

But if you're existing before music...if music is the reason you get out of bed in the morning, if music is the meaning of your life, if music is the way you know you're worth something...if you're *existing* before music, you will really struggle to happily admire anyone who's doing better than you. You will resent them; you will envy them. He says if you want to know what your self-justifications are, if you want to know who *you* really are, follow your envies. You envy people who have the thing that you use to justify yourself.

If the love of God, your relationship with God, if knowing God delights in you, isn't the deepest consolation of your heart, the greatest honor of your soul, if it's not God who convinces you you're life is meaningful...but it's something else, you're going to be drained by envy all your life. Because everybody in this room, including me, does not really wholly live before God but is always looking to something else for self-justification. We're all filled with envy. We're all fighting envy, and we're all therefore drained of joy. Now do you see why we have to deal with envy?

So where do we take our envy so it doesn't strangle us and suck all that joy out of our lives? Well, take a look at **Proverbs 23:17–18**, “*Do not let your heart envy sinners...*” - Hey, don't envy. So do what instead? Here it is - “*...but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD. 18 There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.*” Instead of looking at your rival, at your competition, at the lifestyle influence model...Look up, look ahead. Take your envy ahead into the future hope that is guaranteed to you as a believer.

Now, this is why Christian faith is so important. Because if you believe that when this life is over, that's it. Turn out the lights, the party's over. All that's left is to rot into nothingness and be forgotten. That's the materialistic world-view – all that matters are material things. Well, then, yeah...by all means, you better make something of your life and tear down anyone ahead of you on the ladder. Get while the getting's good. Because this is all you've got!

Let me play you one final clip from our movie. And again, it's about Salieri – I told you, this is *his* story. And so when we get to the end of the film, we see the end of Mozart. Again, no one knows exactly how he died, and rumors that he had been killed by Antonio Salieri – poisoned perhaps – had begun to circulate not long after.

Even Mozart's wife insinuated that in letters – then again, she made something of a living out of being “the Widow Mozart” and was prone to sensationalize her husband's life for attention and profit. But it *is* the fact of history that these unsubstantiated claims negatively affected Salieri's career and contributed to a mental breakdown he would suffer later in life.

But the known history is that Mozart died of a mysterious illness while working on a Requiem Mass commissioned by a mysterious benefactor. That Salieri *had* attended Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* with him just days before he passed, and walked behind his casket afterwards. And Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's body was in fact buried in a common mass grave that is unknown to history.

And that might have meant the end of Mozart, but certainly not the end of his legacy. But what of the legacy of Antonio Salieri? Here is the scene where he finished his “confession” to the now emotionally devastated priest. **[Mediocrity :55]**

The Mozart piano concerto begins to swell as Salieri is wheeled out to use the bathroom past a menagerie of raving lunatics. The indignity of it. What he is experiencing is hell. Hell on earth. All of my great works just fading away into oblivion. That's the materialistic world.

Salieri and his envy reminded me of a famous depiction of hell by C.S. Lewis. “Hell begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it....But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine.” (*The Great Divorce*, 74). Salieri and his music are just fading envy going on forever. Hell indeed.

But a Christian worldview is spiritualistic, not materialistic. Your existences is not just material – flesh – but flesh *and* spirit. Body *and* soul. And the gospel is about the death *and* Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, death to the material body on the cross. But Easter means that is most certain *not* all she wrote. Easter Sunday means the party is *not* over. The party never ends. We’re going to have a new heavens and a new earth. Just like with Mozart’s music – inspired by God, why not? – it just keeps rising up, playing on, forever and ever.

Let me close with the story of two artists who also dealt with envy, but who ultimately learned to overcome it – to look up. We’ve just mentioned one of them. C.S. Lewis was envied by his friend, J. R. R. Tolkien. Do you know why? Tolkien and Lewis, back in 1937, sat together in a pub smoking their

pipes, lamenting the sorry state of literature in the world and said something like, “Let’s write fiction books of the kind we really want to see written.”

And over the next 20 years, Lewis wrote three volumes of a space trilogy, seven volumes of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Screwtape Letters*. He churned them out and churned them out. And they were – and are – hugely successful. Meanwhile, Tolkien continually wrote over and over and over again, rewrote and rewrote, one book. For 37 years he was working on one book and he thought he would never get it done. And he envied Lewis - if you read his biography, he had a great struggle with envy because he had such grand ambitions. He had this great story he wanted to tell. He desperately wanted to tell it.

If you know anything about the history of how he would write, every chapter in *The Lord of the Rings* was written about 10 times. It was rewritten and rewritten because he never liked it. It was never good enough. Nothing was ever good enough because it wasn’t as great as what he aspired to. In the early 40s he actually got so frustrated with his own artistic incompetence and his own crippling envy and insecurity, that he just stopped working on *The Lord of the Rings* all-together.

But one night he had a dream. And when he woke up he wrote the dream down into a story, and after that he was okay. The story is called *Leaf by Niggle*. It's a short story about an artist named Niggle. The town fathers commissioned him to do a huge mural on the side of the city hall. They put this big canvas up there and he worked on it for weeks. He worked on it for months. He worked on it for years. He had this idea in his head of a tree, a beautiful tree, and he was trying to paint this wonderful tree. But after years, all he had completed was one leaf right down in the corner of the canvas.

The town fathers came and said something like, "We paid you all that money for a leaf? It's not even a whole tree! A leaf?" He said, "I'm trying, I'm trying!" But he never could get past the leaf, and then he died. He was on a train to paradise, and as he was getting close to paradise, he suddenly saw something up on a hill. He said, "Stop the train!" He ran up to the top of the hill, and this is what we read:

"Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished...its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. 'It's a gift!' he said."

And suddenly Tolkien realized, "There is a real tree, and someday everybody is going to see it. There's an epic story I'm trying to tell, and of course I'll never get it out, but someday I will, and someday everybody is going to see that story."

Tolkien was a Christian and he believed in the resurrection. When he realized in the future the deepest desires of his heart were all there, and we're going to get there, we're going to get to them, he was able to handle the incompleteness of his own talent and he was able to handle his own envy. You have to look up.

You have to take your envy into the presence of the most unenvious God, and then you must take your envy to the future, and *that* will destroy your joylessness. That will rid your soul of the poison. Go to the most unenvious person in the history of the world, Jesus Christ, and to the degree you come into his presence, you will find rest for your souls. And you will find that the music of your life...will never fade away.

Let us pray...