

# **A THEOLOGY OF ENVY**

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*The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These men who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day"*

**Matthew 20:9-12 NIV**

Envy is ugly. It caused the workers in the parable above to grumble against their fellow workers. It incited Cain to murder his brother Abel. It persuaded the sons of Jacob to sell their brother Joseph to slavery in a foreign land. It pushed Saul to throw spears at David, aiming to pin him to the wall. It provoked the Pharisees to plot the death of Jesus. In all, the Bible's narratives are often pregnant reminders of the evil effects of envy.

From the beginning of time, envy has polluted our psyches, destroyed our relationships, and ravaged our society. It has wormed its way into every facet of our individual and corporate lives, infecting entire subcultures with the desire for destruction. "If we confessed each day how often we had been envious during it, we would be on our knees longer than for any other of the sins."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, envy is not merely contained in the secular world, but it has also worked its way into our churches and our ministries, threatening like a slow cancer. Envy is evil, destructive, and most of

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; New Republic Books, 1978), 61.

all, a sin against God. The envier rebels against God, devaluing the worth of His creation and replacing the One True God with cheap imitations.

### **Envy's distinctiveness**

Envy is often confused with jealousy. In our everyday speech, the distinction blurs between these two sins from inexact use. But, a distinction exists nonetheless. The jealous person is afraid of losing something which he already possesses, and reacts to keep what he has at all costs. For example, a jealous lover is frightened of the possibility losing his girlfriend to the perceived romantic allurings of a rival. However, the envious person wants something which is *not* in his possession. Instead of trying to protect his girlfriend from being snatched away, the envious person is the rival who desires to tear the girlfriend away from her lover. While jealousy starts with something in ownership, “envy begins with empty hands.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, jealousy is the overprotective watchdog; envy is the underprivileged thief.

But, envy is not exclusively covetousness or greed either, though the three are distant cousins. The similarity is easy to draw, since these sins cause us to desire something that belong to someone else. In fact, many scholars and psychologists have often confused the meaning between the two, using the terms interchangeably. For example, psychiatrist Karl Menninger believes that over the course of time the term “covetousness” was replaced with “envy”, which he defines as the “yearning to possess, to possess as one’s ‘own’ what belongs to someone else.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karl A. Olsson, *Seven Sins and Seven Virtues* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1973), 148.

Louis Smith also equates envy with covetousness, but takes it a step further, claiming that the original sin in the Garden of Eden was envy.<sup>4</sup> He argues for a chiastic structure of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5, with each of its three pairs referring to a category of sin, and the command, “Do not kill,” is placed at the center. The first and last commandments relate to the prohibition of idolatry and covetousness, and Smith asserts that these two sins are the actually the same vice: a desire to obtain what was not promised by the Lord. Since envy (his equivalent of covetousness) and idolatry are at the bases of the chiastic arch,<sup>5</sup> and since an arch can only stand if its bases are strong, then, it is these two sins that cause all of life to be jeopardized.<sup>6</sup> The connection is that the “original sin” and the violation of these two commandments each destroys the “life-together-in-love given by God.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the argument is on extremely shaky ground. First, the categories of sin which are created are too broad to be of any usefulness. By definition, many — if not all — sins destroy our “life-together-in-love given by God.” Second, the emphasis of a chiasm normally lies at the center of the arch, not at the ends, reflecting a poor understanding of the chiastic literary form. Lastly, no distinction was made between envy and covetousness. As far as the text in Genesis 3 reveals, Adam and Eve sought to *obtain* the knowledge of God for themselves, but did not seek to *destroy* the knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Smith, “Original Sin As ‘Envy’: The Structure Of Biblical Decalogue”, *Dialog* 30 (Summer 1991): 227-230.

<sup>5</sup> Imagine the chiastic structure turned on its side, so that the ends of the chiasm form its bases and the center forms the apex of the arch.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 230.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

which God possesses.<sup>8</sup> They sought God’s abilities through possession, not destruction. This is greed or covetousness, but not envy.

