



“Godliness with contentment is great gain” (I Timothy 6:6).

## **The Evil of Envy**

**Central Truth:** Envy disappears in the practice of godly contentment.

**L163. Date:** January 1989. **Text:** I Timothy 6:3-6; Philippians 2:1-8.

**Topic:** Envy.

An ancient Jewish fable reports that an angel appeared to a man and offered him one wish, with the understanding that his competitor would get twice what he got. The man wished to be blind in one eye!

That is the evil of envy. That subtle enemy lurks in the shadows, ready to attack your mind. It will rob you of joy and contentment in living. It will harm you spiritually, physically, and socially. Beware of the evil of envy!

Envy can separate the closest of friends. It can break asunder a family. It can destroy the fellowship of a church. Envy may arise over many issues: money, clothes, position, abilities, beauty (or lack of it), or influence. It is closely akin to covetousness and jealousy; perhaps it may be considered the offspring of their union. It is an illegitimate intruder into the Christian's thoughts.

Envy produces self-pity and depression. It opposes good will and joy at another person's success. It turns attention to oneself so that the envious person lives in continual misery. It lives in evil company and corrupts all it touches. Flee from it as you would flee from a plague.

Envy is hated by God and man.

## **I. DEFINITION OF ENVY**

Envy is the desire to have what belongs to another — not to have something like his, but to have his own so that he no longer has it. It is the spirit of covetousness which desires to deprive the favored one in order to enrich oneself.

The envious person often has feelings of ill will, jealousy, or discontent because someone else possesses what he keenly desires. Often he goes so far as to dislike the one who possesses the desired object.

Envy may be expressed in almost any area of life. An older sports hero envies the younger athlete who is moving up in skill and fame. A pastor may envy another pastor whose church is growing more rapidly than his own. A politician may envy his opponent who won the election, particularly if by a large majority. A child may envy the attention the parent gives to another child in the same family. Envy knows no bounds of geography, culture, age, or race. Every human being is subject to its effect.

Envious people are capable of using almost any means to destroy their rival. Cain killed his brother Abel because God approved Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's (Genesis 4:3-8). The brothers of Joseph plotted his murder, but sold him into slavery instead, because they envied his closer relationship to their father (Genesis 37). Political opponents schemed to get Daniel condemned to death in the lion's den because they envied his superior position of authority and his popularity with the king (Daniel 6:1-9). The Jewish religious leaders arrested Jesus and sought Pilate's death sentence upon Him because they envied His popularity with the people (Matthew 27:18). Jewish leaders opposed the ministry of the apostle Paul because large crowds came to hear him and they could not attract such popular response (Acts 13:45). In each case it was envy which moved people to murder, condemnation, blasphemy, and opposition. No wonder we speak of "the evil of envy."

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF ENVY

Why is envy so bad? We all want to have good things, and most of us want better things than we have. We often want what we see advertised as "new and improved," particularly when our neighbor gets it first. Why is envy so evil?

**A. It is based on the world's standards and rejects God's standards.** Jesus warned, "*Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not of the abundance of the things which he possesseth*" (Luke 12:15). But envy rejects that evaluation. It insists that the possession of what belongs to another is the greatest good in life. So it seeks to get, even at another's loss, for personal gain. That is a rejection of God himself.

**B. It curses with unhappiness and self-contempt.** The Bible warns, "*Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity*" (Psalm 37:1). Why not? Proverbs 14:30 explains,

*“Envy (is) the rottenness of the bones.”* One scholar interprets that to mean that envy is to the spirit what cancer is to the bones. Think of it!

The envious person never gets enough. He is always unhappy because he sees another who has more than he. He is filled with self-contempt because he is not able to get more of the desired thing than he has. He is never satisfied and lives in continual misery.

**C. It rejects the words of God.** God commands us to do nothing motivated by envy, pride, or a self-seeking spirit (Philippians 2:3). He calls us to put all such motives to death (Colossians 3:5). We are to be motivated by a spirit of giving rather than getting, rejoicing at the prosperity of another rather than envying him. But the spirit of envy rejects that counsel and insists on its consuming desire for more. Therefore, envy hinders prayer. *“He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination”* (Proverbs 28:9). Envy separates one from God because it is a turning away from the law (words) of God.

