

A Study of Envy (Invidia)

Pastor Boehne – Trinity Lutheran Church El Paso, IL

“Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?” – Proverbs 27:4 KJV

What is ENVY?

The classic definition of envy, from Thomas Aquinas, is sorrow at another’s good. It is “feeling bitter when others have it better.” (DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Brazos, 2009, p. 41.)

Envy rejoices over those who weep and weeps over those who rejoice. Envy is also that sin of wishing that things were other than they are with your life. With this definition one can easily see how envy is rooted in anger at God (Pride).

What are examples of envy found in the Bible?

Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16)

The brothers of Joseph (Genesis 37:1-35)

King Saul and David (1 Samuel 18:1-15)

Judas and Mary (John 12:1-8)

What is the opposite of Envy?

Love. (See 1 Corinthians 13). Love and envy cannot stand together. If we love our neighbor, we rejoice with their good. If we envy our neighbor, we are sad at their good. Love desires always to build up our neighbor while envy desires to tear them down and stand over them.

Why is envy so sneaky?

Envy is very good at disguising itself (think *passive-aggressive*). It is one of the cold-blooded sins, not a hot one like wrath. It tries to parade its evil as good by false humility. It will give all the righteous-sounding reasons why it is more deserving than others. More than 80% of our criticisms of others are most likely rooted in envy. (Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*. Abingdon, 2005, p. 60)

Some of envy’s offspring sins are: “feeling offended at the talents, successes, or good fortune of others; selfish or unnecessary rivalry and competition; pleasure at other’s difficulties or distress; ill will; reading false motives into others’ behaviors; belittling others; false accusations; backbiting... slander... gossip... teasing or bullying...” (DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 45-46.)

Where does envy lead if left unchecked?

Envy leads to hatred and hatred leads to desiring or inflicting harm on our neighbor. Here’s a joke from Joseph Epstein on envy’s malicious character. Once there was an Englishwoman, a Frenchman, and a Russian:

Each was given a single wish by one of those genies whose almost relentless habit is to pop out of bottles. The Englishwoman says that a friend of hers has a cottage in the Cotswolds, and that she would like a similar cottage, with the addition of two extra bedrooms and a second bath and a brook running in

front of it. The Frenchman says that his best friend has a beautiful blonde mistress, and he would like such a mistress himself, but a redhead instead of a blonde and with longer legs and a bit more in the way of culture and chic. The Russian, when asked what he would like, tells of a neighbor who has a cow that gives a vast quantity of the richest milk, which yields the heaviest cream and the purest butter. “I vant dat cow,” the Russian tells the genie, “*dead.*”

(Quoted in DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 48)

Have you ever reflected on just *who* you envy and *why*?

We tend not to envy those whose good is far superior to our own. For instance, none of us probably envies the riches of Bill Gates. Why? Because we know we will never have them. But more than likely, we are very envious of our long-time friend who earns just slightly more than us. We envy only those whom we wish to rival or surpass. In other words, envy works best at close range. It hits close to home. Consider who you often envy the most and ask yourself the hard question – *why*?

What is the answer to envy?

We’ve already seen that love is the opposite virtue to envy. The love of Jesus is most certainly the answer to our envy. The problem of envy is a problem that we do not see ourselves and others in the right way before God. That’s why envy has been called “green-eyed”. It’s evil-eyed. It sees evil instead of seeing good. (People are also called *green with envy* because they are sick, hence the color green.)

St. Augustine says that when we share spiritual goods, they actually increase. The love and peace of Christ carry no reason for envy. When we share them together, they’re magnified.