

Many years ago, I met someone who would become a very good friend. I appreciated this person's sense of humor and outlook on life. I loved their optimism and how they could bring people together. I also experienced encouragement in my faith whenever I was around them. They lived out their Christianity with passion and zest for life.

Eventually, I moved to another city and kept a bit in touch with this friend. Then a couple years later, they got a job in this same city. Now by this point, I had established myself with a new circle of friends and social group. I invited my friend to meet the people in the group. They soon integrated into the group. I was glad to have helped them in their move.

But as time went on, I began to have negative feelings towards this person. I found myself resenting them. They irritated me and I even found myself thinking some cruel thoughts about them. This friend not only integrated into my social circle. They became very well liked. They had different ideas for fun that people latched onto. People appreciated their sense of humor, optimism and strong faith. But I began to resent them.

What happened? I was jealous. I envied the attention they got. I even regretted inviting them into my social group. Eventually we resolved things. Yet I couldn't believe how strong my negative feelings were towards this person for whom I once I had nothing but positive thoughts.

But my struggle with envy didn't end there. When I was called to my first preaching pastorate in the west end of Ottawa, we served a small church of less than 100 people. Some Sundays there would be 50 or 60 people there. Then I would go to gatherings with other pastors. I would hear about their churches – how God was doing amazing things; how fast they were growing; how well this new ministry was taking off. On the outside, I nodded my head and praised God. On the inside, I would gnash my teeth. I would think thoughts like "How come they experience so much blessing? What are they doing that I'm missing? What do we need to do to be successful like them?" I'm not proud of those thoughts. I would often end up in a corner of those gatherings with pastors of other small churches trying to find someone who had a smaller church than I did so I could feel good about myself. The Lord had to do a lot of work in my heart through those years to liberate me from the success syndrome in ministry and envy.

Yet I don't think I'm cured or free from envy in my life. God has taught me much. But I have much to learn. I think that envy can be more common than we like to admit. Maybe it's part of your life or it rises up when that certain person comes along or you see what they're doing on social media.

What is envy? One dictionary defines it like this: **Spite and resentment at seeing the success of another.** Or envy is a feeling of grudging admiration not pure admiration. It is desire to have something that is possessed by another. So we can be envious of people or what they have. You might know the phrase "green with envy." They think it came directly from William Shakespeare's play Othello. In the play, a character named Lago or Lego? warns Othello, "Beware my lord of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." This seems to have led to the connection of envy to the color green.

Now you might have noticed that the Shakespeare quote referred to jealousy as the green-eyed monster. So is jealousy exactly the same as envy? Well no and yes. What do I mean No? How can jealousy and envy be different? Well, we get a clue about this from the Bible when it talks about God. The Bible describes God as jealous. Exodus 34:14 is a good example. It states "For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." For many years, I never understood how this could be the case. If jealousy and envy are identical, that means God experiences spite and resentment at seeing the success of others.

But that would mean God commits one of the seven deadly sins. God doesn't sin so it has to mean something else. The resolution comes when we realize there are two types of jealousy - Good jealousy and Sinful bad Jealousy or Envy.

Good jealousy – the kind God is - **jealousy for someone.** It is a protective response when something or someone threatens a love relationship. If you are married or in a relationship, it is appropriate to have a good jealousy for it. Marriage especially is supposed to be exclusive. An extended definition of good jealousy would go like this – "The proper intolerance of a disruptive intrusion into a relationship or situation." So this kind of jealousy is a mark of love rather than indifference. It is a commitment to the relationship. It is stirred up when it moves us to maintain a threatened relationship or restore a broken one.

This understanding of jealousy makes sense to apply to God. He is jealous to protect His love relationship with His people. The Lord knows that it is bad for His people to love other gods. So the Lord protects this love. This is a good kind of jealousy.

We can express this kind of good jealousy in our relationships. But if you are an overly jealous person, please don't use this explanation of good jealousy as an excuse to put the clamps down further on your spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend. There's an unreasonable jealousy where the spouse or partner can't even go out of the other person's sight or do anything without permission. That's not good jealousy. That's over control and dominance.

But then there is sinful jealousy or envy. Good jealousy is jealousy **for** someone. The sinful kind is **jealousy of someone or something**. This jealousy or envy wants someone else's life. It weeps over the fact that we don't have what someone else has or that they are better than us at something. Or it wants some part of another person's life.

