

Battling the Unbelief of Envy

by John Piper

Envy is a form of unbelief that can lead to a lack of joy and peace, but can be fought by trusting in God, delighting in God, and committing your way to the Lord.

Duration: 32:46

Scripture: Psalm 37:1, Proverbs 23:17, Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 3:20-21, Galatians 5:26, 1 Peter 2:1

Topics: "Overcoming Envy", "Trusting God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the topic of envy and how it can hinder our joy and concern for others. He shares a story from the Bible about the lad with the five loaves and two fish to illustrate how delighting in the Lord can help overcome envy. The speaker emphasizes the importance of trusting in God and finding contentment in Him, as He promises to satisfy all our desires. He also highlights several Bible verses that prohibit envy and provide reassurance of God's provision and blessings for those who delight in Him.

Transcript

One of the barriers to being concerned for other people is that we envy them. We're going to talk tonight about battling the unbelief of envy. Let's define it.

I don't think it's too hard to do that. As I analyzed envy, as I tried to do this afternoon, and then after I'd analyzed it and written it down, I looked it up in Webster's just to see if this was a common, ordinary definition. The very two things that I had picked out were right there, so I think it's a pretty common thing.

I thought of two things when I thought of envy. I thought of a desire. It has an element of desire in it, that somebody either has experienced an advantage in life or a benefit, something's going well for them, and you want that to happen to you.

But that's not enough to make it envy, because that could be okay in certain circumstances. We're supposed to imitate saintly people. The other element that makes envy bad is that desire is tinged with resentment, that it's going that well for them and not for me.

That's what makes it envy. So, in a sentence, it's a feeling of desire that you have the benefit that someone else does, mingled with resentment that they have it and you don't. So, a mingling of desire for something and resentment that another is enjoying it and you're not.

Things aren't going so well for you. Things are going well for them. It just gnaws away at you sometimes that, why does it go so well for that person when it doesn't go so well for me? And then the next thing I did this afternoon was just try to flesh it out.

Some from my own life and just with my imagination from other people's lives and things I've read. What are some illustrations of envy? So, let me just go down the list that I wrote. See if you can find yourself somewhere in this.

Maybe I'll even throw it open for you to toss out some more illustrations lest we talk into an irrelevant void here. I thought of Mr. Dukakis and Mr. Bush and I thought, now here's an opportunity for envy. That a man who devotes a year of his life and a lot of money and a lot of effort, try to become the president and loses when he thinks he's a better candidate and thinks he has better policies and thinks he has a better running mate, could easily lie awake at night and just seethe inside that didn't pan out the way he'd hoped it would.

And he devoted a lot of time and energy and got nowhere. He might. I don't know if that's the way he feels or not.

A friend gets married. You don't get married. You've known this friend a long time perhaps and now that person's getting married and you're not getting married and you can start to feel kind of resentful that it happened to him or her and yet it hasn't happened to you.

Another one, a sick child and this other child, these other families, they always seem to be healthy. My child's always sick. My child gets sick week in and week out.

My child has these extraordinary problems and look at these other families. They're no better than I am and their kids are always well. Another one, you're a kid and you're second string and you're warming the bench and this kid, he's such a smart aleck and yet he gets to play all the time and you sit there and you want to play and he gets to play.

We got a lottery in Minnesota almost now. I think that's bad and I hope you don't play it. In fact, I thought this afternoon, I'll tell you that in a minute, let me tell you.

Suppose you have a friend who plays the lottery and they're a real scoundrel and they make a million dollars. You might say, well, that person shouldn't get the million dollars. I should or Span the 90s should.

And then I thought, if anybody in this church tries to give Span the 90s the payoff from a lottery, I'll resign before we take it. Okay. Don't get any ideas in your head that we're going to build this building with a lottery victory.

You just stay away from the lottery if it comes. The pastor's church starts to grow, gets real big, 14,000 down in Willow Creek. We plug along here, maybe seven, eight percent, level off a year or two, grow a little bit.

