

ENVY

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

PRIDE

ENVY

ANGER – FAITH

SLOTH – HOPE

GREED – GENEROSITY

GLUTTONY – TEMPERANCE

LUST – LOVE

Why is it so high up on the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, this envy, this green-eyed monster? Something terribly malevolent is implied and intended in this concept of envy. Why would the ancient saints fear it even more than lust or greed or sloth, or even anger? This sixth of the Seven Deadly Sins is the worst or deepest source of all sins except for pride itself, which defies God straight out. What is it, then, that comes to mind at the sound of the word “envy”?

There are no big surprises this time. Envy is defined as “resentment aroused by the contemplation of another’s desirable possessions or qualities” – to covet, to be jealous, to begrudge. That does not sound nice or mature or friendly or very Christian, but neither does it sound nearly as serious as gluttony or lust or sloth. What’s going on?

We are playing around the pastel edges of what envy is really about. We have modern definitions that clean it up and make envy sound like a fairly civilized, understandable, ordinary, tame, and almost harmless sort of sin. I mean, we would be better off without it and all, but why get all excited?

Further on in the dictionary entry are some hints from a bygone age. Under obsolete meanings for envy it says “malevolence, from the Latin *invidia*, from *invidere*; to look at with malice.” Going back further, to the Greek word that is translated as “envy” in the New Testament, we come to *phthonos*: ill-will, detraction, spite. *Phthonos* is from *phthio*: shrivel, wither, spoil, ruin, especially by moral influences; to deprave, corrupt, defile, destroy. So, to envy someone is to try to deprave, corrupt, defile them.

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The meaning has not been changed so much as trivialized, which is perhaps the most dangerous change of all. Today, for instance, if you say to a young woman, “So-and-so envies you,” she thinks that’s nice, that it’s a compliment, that it’s pleasant to have someone look at her and see that she has a lot going for her.

Remember, however, the wicked witch in the story of Snow White. Not so cute! Not to be toyed or fooled with. Five hundred years ago, if someone had said “So-and-so envies you,” it would have been cause for grave and immediate alarm.

Envy is not as open and honest as anger, but it is more deadly, more bent on destruction. Envy is not just wanting what others have. It is a great desire to destroy those who look good, who have it good, who seem to be better, smarter, richer, more lovely, kinder, more effective, more influential, or wiser than we are.

So envy is not just a backhanded compliment; it is a deadly killer. It kills both ways: it destroys the envied person, if possible, and for certain it kills the person who bears the envy.

King Saul loved David until one day when the two were returning from a victory over the Philistines. The women came out to meet and greet the returning army, and they sang, “*Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*” The account of that day ends with “*And Saul eyed David from that day on.*” (I Samuel 18:9) The Revised English Bible says, “*From that time forward, Saul kept a jealous eye on David.*” The origins of the evil eye.

This is one of the classic stories of envy. The next day an evil spirit began to take over Saul’s life. First the envy, then the evil spirit. Or in our language, first Saul allowed envy to settle unchallenged within him and, from that day on, he began to go mad.

Clearly David was Saul’s greatest commander, his close friend, the court poet and bard, his son’s best friend, husband to his daughter, favored of God, immensely loyal to Israel and to Saul himself. All these wonderful credentials just made it worse and worse. David was *too much!*

The hallmark of envy is that it hates goodness – it hates people not for their bad or evil qualities, but for their best qualities. Most people react to rejection, displeasure, and rebuke from those we care

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about by trying harder to be better, to please. With the envious, we would have to see what we were doing right and then stop it. With envy, all good efforts and good intentions backfire and make it worse. Envy hates for people to look good, to do well, to perform well. If it can, envy will destroy those who are in any way succeeding, who are accomplishing things, who are making a contribution, who are caring, who are liked.

So Saul envied David, and David sensed the displeasure and worked to do more and more for Saul, which only made Saul's envy grow. Saul began to do cute little things, like trying to pin David to a wall with his spear while David was playing the harp and singing to comfort him. Eventually the envy killed Saul, destroyed all that he had worked for, killed his son and his relatives, and put the whole kingdom in grave jeopardy.

I mention this to show that envy is not for fun and games; it is not the friendly little sin our society seems to take it for. Something within us hates it when others do well or look good. In envy we turn against the good and try to destroy the very blessings and benefits that are on our side.

Do we really love the good? Do we love it when others excel? Do we truly rejoice whenever goodness flows, even for those we know and care about? Would it please you just as much if your spouse or your best friend won the lottery instead of you? Do we recognize ourselves as a family of God's children – all on the same team – so that any goodness or achievement that comes for any one of us enriches and blesses us all?

