

The Seven Deadly Sins: Envy

Titus 3:3; Proverbs 14:30

Envy is a crafty sin because it dresses up as so many other things—desiring justice, dealing with lack of privilege, wanting only what is fair, consumed with self-pity. When someone says they “just want” this or that, chances are good that envy is at work. Covetousness lusts after things (Col. 3:5). Jealousy wants something in competition with others. An envious person wants to take something away from someone else whether it benefits him or not. If I can’t have it, you can’t either. This malicious discontent at the blessings of others dwells at home in the unrepentant human heart.

Summary of the Texts

Paul tells Titus to remind his people to obey authorities, speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle and humble because at one time they were foolish, disobedient, deceived, chasing lusts and pleasures, *living in malice and envy* (Tit. 3:1-3). Not everyone steals, but everyone must deal with envy in their heart. Any child who has ever yelled, “That’s mine!” and torn a toy away from another kid (or wanted to), not to play with it but because it’s his, has acted this out. Every adult who has been disappointed at the success or blessings of another, feeling at loss because they have more, knows the tug of envy. Solomon says, “A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones” (Prov. 14:30). It’s not our neighbor’s prosperity that destroys us, but our envy of his prosperity. A healthy, tranquil, contented heart in Christ brings life to the whole body. Envy rots you out.

A Theater of Envy

Scripture teems with examples and warnings about envy. The battles and conflicts we have with others don’t occur because of miscommunication, lack of resources, cultural differences, economic disparity, or anything else outside of us. “Where do wars and fights come from among you?”, James asks, “Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask” (Jms. 4:2). Adam and Eve wanted to be like God and tried to replace Him (Gen. 3:5-6). We know we are not God, and when we try to live as if we are, it’s an act of treason. It’s likely the Devil wanted Adam and Eve to fall because of envy. Who were these dust bags to eventually rise and tell him what to do (1 Cor. 6:3; Ps. 8:5; Heb. 2:9)? Cain wants to be like Abel. Joseph’s brothers envy him—as if they’re going to bow down to him (Gen. 37:11; Acts 7:9)! Korah, Dathan, and Abiram gather a crowd of leaders who all envy Moses and accuse him of exalting himself (Num. 16:3). Paul rejoices when people preach Christ out of envy to get him in trouble (Phil. 1:15-16). The success of the gospel provokes the Jews to envy: “But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 13:45; cf. 17:5). Our culture is filled with envy. Marxism is economic envy. Feminism is envy of masculinity. Attacking “white privilege” is cultural envy. We don’t have “Asian privilege” because that’s not a useful tool yet for the envious. Antisemitism is envy of the Jews, seen not just all over our college campuses but now on the fringe right. “Social justice” is a movement to advance egalitarianism, that is, envy, through our entire society. They don’t want equal opportunity, which means everyone gets a fair shot, but equality of outcome, which means tearing down those who succeed. Any time someone wants to tear a blessing (“privilege”) out of someone else’s hands look for the arms of envy.

Christians must be careful not to envy the wicked: “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be zealous for the fear of the Lord all the day” (Prov. 23:17); “Do not envy the oppressor, and choose none of his ways” (Prov. 3:31). The ungodly lie and cheat for short term gains. They play dirty, and you can’t. Don’t envy them. It’s better to lose the game and not play like a scoundrel than lose fellowship with God and suffer in bigger ways. Christians must also not envy the godly. We’ve seen Joseph’s brothers and Paul’s adversaries. Timothy must watch for men who are “obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds. . . From such withdraw yourself” (1 Tim.

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6:4, 5). Many Christian leaders want to tear others down because of envy. Avoid them and the chips on the shoulders.

Jesus' War on Envy

Jesus went to war against envy. His parable of the workers in the vineyard sketches a scene where the landowner hires a crew at the beginning of the day to work for a denarius, and they agree. He finds others idle in the marketplace and hires them at the third hour, another bunch at the sixth, another at the ninth, and finally another at the eleventh hour, agreeing with all to pay them what is right (Matt. 20:7). Evening comes and beginning with the last hired, he pays them a denarius—cha-ching! Apparently, there was no non-disclosure agreement, and when those first hired came to get their wages, they figured they'd get more and complained against the landowner. He answers: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (vv. 13-16). God does what He wants, and when He calls tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, Gentiles, younger brothers who wasted their inheritance, thieves, and gamblers and puts them not only at His table but in front of the religious kids and members of the Sanhedrin, the envious respond, "What the hell?" The first will be last and the last first. The gospel goes out to everyone, but only those who need mercy and not what they think they deserve are the chosen ones. Right after this parable James, John, and their mom come asking to sit on Jesus' right and left in His kingdom, and the ten get really upset when they hear about it. Jesus puts everyone in their place (vv. 25-28). If you want to be great, be the servant of all, just as Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. This is upending gospel, the end of envy.

Envy Jesus

The Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, humbled Himself and took on flesh. Though He had no office, no official position in Israel, no fortune, and no lust for power, the priests and scribes envy and eventually murder Him. Even the Roman Governor Pilate sees it: "Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy" (Matt. 27:17-18). What we tried to do to God in the garden of Eden, we tried again at Calvary. What kicked off God's glorious plan to rescue this world from sin and death came its climax on the cross. Christ was crucified with all the envy of the world upon Him. He died for and with our lust to be God.

Sound Hearts

A sound hearts gives life to the body. A heart free of envy pumps with grace to every member. James says our spirit yearns jealously, or lusts to envy, and we do not have because we do not ask (Jms. 4:5, 2). So ask for what you want in submission to God. Deal with the fact that He has given others exactly what He wants and your eye should not be evil because His is good. When you submit to God and find contentment in Him, you know He will bless you and not allow you to destroy yourself (Prov. 30:8-9). Love does not envy, it edifies (1 Cor. 13:4-5). Love builds others up—hopes, believes, and endures all things for the sake of the beloved—the Lord and His people, including those who have yet to call on Him. Look to Christ and know the height, depth, and breadth of His love, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:18-19). From here you lack nothing.