One might think, well, you saw it not to be. I got a real live one right here in my pocket here, came in the mail, I mean, through the offering this morning. Here's an unsigned prayer card, and I don't think it'll betray any confidences.

I like it. It's very good. If the person who wrote this is here, I love you for it.

And I'm praying with you. It says, pray for strength and peace as I seek to live a simple world Christian type of life. The pressure to dress nice and be materialistic like the rest of society often troubles me.

Now, one way to describe this struggle is you've committed yourself to a simple lifestyle. You're not going to buy this, this, this, this and this. You're going to try to spend as much of your money on the cause of Christ as you can.

And then you look around and hear these women or men who are just right up to date in everything they wear. And I've still got on this thing that I wore back at Wheaton. And and you kind of look at what people really think I'm out of it, you know, and you start to have misgivings and you want to you want to be like them.

And you start to doubt that you've really made the right choice or looks. I mean, God gave you your looks and how easy it is to walk through life and look around at people who seem to be so handsome and so schlunk, as the Germans say, slim and just right. And I'm not put together the way they are.

And how easy to just lead your life from one bout of envy to the next. Is that enough illustration? They might want to throw out some more that you've struggled with or, you know, somebody. Oh, there's just so many.

It's it's it's it's a universal threat to our joy. And I think as I started to our concern for other people. So what I want to do is to take 20 minutes here to just observe texts where it's prohibited in Scripture.

And then some consequences of it, if you give way to it and then talk about how to fight it. And seeing our time slipping away real fast, I'm just going to assume almost these first two. Namely, did you agree with me that the Bible says don't be envious? Can we just kind of start with that one? I've got four texts here.

I'll just tell you what they are. Psalm 37, 1, Proverbs 23, 17, Galatians 5, 26, 1 Peter 2, 1. All of them say don't be envious. So it's not biblical to be envious.

It's it's against the will of God for you to give in to envy. And then we could talk about warnings. It might be good to just look at one passage.

I've got three written down. Galatians 5, 21 is the one we might look at. Galatians, this is the works of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit passage.

And one of the works of the flesh is envy. Says in verse 19 of Galatians 5. Now the works of the flesh are plain. Immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy.

Which, by the way, is, I believe, a subspecies of envy. I tried to think, should I preach a sermon on jealousy? I was thinking this last August. And as I thought and thought, I said, jealousy is a species of envy.

What I mean by that is jealousy is envy directed toward another person when they are getting affection that you wish you had. You're jealous of another person because affection from somebody is going to them that you thought should be going to you. Now, that can be a very healthy thing.

God is jealous over love that should be coming to him. And a husband or a wife should rightly be jealous over a bad relationship that's developing. But there is also an unhealthy jealousy.

And the reason I don't focus on it is because I think everything I'm going to say about envy applies to jealousy because it's a sub category under envy. Anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy. There it is at the beginning of verse 21.

Drunkenness, carousing and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. So there's the warning.

It's real serious business. Everything I'm preaching on these fall sermons is serious business. In other words, if you give rain to this unbelieving state of envy, it could so take over your life as to cause you to make shipwreck of faith and do you in in the end.

All right. We've seen what it is. We've seen that the Bible says don't have it.

And we've seen that there are bad negative consequences if you if you give way to it indefinitely. Now, let's just talk about how to fight it. That's the big issue.

And Psalm 37 is the place where we'll start. So I invite you to turn there with me. This is a great Psalm for talking about how to fight envy because it starts off with the main point being don't be envious.

And then I count six good, solid reasons not to be envious in this in the first 11 verses of this Psalm. And what I'm trying to do now tonight is just to give you a kind of example of how to fight the fight of faith in your devotions. When you feel when you wake up in the morning and inside, there's this feeling of envy towards somebody at work or family members, something.

And you say this shouldn't be there. It shouldn't be there in my mind. What can I now do about it? So here's what you do.

You get out the Bible and you kneel down in prayer and you start reading and you look for biblical promises that explode envy. But now to do that, you have to realize, first of all, that envy is a form of unbelief. So let's see if that's here.