This distinction between greed and envy is this: if greed is a hoarder, envy is a destroyer. Though both sins covet, greed seeks to gain for itself, but envy — in all of its ugliness — seeks to destroy what it cannot have. May writes, “The covetous man wants to possess the good of his neighbor, whereas the envious man, first and foremost, regrets it.”<sup>9</sup> The envier does not seek his own gain for pleasure or desire, but he seeks the destruction of the blessings bestowed on others. He cannot find pleasure at other people’s fortune, but instead wants to tear them down. May continues, “The envier is a child of the evil one: if he cannot have heaven, he can at least raise hell in the lives of others.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Envy and pride: the gods of competition**

At its root, envy is a sin of competition. It is a sin among equals, bred and raised through sizing up its rivals. The average person rarely envies the power and prestige of the President of the United States, unless he himself holds a high government office. Instead, a benchwarmer envies his brother’s All-American basketball skills. A high school cheerleader envies her sister, who flaunts her mesmerizing good looks. The

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<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 3:5, Satan’s tempted Eve owning what was not hers, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (NIV). And the woman’s responses of seeing the fruit as “pleasing” and “desirable” confirms this view for greed and against envy.

<sup>9</sup> William F. May, *A Catalogue of Sins: A Contemporary Examination of Christian Conscience*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 164.

student with the 3.78 GPA envies the valedictorian of the class. The middle-aged accountant envies his neighbor, who drives a BMW and still seems to be as young as ever. Through his comparisons, the envier worships the blessings of the envied, but at the same time, feels threatened by them. Envy is a peculiar blend of adoration and malice.

In this competition, the envier wants the tables to be turned: to be envied and praised himself instead of envying others. He cannot stand the adulation given to another. But, if he is the one envied, the one receiving honor, his fragile ego is sated. With a quick change in circumstances, the envier shifts into the spotlight from out of the shadow of the envied, and soaks in the praise reserved only for the best. The envier becomes the envied. And to him, the praise is deserved; he thrives on the new-found accolades. In his own mind, he has been transformed into deity, to be glorified and exalted by his rivals. Envy has quickly changed its colors, and has converted into pride.

Envy and pride are "insidious twins,"<sup>11</sup> the same vice in different situations and circumstances. Both are still the sins of competition. Roberts writes, "At the bottom, they are really the same vice, the same structure of personality, the same view of the world, the same disease of the spirit."<sup>12</sup> If, after comparison, a man feels as if he is the superior, he suffers from pride. He will lord his own superiority over the other, full of self-love. However, if the person judges himself as the inferior, then he is sufferer of envy full of self-hatred, who seeks to destroy the good of the other person to level out the playing field. It takes precious little to change a person's pride to envy, and vice

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<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Roberts, "I Win, You Lose," *Christianity Today*, 23 April 1990, 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

versa. Between pride and envy, only the focus of worship changes, either deifying the self or the neighbor. The worship of God is pushed to the wayside. Therefore, both are sins of idolatry.

These two sins feed off of each other, creating a downward spiral into the depths of sin. Roberts writes:

*They are made for one another. They fit together like precision gears. The proud person is nothing without someone inferior to herself from whom to get her sense of worth. And who fits this role better than one who involuntarily shows, by his envy, that he recognized the proud person's superiority?<sup>13</sup>*

### **Poisoning the self**

The source of envy is insecurity. The envier's self-worth is based on comparison, and hence his eyes are always roaming, weighing himself up against the competition, who seem to be richer, smarter, luckier, funnier, or more gifted. He underrates himself, condemning himself for his own lack. In essence, the envier poisons himself. His envy leads him to self-hate, and it fills all of his attitudes with bitterness and gall. This man is incapable of gratitude. There is no pretense of God-likeness here; only the bitter ramblings of an inferior.

In fact, the envier is often the rare one who can appreciate the envied's "superiority." A semi-talented musician knows precisely her own faults when compared to a concert pianist. A struggling comic highlights his own shortcomings compared to an up-and-coming HBO comedy all-star. Envy is stoked by both an appreciation of the competitor's gifts and blessings, and a burning desire to have them

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

destroyed.

