

Envy

Genesis 37:11, 17b-28; Titus 3:1-11

Last Sunday night, *60 Minutes* ran a story called *Breaking Point*. The subject was bullying at school. Two years ago, Alex Wildman committed suicide because of this issue. During the program, one of the girls in his class said this:

There was a particular group of boys that didn't like that all the girls liked him, and they used to pick on him, like, "Why aren't you playing sports at lunchtime with us?"¹

And so the bullying started – internet, mobile, segregation, bashing, group violence. He changed schools and it started all over again. How could something as simple as that – popularity with the girls – end up in such violence and such tragedy? How does envy progress to that level?

What is Envy?

What is envy? As I pondered this, I found myself thinking of other words – jealousy, coveting and greed. And I wondered: What's the differences between these things? Do they all mean basically the same thing? Or are there important distinctions we should make between them? So, I went to my trusty *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* and discovered two definitions of envy:

- a feeling of discontent at seeing another's superiority, advantages or success
- desire for some advantage possessed by another.²

I then looked up *jealousy* and found it's

- vigilance in maintaining or guarding something.³

¹ From transcript on *60 Minutes* website.

² *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 141.

³ *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 218.

In other words, jealousy's about something I have and envy's about something I don't have. Now, to be fair, as I read other definitions, they didn't always stick to that. Some suggest jealousy's a form of envy. Some suggest the two terms can be used interchangeably these days. So it's not always straightforward.

I then looked up *greed*. According to the *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* it's an

- inordinate or rapacious desire, especially for food or wealth.⁴

I looked up *covet*. It's

- to desire (another's possessions) inordinately.⁵

They seem to like the word *inordinate!* Those two look pretty close to that second definition of envy.

But then I got to thinking that another of the seven deadly sins is *greed*. Do I get to preach the same sermon again when we get to it? Or is greed different from envy? As I dug a bit further, I discovered that envy – at least in terms of its definition as part of the seven deadly sins – is a bit more specific. In terms of our everyday usage, we may interchange it with *jealousy* and *greed*. But in terms of what we're looking at this morning, envy is:

sorrow or displeasure at the good of another that wants to see them deprived of that good.

It's not a question of seeing someone else's good and wishing we possessed it ourselves. Rather, it's wanting to bring them down to my level – or, preferably, below my level. It's not looking to do me good; it's looking to do them bad.

⁴ *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 180.

⁵ *Macquarie Budget Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1995) 102.

And so it's different from coveting. Coveting sees what someone else has and desires to make it yours. Envy sees what they have and causes you grief and wants to deprive them of what they've got. Coveting has empty hands and wants to fill them with someone else's stuff. Envy also has empty hands, but it wants to empty the hands of the person envied.

It's also different from *emulation*. Emulation is when we admire someone's character or ability and try to copy it. We think that a good and desirable thing and we work to develop ourselves in that same area. Their character or their ability inspires us to grow and do good and become what God wants us to be. That can easily develop into envy if our motivation is warped – if we turn it into a competitive thing – but emulation in itself is positive.

It's also different from what used to be called *nemesis*. Sometimes we see wicked people succeed. They build an empire on the basis of evil – violence, immorality, fear, corruption. Their empire spreads grief and sorrow and pain and more evil. It's not wrong to grieve over their success – unless you're grieving because you want to be in their place. It's right to pray for their downfall and rejoice when it happens. That's in the public good.

Now, having distinguished *envy* from *greed* and *coveting* and *jealousy*, I want to point out two things.

- First, I wouldn't want you to get the idea you're free to pursue those other things to your heart's content. Whether or not they're included in the definition of envy, they're still sins. They're their own particular forms of evil. We need to renounce them too. With greed, we'll come to it in due course in this

series. But for this morning we'll concentrate on envy. Some of this will be relevant to those other things – but some won't.

- Secondly, the Bible doesn't make that distinction when it uses the word. The Bible has several different words that are behind the word *envy* in our English translations. Sometimes the translators use *envy*; other times they use *jealousy*. So, when you read envy in your Bible, it's probably much broader than this "seven deadly sins" definition. By and large, we'll stick to that narrower definition this morning.

The Idolatry of Envy

What's the underlying issue with envy? When we looked at pride and anger, we talked about an underlying idolatry – the idolatry of focusing on self instead of God. So, it's probably no surprise to you if I suggest it's the same idolatry with envy. Envy arises because I want to worship self – I consider self the centre of my existence. I lack contentment in self. I want to elevate self. I want to attack other people who stand in the way of self being elevated.

With envy, self has a couple of half-truths it feeds into its idolatrous system. The first is we're all created identical. It doesn't put it in such a blunt fashion – because that's obviously not true. You only have to look at two people and you know there are differences that enable you to tell them apart. No – it puts it in terms of we're all created equal and then defines equal in ways that wrongly move it in the direction of identical.