Maybe we should just read a few verses until we we see that. Psalm 37, verse one, fret not yourself because of the wicked. Be not envious of wrongdoers.

There it is. Basic statement. Be not envious of wrongdoers or get all fretted about them for.

They will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. And then I think verse three means instead, here's what you should do. This is the opposite of envy.

Trust in the Lord. Do good. And then the next phrase could be a command or it could be a promise.

It's sort of both, I think. The RSV says, so you will dwell in the land and enjoy security. It could be dwell in the land.

And literally, I checked it out because when David did his devotional on Wednesday night, he read this from the NIV, I think. Is that what you were reading? NIV? NASB. Whatever he was reading.

It was so different from the RSV. So I checked this afternoon and literally it's feed on faithfulness when it says enjoy security or whatever your version has. Feed on faithfulness.

And I think it means God's faithfulness. And so the idea of security is right and good, I think. Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him. So now notice these positive things that you're supposed to put in place of envy in your emotions.

Trust, verse 3. Delight, verse 4. Committing, that Hebrew word is roll. Roll your way. Roll your concerns onto the Lord.

And trust again in the second half of verse 5. So the reason I chose Psalm 37 tonight was because I think what that teaches is that envy is unbelief. Or has its root in unbelief. And the opposite of envy would be faith or trust or delighting in God or rolling your burdens onto the Lord.

So that point I hope is clear. That when we are beginning to envy, when we're starting to look at somebody and resent that they have something and we don't. And we're beginning to lose our peace and contentment in God because of envy.

The issue is faith. Okay. That's the point so far.

Now, the other reason this Psalm is so great is because there are so many reasons given in the Psalm why we shouldn't be unbelieving. Why we should be totally restful and confident that God is for us. That he's working in a way so that even if it looks like something's going better for them, things are going to go great for us.

Now let's look at those. I wrote down six reasons that I see in this chapter for not being in the grip of the unbelief of envy. Number one is in verse two.

They will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. So if you're starting to get envious about a wrongdoer, this scoundrel who just won a million dollars. God says, wait a minute.

Don't want to be in his shoes. He is going to fade like the grass. And those who do the will of God abide forever.

First John 2.15. So that's argument number one. It's repeated in verse nine. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.

Then in verse 11, 10. A little while and the wicked will be no more. So the first reason that you shouldn't let envy get the upper hand when it's envy directed at an unbeliever or somebody who's unrighteous is the thought.

Wait a minute. God has said in his word and I believe him that this person is going to fade like a flower. Very quickly, they'll be gone.

And then whose will their prosperity be? Argument number two for why we should believe instead of being envious is in verse three. The one I talked about. So you shall dwell in the land and enjoy security or feed or pasture on faithfulness.

In other words, that's the reward that comes from trusting God. Trust the Lord and do good and you will pasture in a land, in a pasture that is green. Your desires will be met, which is leading to the next one.

Verse four is number three. Delight yourself in the Lord that is trusting the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Now, that's an amazing promise because usually envy arises from not having the desire of your heart.

You see somewhere that somebody has something that you wish you had. And so this desire is missing. So the best way to fight that is to go to this promise and say, now, Lord.

You have made a covenant with me in verse four and have said that if I will put my delight in you, you will give me the desires of my heart. And so I am now going to delight in you. Now, that's that's a key step.

Trusting in God sufficiently that you come to rest in who he is for you. Now, that may have a profound effect on the kind of desires you must have in order to be content. But all the desires that you have will eventually be satisfied.

Those are amazing promises in Romans 8, 32. If he did not spare his own son, but gave him up for Saul, will he not with him freely give you all things? Or at the end of 1 Corinthians 3, verse 20 and 21. All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or life or death or things present or things to come.

All are yours and you are Christ and Christ is God's. I mean, the Bible has staggering promises to make for people whose delight is in God rather than things. Number four, verse five and six.