**D. It leads to other sins.** Envy is never content just to desire. It acts to obtain the object of its desire. It does not care how the desired thing comes, so long as it is received. (Look at the list of offenses produced by envy as given in paragraph 4 of the above discussion of a “Definition of Envy.”) Even the apostles of Jesus argued against one another because each wanted to be first in His kingdom (Luke 22:24). The Christian principle is, *“Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another”* (Galatians 5:26).

**E. It manifests pride.** Philippians 2:3 sets out the positive and negative spirit which shows envy and humility standing in contrast: *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory (envy or pride); but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”* Envy demands what belongs to another person because, *“I am so important that I have the right to claim as my own what is truly your own.”* What a selfish and proud spirit accompanies the evil of envy!

**F. It disobeys God.** God says, *“Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the LORD all the day long”* (Proverbs 23:17). Envy is strictly forbidden; reverence for God is urgently suggested. How can one be envious and still please God? He cannot. Envy is sin.

### III. FIGHTING AGAINST ENVY

How does a person resist the evil spirit of envy when it raises its ugly head in his thoughts? It is possible to subdue it and have victory over it. Here are some steps to take in conquering envy.

**A. Recognize the value of contentment.** “*Godliness with contentment is great gain*” (I Timothy 6:6). It is of much greater value than the object for which one is envious. We have something much more precious than valuable things of this world. “*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be ye content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee*” (Hebrews 13:5). Which is of more value, the material object for which one is envious or the personal presence of the sovereign God? Cultivate the grace of contentment when you are tempted to envy.

**B. Give thanks for what you have.** Envy thrives on the desire to possess what one does not have. Look instead at how much you already have, remembering the admonition, “*Having food and raiment let us be therewith content*” (I Timothy 6:8). God will see that we have all the necessities, plus many of the luxuries. Cultivate a thankful heart when the temptation to envy comes to mind.

**C. Follow the example of Jesus.** Philippians 2:5-8 is the record of our Lord's example. He willingly gave up all things of value to Him that He might provide what is of value to us. Live in such a spirit of sacrifice and envy will die. Do you ask how? Paul answers, “*Charity envieth not*” (I Corinthians 13:4). Love people with the love of God and you will never envy their advantages.

**D. Discipline your thoughts.** Envy thrives in the thoughts. One can conquer envy by having the mind of Christ and thinking of things which are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). A humble spirit which thinks of the benefits of others will not envy their good things (Philippians 2:3-5). Keep renewing your mind under the discipline of Christ and refuse to think evil.

**E. Recognize God in your life.** His presence is the best cure for envy. Psalm 73 speaks of the blessings of His presence. He is our support, our guide, our inheritance, and our refuge. “*It is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD*” (Psalm 73:28).

#### **IV. THE CURE FOR ENVY**

Philippians 2:1-8 is an excellent summary of principles which will cure envy. Examine them in light of each verse of Scripture as they are listed below.

- (1) Maintain a vital relationship with God which includes “consolation in Christ, . . . fellowship of the Spirit,” and “bowels and mercies” (verse 1).
- (2) Express a sincere love for people through “*mercies*” (verse 1) and by

*“having the same love”* for others (verse 2). (3) Express true unity with Christian brothers and sisters by being of one mind, one love, one accord, and one intent (verse 3). (4) Express true humility of spirit, doing nothing through *“strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves”* (verse 3). (5) Show a total absence of selfishness, no one seeking his own advantage, but each seeking the benefit of the others (verse 4). (6) Show the sacrificial spirit of Jesus who gave up all that we might be profited (verses 5-8).

No one can experience an envious spirit while he follows those six principles. Are you willing to cultivate them in your own life?

It is a sign of great maturity for one to say, *“I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”* (Philippians 4:11). Those with that spirit are protected against great harm and loss. *“They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts. . . . They have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”* (I Timothy 6:9, 10).

Ask God to help you to discipline your thoughts so you can know the grace of contentment and the joy of rejoicing at the benefits which come to another. The grace of contentment is the spirit of Jesus. The evil of envy is the spirit of Satan.

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## Questions

1. What is envy?
2. How is envy distinguished from a desire to have better things?
3. Why does envy lead on to other sins?
4. What Bible examples show envy leading to other sins?
5. How is Luke 12:15 teaching against envy?
6. What does Proverbs 14:30 mean to you?
7. How is envy related to selfish pride?
8. How does contentment conquer envy?
9. What principles in Philippians 2:1-8 show a cure for envy?
10. How can you conquer envy in your life this week?