Envy does not like any of it. Better for nobody to win than for somebody besides me to win. Envy says that even if I do not care – even if I do not want it – nobody else should have it either. Anyone who has it good probably cheated. In all likelihood, they deserve to be punished.

The Tenth Commandment is "*Thou shall not covet.*" (Exodus 20:17) Covetousness is often used as a synonym for envy. I am not trying to minimize covetousness, but it is more on the level of the bottom trio with lust, gluttony, or greed. Covetousness does not have the depth of evil, the twisted power, or the hidden agenda of envy. The rule on covetousness is straightforward: you shall not covet your

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neighbor's house or wife or golf score; you shall go get one of your own. So if I get my own, my covetousness stops. If my neighbor has a car he wants and I have a car I want, then we are both fine.

Not so with envy. Envy is much deeper and blacker on the inside. Envy needs to destroy, to put down. The truly envious do not work to succeed or accomplish much themselves. They work, expend energy, and think and plan with incredible energy and dedication to make sure nothing goes very right or very well for anybody around them. Groups, churches, whole nations get caught in envy – they stop doing very much for themselves and just want to make sure nobody else has it very good.

In some ancient traditions, envy, rather than pride, causes the fall of Satan. Rather than falling because of rebelliousness due to pride, Satan gets upset by the news of God's plan to create a new kind of being. According to the myth, humans will have the potential to exceed the glories of the angels. At this thought, Satan rebels because of envy. *"Through the devil's envy came death into the world."* (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24)

John Milton says, "The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile, stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived the mother of mankind" (*Paradise Lost*, book 1, lines 34-36)

One of the most chilling verses in the entire Bible is Matthew 27:18: *"For he knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over."* Is it possible that Jesus was delivered up to be crucified because of envy? That tells us the nature and magnitude of this sixth Deadly Sin. We cannot abide to have the Son of God in our midst because we cannot stand the comparison.

This second group of sins shows us our greatest struggles with the internal, interior life, as the first three show our greatest struggles with our environment. So what is the interior mechanism of this envy that's so quiet, subtle, and low-key, yet so incredibly malevolent and deadly?

Compare pride and envy: Pride says we are better than others. Envy believes others are better than we are. Those are the top two on this hit parade, the two gravest errors of humankind: to think we are better than others, or to think others are better than we are. To talk about one without the other is like training a child to handle all the

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dangers of heat but never mentioning anything about the cold, or like teaching someone all about math and science but never teaching them anything about feelings or relationships.

Envy is the mark of those who believe they are no good. The envious have not discovered that God loves them. They do not know or trust that the Great Creator has designed and made them. Deep within, they feel, "I am not enough. I am not good enough. I will never be enough to be worthwhile, valuable, acceptable, or cherished." Therefore, with a growing urge, an increasing need, a passionate driving demand, such people must bring others down to what they perceive to be their own level or, to be safe, a little lower. From all those who have luster, the envious must take away whatever light they are shining, so that all will be as gloomy and depraved and dark as the envious feel within.

Thus, envy drives off all love, affection, and approval – all of the very things it most needs. It ceases to believe in those things; they do not exist, or they are all counterfeit, a charade, pretend. Envy finds it unbearable to contemplate the existence of genuine love, or of a God of grace and love.

Where envy has a hold on us, it is so very hard to change. We are certain that, at those places, we have just been more honest, more courageous, more realistic than those around us. We were only trying to bring people down from falsehoods, impossible dreams, and meaningless hopes so that we could all get on the same plane and start out even. At least that's the way it feels from envy's side. Do not ask me how I know; I know for the same reasons you do ...

As with each of the Seven Deadly Sins, what we really need is conversion: to be born anew – to discover the love and caring and forgiveness of Almighty God for us personally. Pride says we are good enough to take over. Envy says we are no good and never will be. The Cross says to pride: "Then why are you killing the Messiah of God?" To envy, this same Cross says: "But I forgive you. And I, God's Messiah, think you are worth dying for, and you need to know that I love you and that the Father loves you."

Meanwhile, we look at the counterpart virtue, gratitude. Think about thanksgiving, praise, appreciation. Most important of all is gratitude for what we are, for how we have been designed, for the gifts and abilities we have been given. Envy cannot survive in an

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atmosphere of grateful awareness of the blessings and possibilities that are ours.

Be grateful for your own life. Trust your Creator. Be thankful for your true name, for your own unique identity. Rejoice in the gifts you have been given – for the talents, wisdom, caring, and perspective you have to share.

Envy's entire perspective, method, and purpose are destroyed in the presence of gratitude. To insult yourself is to insult your Creator. To be envious is to lose sight of WHO made you. If you know who you are and what you are worth in the eyes of God, it absolutely flat-out does not matter how great or good anybody else may be. In fact, how good they are is wonderful too. And that's the Gospel truth!