We can practice this kind of jealousy or envy in so many ways. We can envy other people's bodies or face or bank accounts or relationship or the praise they get for a well-done performance. We can envy other's lives because we think we deserve them but don't have them. Envy can show up when someone gets better grades than we do or receives a promotion or has more friends or is more likeable or is more gifted or educated or popular.

If we're single, we can be envious of a friend who gets a boyfriend or girlfriend or engaged or married. If we're young, we can be envious if our brother or sister gets something we think we deserve or gets away with something when we got caught. We can envy when someone else makes the team or gets the award.

We can envy the accomplishments of other people's children – when their baby learns to walk or talk before yours. We can angrily eye other parents who seem to have better behaved children. Or we might experience envy if someone else gets a promotion at work that we didn't get. Guys, this may be especially true for us and our competitive nature. Imagine you were a general in King Saul's army in ancient Israel. Then this young punk named David comes along and luckily (in your eyes) kills the Philistine giant Goliath. You're thankful that giant is gone. But then you find out that the king has made David the chief general even over you. Would you throw your support behind him? Or would you be tempted to undermine his authority and leadership?

Envy can show up in a lot of different ways.

Envy is not a new problem. It starts in Genesis 4 when Cain was ticked that God honored his brother's Abel's sacrifice more than his. So Cain killed Abel.

Rachel envied Leah her sister because she bore Jacob children. So in Genesis 30:1 we read "When Rachel saw that Leah she bore Jacob children, she envied her sister." Then she makes the very irrational statement. She said to Jacob, "Give me children or I shall die!" What's Jacob supposed to do? Yet envy provokes this emotional outburst from Rachel.

King Saul envied David after he killed Goliath. When the women of the Israelites villages heard their army marching through town, they would sing the song, "Saul has killed his thousands and David his tens of thousands." Saul didn't celebrate. It galled or irritated him. He spent the rest of his life in bitter envy towards David.

The religious leaders envied Jesus. In fact, this was so obvious, that unbelieving Pilate discerned this. Matthew 27:18 states "For Pilate knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered Jesus up."

Envy is common. We feel it rise up in us before we even know what's going on.

What's the problem with envy? Envy can bring us problems. Envy is bad for your spiritual, physical and relational health. We learn this from **Proverbs 14:30 – A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.** Unlike anger, which can often be seen on the face or heard in the voice of the angry person, envy often remains inside or is stated under our breath. Yet it eats away at us. When we see that person we envy, we can rot away a little more inside. This rot of envy can eat away at our spiritual, relational and physical health.

We see the impact on our spiritual health in several New Testament verses. It shows up on a lists of sins. In Mark 7:22, Jesus talks about the defiling sins that come out of our hearts – coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, **envy**, slander and pride. Envy is also found on a list describing those who have a debased mind and do what ought not to be done. Romans 1:29 – "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. **They are full of envy**, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness." Envy makes the list of the acts of sinful nature in Galatians 5:21. It is certainly not one of the fruits of the Spirit. Then at the end of Galatians 5, Paul writes in verses 25 and 26 "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another." So Paul singles out envy as an indicator of someone who does not walk by the Spirit. Envy can harm our spiritual health.

Envy can harm our relational health. Many of you are familiar with the great Love passage in 1st Corinthians 13.

How does it start? 1 Corinthians 13:4. “Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy.”

Envy also shows up when people get into unhealthy quarrels. 1 Timothy 6:4 talks about the man who does not agree with the sound doctrine of Jesus Christ. Paul writes “He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce **envy**, dissension, slander and evil suspicions. So envy harms relational health. Envy can wreck havoc in our relationships.

But it also seems to diminish our physical health. We have this verse in Proverbs that talks about envy rotting our bones.

The author of Ecclesiastes observes envy as the primary motivator for some people’s work. Ecclesiastes 4:4 – “Then I saw that all toil and skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.” So they didn’t work for the pay or the satisfaction of using their skills or being creative. Can you imagine envy as the motivating force in your life? They worked, toiled and used up their energy to keep up with their neighbor. That can’t be good for your health long term. How many envious people do you know who are joyful? If joy is health for the body, then envy rots the bones. So envy is bad for our spiritual, relational and physical health.