Verse five says, commit your way to the Lord and trust in him. And then verse six gives the promise, the reward. He will bring forth your vindication.

Oh, so does the second half of verse five. I missed that one. He will act.

He will bring forth your vindication as the light and your right as the noon day. I can remember several years ago. Goodness, it must be six now.

Steve and Susan Roy were living across the street from us on Elliott Avenue over there. Steve had just resigned from inner varsity. He did not have a position.

It didn't. We didn't know at all whether he would be hired at Bethlehem. And he was painting on the weekends.

Steve Roy painting on the weekends. Steve is a theologian through and through. He didn't want to paint.

Now, he said one day as we were walking across the street and Susan was there, he said, we really need some encouragement. And I can remember standing right there on the sidewalk. I said, here's the promise for you today.

Isaiah 64 for who has seen a God like you who works for those who wait for him. And they told me many times in succeeding years that they could remember that encounter on that afternoon as well. God works for those who wait for him.

That that's the word. That word work is there in verse five. He will work in Hebrew.

He will work for you. He will vindicate you. And that word vindication is precious, too, because one of the things that lies behind envy very often is that we feel like things aren't going as well as they ought to go.

We're getting a raw deal while somebody else things are going well, who shouldn't have them going well. And so what we want is vindication. And that's exactly what's promised here.

The vindication will come. Number five in verses nine and 11, this wonderful promise of the land for the wicked shall be cut off. But those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.

And then verse 11, the meek shall possess the land. Now, if you say, well, wait a minute, I'm not a Jew and I don't expect to inherit Palestine. Careful.

All of the promises of the Old Testament made to Jews will either be fulfilled to you the way they are fulfilled to Jews or better. Now, where in the New Testament is there a better promise with almost the exact same words? Of verse 11. The Beatitudes, namely, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit what? The earth.

All right. I don't get Palestine. Just the earth.

In fact, in Romans 4, 12, I believe it is. Those who are believers like Abraham are called heirs of the world. First Corinthians six, you will judge angels.

You will sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel to the disciples. We, the non-disciples or non-apostles will judge angels. I mean, the Bible is so full of the most stupendous promises to remove the resentful feeling that simmers beneath envy.

Last promise in verse 11. And delight themselves, the meek will possess the land and delight themselves in abundant shalom is the Hebrew word. It's translated prosperity, which probably in our day has a ring that is not as helpful as peace.

It's the whole well-being that comes to those who trust. So here's a little example of how you fight the fight of faith or fight against unbelief in the morning. If envy starts to rise up in your heart, you get a text like this where it says, don't be envious.

And then you say, Lord, if I'm going to get over this envy, I'm going to have some powerful arguments for why I should be resting in you. Would you give me some? And then you just read step by step. And as you get to one, you stop and you pray, Lord, open my eyes to see the wonder of this promise and grant me by your spirit, the capacity to savor it, rest in it, believe it, walk by it, live in it and act on it today, please.

And you go to the next verse and work on it again until you find God meeting you and just lifting this this ugly thing of envy off of you. Well, let's take a few more. Go to Proverbs.

What I mean by a few more is a few more texts that you could use as sample warfare texts against envy. Proverbs 23, 17. Here it says.

This is just wonderful. We just finished reading Proverbs as a family. I recommend it highly periodically throughout your family life to read Proverbs together and just pick out ones here and there.

Talk about with the kids, especially if you've got sons. And this book is written for men mainly. I know it frustrates the women to read Proverbs lots of times because all these sons, sons, sons, sons do this, do that.

But there are a lot of applications for everybody. But if you've got sons, it's dynamite. Where am I here? 23, 17.

Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all day. And here comes this great promise. Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off.

So here's the person who looks at a sinner. They're prospering and they start to feel like, doesn't look like my hope is really going to prosper. I mean, I try to live for Christ and things don't go as well as that person.

They're not living for Christ. The Bible is so aware of that problem. Psalm 37 was written to it.

I didn't even touch on Psalm 73. All of Psalm 73 is written to address that problem. And this text is written to address that problem.