His envy can lead to impotence. Through constant comparison, his self-esteem is shattered and fragile, and any failure is like a dagger in the back. The risk of failure is not worth the possibility of gain. The envier persuades himself that the goal itself is no longer valuable, and therefore succumbs to laziness. Frustrated at his own lack and eyeing the plenty in his affluent culture, the envious poor quits working hard. The average student stops studying, never attempting to do his best because someone else in his school will perform better with less struggle every time. His potential is lost amidst a sea of competition. Unable to strive for his goals, the envier's impotence causes him to lash out at the good of others, denigrating the worth of the blessings in his mind.

In his self-condemnation, the envier sins against God. He forgets his identity: he was created by God in His image.<sup>14</sup> Though created to be unique from the rest of God's creation, he hates himself when he compares himself to others, perverting the self-image God intended for him to have.<sup>15</sup> He has devalued the image of God within himself, and thumbs his nose at God by telling Him that His creation of man is worthless.

### **The road to destruction**

Agnus Wilson asserts that, unlike the other Seven Deadly Sins, envy has no

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 105.

gratification at any stage of the sin.<sup>16</sup> Lust finds fleeting pleasure through a touch of the flesh. Greed soothes its hunger with financial gains until it is hungry again for more. But, envy never gives its victim any form of pleasure. It only sees what it lacks, it only casts its eyes on what others have, and no pleasure is found in that. The envier finds only bitterness, only hatred, only malice.

However, Wilson is wrong in saying that no gratification exists at *every* stage. Unlike the other Deadly Sins, envy does not delight in the sin itself, but finds pleasure in its consequences. When the envier destroys what is envied, he finds momentary pleasure. He finds pleasure at making disparaging remarks about his rivals. Through destruction, the shadow that has darkened his own self-worth is finally annihilated, and a sense of freedom rushes into the self-imprisoned envier. Envy is the sickest of the Deadly sins; it is a bloodthirst, only sated by the destruction of the object of desire.

Plantinga, Jr. writes:

*This is a motive that prompts people to slice up other people's reputations, to disparage their achievements, to minimize their virtues, to question their motives, to challenge their integrity ('Nobody's that good!'), and failing other ways of bringing them down, to kill them.*<sup>17</sup>

Some of envy's consequences are verbal. According to Olsson, It can lead to three different forms of backbiting: the "*but*," the *reversal*, and the *unfavorable comparison*.<sup>18</sup> In the first category, the envier might say, "He's knows how to deliver a great sermon, *but* he seems so arrogant in his delivery." The compliment is always

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<sup>16</sup> quoted by May, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way*, 157.

<sup>18</sup> Olsson, 22-23.

given with conditions. With *reversal*, the envious questions the motive: “She just did because she wants something from me.” In *unfavorable comparison*, an amateur painter may actually be a superb artist, but envy causes another to make an unfair comparison, “Well, compared to Rembrandt, that artist still has much lacking.” In all three ways, the envier blinds himself from seeing anything good out of his competitor.

All of these reactions are caused by cognitive dissonance. The envier does not want to admit his own perceived inferiority, and so attempts to whittle his competition down to size. He reacts with one of these three types of backbiting, to bring low the competitors. But, all of these reactions are smoke-screens. Deep down inside, the envier knows the “truth,” and that his object of envy is “superior.” His backbiting are merely temporary salves to his aching inferiority, which will inevitably ache again.

In the presence of envy, communities are torn asunder. The envier sins against his brothers. Especially vulnerable is the true fellowship of the church. His religion is filled with prayers of evil petition. He prays to God, entreating him with prayers of witchcraft, asking for harm and misfortune to befall on the envied. He wishes that God would obliterate the His gifts to the envied. When the envier seeks to destroy what is normally used to build up the church, he inadvertently destroys the entire community. Hence, the destruction of the self turns to destruction of others. No wonder envy is listed in the Bible with the sins that destroy fellowship.<sup>19</sup> The Scriptures understand the gravity of this sin, and its potential destructiveness for the church. Fairlie writes,

*Envy is a sower of strife, between colleagues, between neighbors, even between friends, and here it is close to Pride. It introduces into even the most*

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, Galatians 5:21, for example

*straightforward of relationships an atmosphere of distrust, of ill-ease and contention and malice, until even the most amiable and complaisant of people will find in self-defense that they also have fangs.*<sup>20</sup>