Suppose you're a 19-year-old young lady. You look in

the mirror and you see "plain" – and quite likely you tell yourself you're ugly. You go to uni and look at other 19-year-old young ladies. You see "beautiful" or "stunning". You do the comparison. You start to feel cheated. You have a right to look just like them, don't you? Isn't everyone created equal?

Or suppose you're a 12-year-old boy. You watch the World Cup on TV. You think:

That looks good. I'd like to be part of that sometime. In 8 years, I'll be 20. I'll join a soccer team. I'll do some training. I'll have some fun. And I'll be in the Australian squad in 2018.

Everyone's created equal. Everyone has an equal chance. Put your tail down, work hard and you can achieve whatever dream you want.

I heard of a girl wanting to be a model. She expressed this dream in class. Apparently the Christian teacher tried to discourage this as a career path. Another student found this objectionable. She claimed: Teachers are supposed to encourage you to follow your dreams.

The second half-truth is that those who get to the top win – though I'm not sure this qualifies as even a half-truth. Everything's based on competition. These days, schools try to disguise it. They divide students into different ability groups, but they give them neutral names – like flowers or colours – as if the students don't know what's going on. Our society's based on getting to the top.

- Executives that get the most money.
- Sports stars who win the grand final.
- Actors who pull in the big bucks.
- Beauty queens who get the crown.

- Aiming to be *Prime Minister*.

People don't remember who comes second. The ones on top are paraded before us. We're told to copy these great ones. We're told: if you're not like them, then envy them. The media play a dangerous double game:

- They build them up as heroes with great successes.
- And then they cut them down to size with scandals.

This is the culture we grow up in. We absorb it without realising it. We assume it's normal – this is the way it's got to be. And so we join in the rat-race. We accept that definition of success. We believe the lie dangled before us – that anyone can get to the top. Choose your profession, work diligently and you can make it – you too can win in the race of life. You don't want to be a loser.

The lie's based on the assumption of the first half-truth: that we're all identical; that we all bring the same resources to the starting line. It's just not true. God makes each one of us unique. We look different. We have a different blend of gifts and abilities. We have different intellectual capabilities. And so it goes on. It doesn't matter how much I may want it; it doesn't matter how hard I work at it:

- I'm never going to become Miss Australia.
- Likewise, I can't win Australian Idol.
- Nor can I be a ruthless business tycoon.

That doesn't make me a failure.

But that's the message that keeps being pounded into us in so many different ways. We get sucked into the competition again and again. And when we don't win, we envy those who do. And there are so many ways not to win:

- Not coming top of the class.
- Not having the latest mobile.
- Not living in a big enough house.
- Not wearing designer labels.
- Not having good looks.
- Not belonging to the cool group.
- Not getting your dream job.
- Not having travelled the world.
- Not watching the latest movie.

It goes on and on and on as we compete with each other about everything. We work out our place on the pecking order and envy those above us. And we don't even stop to ask whether winning is the purpose of life.

The third lie is that we earn our sense of self-worth as a competitive prize. We endlessly compare ourselves with each other. It's part of the competition. If I think you're better than me, it lowers my sense of self-worth. I envy what you've got. I blame you for my sense of inferiority. I think your success causes my bad feelings. I think you doing well reduces my self-worth. So, if I can deprive you of what you've got, I'll lessen that sense of inferiority. I think it'll make me feel better. That's the crazy logic of envy.

That fails to play life according to God's values.

- How does God hand out different gifts and abilities at birth? Are they things you have to earn? Did you get your clever intellect or your good looks because God was pleased with something you did? Of course not.
- And why does God accept people into His kingdom? Is it because of who they are? Is it because of what they've done? It's in spite of what we've

done. God accepts us on the basis of His grace. It doesn't result from winning a competition.

Our sense of self-worth's supposed to come from being in right relationship with God. Winning the World Cup doesn't come into it. Owning a brick home's irrelevant.

How does envy work? It gets back at those we envy. Several Bible stories feature envy.

- Cain's sacrifice isn't accepted. What's he do? Does he find out what he did wrong? Does he try to fix it up? No. He goes out and does away with his brother – the guy whose sacrifice was accepted.
- Saul hears the women giving greater praise to David. What's he do? Does he rejoice that David's killing off his enemies? Does he go and attack some more Philistines to build up his own reputation? No. He tries to kill David.

But it doesn't have to be that dramatic. Have you ever heard someone start to praise another person and then throw in a "but"? Sometimes the person's being genuinely helpful – providing some constructive criticism to make a good thing even better. But often it's envy in disguise. The real message isn't in what's before the "but" – it's what comes after. And that's designed to cut the person down to size. It's designed to reduce the admiration factor; to take away from the glow of what's been achieved.

And what's the purpose of gossip? Isn't it to bring the other person down in the thoughts of your audience? Isn't it an effort to damage someone's reputation? When the sentence begins: "Have you heard about poor so-and-so", you know it's going to be negative. And why do our ears

get excited at such words? People's auditory radar can pick them up from the other side of the room while in deep conversation with someone else.