Another major problem with envy is found in **Proverbs 27:4 – Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?** This is the bad kind of jealousy. **Envy can lead to a multitude of other sins.** How do I get that? Let’s look at this verse carefully. Anger is cruel. Out of control anger that can lead to many other sins – fits of anger, coarse language, cutting words, violence. Fury seems worse. It’s like anger on steroids. Fury is even more likely to lead to other sins. Yet look at how the Proverb concludes. “But who can stand before jealousy?” It seems to imply that envy has the potential to be more destructive than anger and fury. It festers and watches carefully for the misfortune of others. Then it pounces with an ugly celebration. It cultivates bitterness and cruel words about others. One author puts it like this. Envy is “a distorted and corrupted desire. It involves a perverse comparison of oneself with others. It includes an ungodly preoccupation with the advantages of others. And it harbors a smoldering anger at the blessings others experience.

So envy brings problems to our health. It is sin and leads to many other sins. We need God’s help to get untangled from envy’s clutches.

What can God do about our envy? God can transform those green with envy into those grateful with goodwill.

When I first planned this message, I thought the opposite of envy was contentment with what we already have. But envy has to do with another person and what they have. So I would argue that the opposite of envy is something called goodwill. It is a kindly feeling of approval and support. If envy is spite and resentment at seeing the success of another, goodwill involves honest joy and celebration at seeing another succeed. Author Joe Rigney writes the chapter on Envy in the little book “Killjoys.”¹ He writes “A true sign of the new heart is when you look at what God gives to other people (and not to you) and say “Thank you, Thank you, Thank you, Lord, because you have been so kind to them and so kind to me.”

We see an example of this kind of goodwill in the Biblical account of David and Jonathan. David was the young Israelite who killed Philistine giant Goliath. God had anointed David to be the future king of Israel. We talked earlier about the current king Saul and his jealousy towards David. But Saul had a son named Jonathan who may have been heir to the throne. But when Jonathan saw that the hand of God was obviously on David’s life, Jonathan celebrated. He didn’t resent David’s success. The song of the women didn’t provoke displeasure in Jonathan. He does not want to replace David. He makes a covenant with him. He even removes his royal robe and armor to give to David as a gift. And in 1st Samuel 23:17, Jonathan says to David, “You shall be king over Israel and I shall be next to you.” Sadly, Jonathan is killed in Israel’s crushing defeat at the hands of the Philistines. But he serves as a shining example of goodwill at the success of another.

This is what God calls from us. He calls us to not only get rid of our envy toward others but to respond with earnest and honest rejoicing when others succeed. “This is the test,” writes Joe Rigney. “How do you respond to the blessing and success of others? Do you murmur and gossip about it or do you celebrate with them? Are you filled with gratitude or carping rivalry? When it comes to other’s success or fruitfulness, are you their biggest fan or their biggest critic? That’s a pretty high calling.

But how is this even possible?

How can we come remotely close to Jonathan’s attitude towards David when the people we envy are such jerks? Or they really aren’t that humble about their success? First, we must **Receive Christ as our Savior**. Christianity calls us to face the truth about ourselves. We can’t just put on a happy face when others succeed while we still harbor envy in our

¹ Joe Rigney, “Envy,” from Killjoys: The Seven Deadly Sins, Marshall Segal ed., © 2015 Desiring God Published by Desiring God, Post Office Box 2901, Minneapolis, MN 55402 www.desiringGod.org

hearts. We need that heart change – a new heart. This can only happen when we put our trust and hope in Christ. So if you want to be released from your envy and you're not a Christian, the first step to take is to put your trust in Christ.

Rigney writes “The only way to destroy envy is through the cross of Jesus Christ. The blood of Christ alone cleanses us from the sins of envy, rivalry, resentment and malice. Jesus died to set us free from all of envy's chains. We must confess our sins and genuinely seek to turn from them. We ask God for help and trust Christ alone to forgive our sins and meet all of our needs.

First you must receive Christ as Savior.

Adopt a God-centered view of yourself. I keep on going back to this one because if we base our identity on anything or anyone else, we will always struggle with envy or pride. You must build your identity on who you are in Christ, not what others say about you or what you say about yourself. This can be a scary thing to do when we've worked so hard constructing an identity apart from Christ. But when we do that – base our identity on Christ - we can grow in freedom from envy. Instead of comparing ourselves to others or noticing what they have and we don't, we simply focus on what we have in Christ and who we are in Christ.