Surely there is a future. Your hope will not be cut off. Don't envy those who seem to be prospering.

Let me take one or two others. We're going to just take four more minutes here. Then we're going to have time of prayer and close with the time of worship.

Sometimes stories help more than texts. Bible stories, especially true for kids, probably. Stories have a way of getting in where expository literature doesn't.

So here's a story that I have used often to overcome my temptations to envy. It's the story of the lad with the five loaves and two fish, especially as it's recorded in John 6. In John 6, you remember, Jesus has compassion on the crowds. And then he says, you feed them when they say, send them all home.

And they say, we have to have 200 denarii worth of bread to feed these people. And it's too late. And he says, well, what do you have? And they say, this little boy has five barley loaves and two fish.

But what's that among so many? Now you stop right there and you think the kid kind of looks up. Well, that's all I've got. Don't make me feel bad.

And yet that's where we all are. We're little kids with little five barley loaves and two fish of gifts, looks, money, you name it. Whatever you tend to feel inferior about or denied other people.

You look around all these strong, beautiful, glorious, rich people that everything's going well for maybe. And I've got five loaves and two fish in a job that takes 200 denarii worth of bread. And Jesus says, give it to me.

He takes it. You learn all this in Sunday school, right? This is a great story. Good news.

Takes these five loaves and prays and feeds 5,000 men plus women and children. And I look at that and say, well, maybe there's hope for my five loaves and two fish. And how many baskets were left over? Twelve.

Why? One for each apostle who didn't believe there'd be enough. That's exactly why. To show that not only when you give what you don't think you've got enough of, you get back more than you thought you ever dreamed you had in the first place.

That's a story that'll knock envy in the jaw every time. If you start thinking my gifts are too small, I don't live up to what the need of the hour is. Jesus does live up to what the need of the hour is.

He can take the tiniest little you and multiply it if you're all his. I've got a little plaque over my door at home that Virginia Medeiros gave me out in Maryland about 15 years ago that says, God has yet to see or the world has yet to see what could be accomplished by a man wholly consecrated to the Lord. By God's power, I aim to be that man, D.L. Moody.

One last illustration and then we'll stop. Turn with me to John 21. Gospel of John, chapter 21.

Now you know this story, but I doubt that you've ever thought about it in terms of envy. I hadn't until I read this in a book some time ago. So this is not original with me, but I love it and so I'll share it with you.

The situation is that Peter has been restored by Jesus because of his denial, having affirmed now that he loves the Lord three times in verse 18 of John 21. It says, Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

This is Jesus talking to Peter. This, he said, to show by what death he was to glorify God. In other words, he's going to be a martyr.

After this, he said to him, follow me. Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, John, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, Lord, who is it that's going to betray you? When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man? Now, what's going on here? Why does he say that? So you just told me I'm going to get killed. What about John? He got to get killed, too.

And you can see just right beneath the surface envy. If he doesn't, it's not fair. All right.

Now, how does Jesus deal with this? Jesus said to him, if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me. What's he saying there? I think he's saying it's real dangerous to compare circumstances. It's real dangerous to compare gifts.

I remember at Wheaton College in the dormitory, Mark know my R.A. at the time had a little teeny piece of paper outside his door that said to love is to stop comparing. It's good news. That's right.

Jesus is saying here, look, don't get all involved in comparing yourself with this other disciple. What I have for him, I have for him. Here is what I have for you.

Me. Is that enough? And that's that is the solution to envy. Just like it was this morning.

The solution to what do we talk about this morning? Lust. It's Jesus. Follow me.

If you're behind me, if you've got me, what do you need to worry about him for? And so that's the answer. We just need more of Jesus. We need to realize what an incredible privilege it is to just know Jesus.

Jesus said in another place, don't rejoice over this, that the demons are subject to you. Rejoice that your names are just written in heaven. It is such a staggering privilege to be a disciple of Jesus Christ that what becomes of other disciples is neither here nor there.

And so envy flies away.

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