Our culture is not innocent in provoking this sin; it is an accomplice. Fairlie correctly assesses how capitalism and its structures incite envy.<sup>21</sup> The media is the main accomplice of capitalism, using television, entertainment, newspapers, and magazines, to push images of affluence across our eyes each day. It encourages our wants and desires. Those who have nothing, want. Those who are in plenty, want more. We become resentful of what we do not have. We want everything, and believe that everything should be ours: the perfect family, the perfect pets, the perfect house, the perfect wife, the perfect car, the perfect Cuisinart — it all must be ours. Fairlie writes:

*[Capitalism] is ceaselessly provoking people to rebellion, because it is ceaselessly prodding them to Envy, to want what other have, and even to be what others are. Inevitably and restlessly, out of its own need for profit, it makes people want more than they need and have hitherto desired, and then to expect what they want. Having given them what they expect, it then incites their Envy again, to want something else.*<sup>22</sup>

Our culture also tells us that we are all made equal, and that every person should have the same opportunities as everyone else, consistent with American-style egalitarianism in a so-called meritocracy.<sup>23</sup> We should all be equals. We expect life to be completely fair, that we all start at the same place, and if we all put in the same amount of effort, we will all end up at the same place as well.

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<sup>20</sup> Fairlie, 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-78.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-78.

This, however, has no regard for the differences between those born rich and born poor, those born black and born white, those born healthy and born with defect. In reality, our lives are rarely filled with this sense of fairness. Since our society tells us one thing, and our realities show us another, we find ourselves victims of injustice — that the happenings of life, though real, are just not fair. Everyone should be the same, and if not, we will force everyone to be the same through destruction. “Envy is a leveler,”<sup>24</sup> bringing low what it cannot attain.

Thus, an envier’s sense of justice is warped. It matters little that they earned what they have received or if they just won the lottery, the playing field must be equalized — at any cost. Plantinga, Jr. writes, “An envier does not care whether we have earned our success or whether some golden parachute straight from heaven has dropped into our lap. To an envier, either way is totally unfair.”<sup>25</sup>

Envy consumes the individual, and places his feet on the road to destruction. It fills him with anger, rage, and malice. He can no longer see any goodness in his neighbors, and the whole of life seems to be turned against him. So, the envier joins forces with the Devil, plotting the destruction of God’s people. He kills them in his minds. He wants to destroy what is good in others.

For example, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 show envy at its worst in our society. The Rodney King verdict, which acquitted white policemen from unjustly beating a black civilian, provoked riots in South Central Los Angeles. The trial marked the growing tension between the races, especially between blacks and whites. However,

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>25</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Murder, Envy, and the Harvest Princess,” *Christianity Today*, 25 November 1991, 28.

angry African-Americans, instead of aiming their violence against whites, turned against the Korean-American storekeepers in the neighborhood, vandalizing and looting their property. What was a black-white issue ended with the victimization of Korean immigrants. Why?

The source of the destruction was envy. African-Americans witnessed Korean immigrants move into their neighborhoods with little money in their pockets, diligently working to attain financial success. African-Americans who did the looting suffered from the sin of envy, and seeing their own lack, sought to destroy the success and well-being of others, no matter how justifiably it was attained.

As another example, Campolo tells this gruesome tale:

*[There is a story about] a certain store owner who was visited by an angel. The angel offered the man a wish that would give him anything he desired. However, there was one condition  $\frac{3}{4}$  his rival, who he envied intensely, would receive double what the wish granted. Without hesitation, the envious man wished to be blind in one eye.<sup>26</sup>*

## **Conclusions**

Envy — as with all sins — are sins against God. The envier desecrates his own identity as one created in the image of God. He disavows God's creating him, and turns to self-hatred, condemning himself for his lack, instead of accepting his special place in creation. In underrating himself and aggrandizing his perception of others, the envier ultimately dislodges the moorings of his own identity, to be carried about by the currents created by comparing himself to others.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Campolo, *Seven Deadly Sins*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 95.

At the altar of comparison, the envier worships his rivals. The Most High is replaced with poor imitations. And in all of envy's destructiveness, it attacks others who are also made in the image of God. Envy is pure evil, attacking both the creation and its Creator.

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