Here's four realities about who we are in Christ and how God sees us. Maybe focusing on these facts will help.

You are deeply loved by God. God demonstrated His love for you. Romans 5:8 – But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You have already been declared not guilty forever by God. Romans 8:1- “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” God loves you and accepts you because of what Jesus did. Now you can walk in that not-guilty verdict.

God delights in you. Psalm 147:11 – But the Lord takes pleasure or delights in those who fear him, in those whose hope is in his steadfast love.

God sings over you. Zephaniah 3:17 – The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

God is the only person in the universe who sees us as we really are AND loves us deeply, declares us not guilty forever, delights in us and sings over us when we put our hope in Him.

We need to grow in learning and accepting this God-centered view of ourselves. When we begin to believe it and place the foundation of our identity on how God loves us and thinks of us, it doesn't matter if other people are better than us. Instead of envying them, we can thank God that He gave them skill and ability. If it is God's opinion that count most, then we can celebrate that He has helped others succeed. The more we grow in finding security in how God views us, the less we play the comparison game. We are free to be who we are. And then we can truly celebrate with others and wish them goodwill when they succeed.

1st, Receive Christ. 2nd, Adopt a God-centered view of yourself.

3rd, Think less about what you think you deserve and more about what you've received by grace. Proverbs 23:17-18 – Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.

Tim Keller came up with this one. He writes

“Envy stems from two preoccupations. First, we are obsessed with what we deserve. Our hearts refuse to remember grace and instead think only of what we have earned. Second, we are preoccupied with the present. The solution is to look up to the Lord (23:17b) and look ahead in hope (23:18).

But Christians have a way of “looking up” that Proverbs could not provide. We can look up to the cross. Jesus did not complain about experiencing death when he deserved life – all so we could have life when we deserved death. Jesus was the most unenvious human being who ever lived. When you realize what he did for you, it will begin to erode your envy. If he didn't complain when he received a life infinitely worse than what he deserved, why should we complain when all of us get a life or look forward to a life infinitely better than we deserve?”²

Rigney writes

The soul-enlarging grace of God enables us to say:

I do not need to grasp for the talents and gifts of others.

I do not need to covet my neighbor's spouse, house, family, ministry, or opportunities.

I am not defined by the blessings of others; I am defined by the grace of God.

Therefore, I will refuse to measure myself by a false standard.

² Tim Keller, *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life*, Viking, New York, NY, 2017, 128.

I will resist the compulsive and relentless urge to compete with everyone under the sun (especially those who are called to do the same things that I am). I will put to death malicious dreams about the downfall and failure of others. Instead I will savor the sure knowledge that God is lavish in grace and that he has promised to graciously, freely, and abundantly give to me and to them all things in his Beloved Son.³

One picture that really helped me deal with the envy problem came from a Marriage and Family speaker I heard a few years ago named Tim Kimmel. He spoke of how we could look at the world in two ways using the image of a pie. Most people view the world as containing a few choice pies. There is the pie of success or status at this school or that business or that social group. There is the pie of roster spots on the sports team or admission to a school. There is a pie but there are a limited number of pieces. So you have to fight and scratch and compete for your piece of the pie. If someone gets a piece of pie and you don't – then it's time for envy.

But Kimmel argues there's another way to look at the world. When you include God in the picture, there's enough pie for everyone and more. There are lots of pieces of pie available. Instead of fighting, elbowing and competing, we can relax, encourage one another and collaborate. We can celebrate when others succeed or are recognized. We don't have to live with the constant drain or rot of envy in our lives. We look to share and celebrate the massive pie of God's grace. **So we must put away envy and put on gratitude as we live by the Spirit.** 1st Peter 2:1 states "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander." Together with the Lord's transforming work and our cooperation we can leave envy behind and move more towards goodwill.

So I want to give us an opportunity to do a little of that now as we go to prayer.

- Ask the Lord to remind you of His great love for you.
- Ask the Lord to bring to mind a person/situation that brings out envy from you.
- Confess your envy to the Lord.
- Give thanks to the Lord as your great provider, shepherd and encouragement.
- Ask Him to grow goodwill in you.

³ Rigney, 33.