Envy rejoices in the downfall of the other person. It's pleased when they suffer some reversal of fortune. It thinks it's somehow deserved – simply because they had the audacity to outshine me. So, instead of weeping with those who weep, it's more likely to inwardly cheer at their demise – even rejoice that God's brought a certain level of justice to the situation that you feel vindicates you.

What's Envy Achieve

Does envy bring any benefit? It promises a boost to self-esteem. It promises a better place in the world; a higher standing in the competition. It promises a greater sense of self-satisfaction. But it fails to deliver. How can I be more satisfied with me by diminishing someone else? It doesn't make sense. I don't do anything to improve myself. I don't do anything to benefit other people. I don't achieve anything positive. I just want to deprive the other person. It's a perverse sin – I'm looking for joy in the failure of someone else. De Balzac states:

Envy is the most stupid of vices, for there is no single advantage to be gained from it.⁶

Perhaps you disagree with de Balzac. Maybe you'd like to point to the benefits arising from the competitive spirit. Humans are spurred on

- to outdo their rivals in sport;
- to gain the advantage over their competitors in the market place;
- to outshine their neighbours in their homes.

⁶ www.quotearden.com.

Surely there's great advantage in human progress spurred on by this competitive spirit which is behind envy. Two things.

- First, that's moved beyond envy as we've defined it for this morning.
- Secondly, are you sure these great human achievements actually count for anything. Sure they get people's names into record books and amass vast quantities of wealth, but do they impress God? Do they give you greater acceptance with God?

There's an interesting verse in Ecclesiastes 4:4. We don't have time to look at it in great detail this morning, nor time to examine its context. It says this:

And I saw that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

That too is a broader use of the word *envy*. The writer saw that so much of what people do and achieve stems from this base motive. Everyone thinks great progress is being made – things are getting bigger and better. But where's it all headed? What's the goal? How does it fit with the true purpose of life? How do we know winning's the aim of life? God says it isn't. And so, because it aims in the wrong direction, ultimately it's pointless – it's like chasing the wind.

Envy doesn't achieve anything positive for the envier, but it results in a lot of negatives. It rots the inner being. Proverbs 14:30

*A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.*

Someone has said:

Envy is the rabies of the heart and the cancer of the

soul.

Antisthenes wrote:

As iron is eaten by rust, so are the envious consumed by envy.⁷

James 3:16 says:

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

It leads to a restless and unsettled state. It results in inner mental and emotional and spiritual turmoil. It may even bring on physical illnesses. And it leads to other evil.

That causes damage to relationships. How can you relate properly and openly with someone if your inner desire is to see their downfall? It just doesn't work. You may put on a smile and a friendly face, but it's only hypocrisy.

- Gossip won't encourage friendship.
- Backbiting won't engender warmth.
- If you follow Saul's example and try to kill the person, it's unlikely they'll want to sit next to you at the church social.
- And if you go as far as Cain – well, there's really not much hope for the relationship then, is there?

And envy, along with other things, keeps people out of heaven. Galatians 5:19-21

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It isn't a trivial thing. It's something to take seriously.

⁷ www.quotearden.com.

What's the Antidote

What are we to do about envy? First, we need to recognise it for what it is. Some have suggested envy's the least-confessed sin. It's probably a bit hard to quantify whether that's true, but it highlights a perceived difficulty. It's a private sin that hides in the recesses of the mind. It grows in the solitude of an individual's thought life. It easily deceives us into thinking no one's hurt by it. But it does hurt others. It distracts us from helping the needy. It shows itself in an attitude of resentment and the failure to encourage. It slips out in the cutting remark or the juicy gossip. And it hurts the envier.

- It locks them into idolatry.
- It locks them into a false view of the world.

Secondly, we need to repent. Repentance means changing directions: we were following a path of envy; we now forsake that path and head back the other way – towards God. That's the case with all sin. Envy's no exception. That's what Titus 3 says. Before we became Christians, we were enslaved to all sorts of things – including envy. But God's saved us from that. He's washed us clean from such filth. He's put us on the path to eternal life.

Thirdly, we need to fill our heads with the truth of God's word and get rid of the lies.

- Get rid of the idea that life's about winning. God's not impressed by how much money you make. God won't think more of you because of all the toys you accumulate. He doesn't care if you achieve a Nobel Prize. What concerns Him is that you're faithful to Him – faithful in terms of character and faithful in terms of the gifts and abilities and opportunities He

gives you.

- Get rid of the idea that life's all about comparisons. That's simply a dead-end. We're not all created identical. You're different from others. You have different abilities, different aptitudes, different circumstances. God knows all that. He gave them to you. He doesn't expect you to develop gifts you don't have. He doesn't expect you to be better than someone whose God-given ability is greater. He expects you to be faithful.
- And so, accept yourself the way God made you. You may resent the fact you don't look like Megan Gale or you can't bend it like Beckham or you don't have access to Bill Gates' fortune. That resentment is sin. It's telling God you know better. Learn to be content with who you are – not the sinful bits, but the abilities He's given you and the situation He's placed you in. Learn to serve Him without comparing yourself with others.