

THE PROBLEM OF ENVY

PROVERBS: The Beginning and End of Wisdom

In 1984 there was a film came out called Amadeus. The film won 8 Academy Awards including the Best Picture that year, and it told the story of the competition between Mozart and fellow composer Antonio Salieri. Now the characters in the movie were real historical figures, but the storyline of the intersection of the lives of these two characters was fictional.

In the movie, Salieri is a composer with modest musical talent. He's not great, but he does have a solid reputation in Vienna as the court composer for Emperor Joseph. But then Mozart comes to Vienna. And Mozart is incredibly talented. He is a child prodigy.

But what Salieri quickly finds out is that Mozart, in addition to possessing these incredible musical gifts, is also an immature, crass, infantile, crude young man. While Salieri is totally captivated by Mozart's music, he is just as repulsed by Mozart the man.

Now as a boy growing up Salieri had been very religiously devout, and he'd prayed to God, *"Lord, make me a great composer. Make me famous throughout the world. And in return I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility every hour of my life."*

And up until he meets Mozart, Salieri feels like God has been pretty much coming through on his blessing. But when he sees Mozart, and this amazing God given talent, he begins to hate him and he begins to hate God. He sees it as unfair that God would give Mozart these talents that he really doesn't deserve. So he prays to God. And in his house he takes this crucifix off the wall and angrily throws it into the blazing fireplace, and then he says this to God, because he's absolutely furious at God, he says this:

"From now on you and I are enemies. Because you choose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy, and give me for my reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation." That is that musical incarnation. That God has gifted Mozart. He's saying, "God you've given Mozart the talent, and all I've got is the ability to recognize that talent."

And then he goes on... *"Because you are unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block you. I swear it, I will hinder and harm your creature on earth as far as I'm able. I will ruin your incarnation."*

The rest of the movie follows Salieri's plot to destroy Mozart. Eventually he succeeds and Mozart ends up dying broken in poverty. But what Salieri has done gnaws at him. He is tormented by what he did. For 32 years he feels tortured by the death he caused. Near the end of the movie, after a failed attempt to kill himself, Salieri laments: All these years "my music

grew fainter, all the time fainter, while his grew louder and louder. I was slowly watching myself become extinct.”

It's is a pitiful, horrible movie really. Depressing.

But what is it that destroyed Mozart and slowly destroyed Salieri for all those years? It was envy. It was envy that rotted Salieri's entire person until he was a shadow, barely a man at all.

Amadeus gives us a great picture of envy at its worst, but the reality is envy is something we all struggle with, something we all deal with.

We've been in a series in the book of Proverbs, looking at the topic of wisdom. How do we become wise people? What makes a wise person? And we've seen that a wise person is someone who is able to discern good from evil. And they do that in a way that the good is loved, cherished and embraced and evil is forsaken, avoided and hated.

And so far in our series we've seen that wisdom forsakes and avoids and hates sexual sin and embraced and loves purity. Wisdom forsakes foolish anger and cherishes patience and forgiveness. And this morning I want you to see from Proverbs that wisdom forsakes and avoids envy and embraces something wholly different. Wisdom deals with envy and embraces something completely different.

And I want to answer three questions about envy this morning. How do you know you need to deal with envy in your life? Why do you need to deal with your envy? And how do you deal with your envy?

1. How do you know you need to deal with envy in your life?

Alright, well here's the test. Take two fingers and put them together. Now put them up to the side of your neck, just underneath your jaw....

Envy is part of our sinful nature. And we see envy played out on the pages of Scripture from Cain and Abel, to Saul and David all the way to Jesus' disciples in the New Testament. So the truth is that if you are breathing you are probably dealing on some level with envy.

And, I don't think I need to make the argument that the Bible is clear in commanding us not to envy. But this is important because there are a lot of psychologists and thinkers out there that would say a little envy is a good thing. It gives you motivation to improve your life.

But look at the verses in Proverbs alone:

23:17 - Let not your heart envy sinners...

24:1 - Be not envious of evil men

24:19 - Fret not yourself because of evil doers, and be not envious of the wicked...

I think you know that envy isn't something God thinks is good, that you should have as a part of your life.

But how do you know envy is *really* a problem for you? That envy is something you really are struggling with? How do you recognize it in your life?

Turn with me to Psalm 73. This psalm is really a case study in envy. And we're going to touch back to it a few times this morning. We find a person here that is really in the midst of this struggle with envy. And he begins the Psalm by lamenting his state, this struggle that he's in.

Look at v. 2. "My feet had almost stumbled," he says, "my feet had nearly slipped." Why? "Because I was envious of the arrogant." He had fallen into folly because of envy. But how did he know it was envy? What did it look like? He goes on to tell us...

"For I was envious of the arrogant *when I saw their prosperity.*" Do you see what was happening? He's looking around at other people. He's looking around his neighborhood, he's talking to his co-workers, he's on Facebook and Pinterest, and he's looking at these other people's lives, and he is looking at his own life, and he's consumed with envy for how things are in other people's lives.

And look at what follows beginning in verse 4. He looks at others, at these different people in these different spheres of his life and he says, "their bodies are sleek," they are good looking, "they are not stricken," they are healthy, "they are not in trouble," life is easy for them, "always at ease, they increase in riches," they've got tons of money and don't even seem to have to work! These are the observations he's making, and there are these intense feelings welling up in him when he sees the prosperity of others.

So how do you know you are dealing with envy in *your* life?

Well, here is the first sign of envy. *You want somebody else's life.* That's what envy is, it's looking at a person or people around you and wanting their life.

You want what they have. You want their stuff, you want their career, you want their lifestyle, you want their gifts, you want their status in society, you want people to talk about you the way they talk about them, you want their family, children like they have, a spouse like they have, you want their life. That's the first thing. You want somebody else's life.

But envy is more than that. You see, technically that is coveting, which is a form of envy, but envy is more than that.

Jonathan Edwards, who was probably America's greatest theologian, he lived in the 18th century, and in his famous sermon on envy he says that envy is a "dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others. Envy is being dissatisfied and opposed to other's happiness and prosperity. So wanting someone else's life, that is the dissatisfaction, but there is more. Do you see that envy is both wanting somebody else's life, but it's also not wanting them to have it. And you can hear that in the tone of the psalmist. There is an irritation, an exasperation in his voice. Not only does he want their life, he hates them for having it.

So how do you know you're dealing with envy? Well first, you want somebody else's life. But second, you don't want them to have it. You resent them for having it.

This is where envy begins to show its ugliness. You see, when you're dealing with envy in your life, then when other's lives are better than yours, when things are just going better for them than they are going for you, instead of rejoicing in the good that they have, you weep and despair over the fact that you don't have it. You see people that have it better than you, or you see people that are better than you - they're a better businessman, better student, a better mom, more spiritually mature than you... and you resent it. It makes you angry. You hate it and you start to hate them.

Envy weeps when others rejoice. But even worse envy rejoices when others weep. What do I mean by that? Envy doesn't just want to get what others have, it wants to destroy what they have. It wants to see the object of its envy fail.

There's a great story about a certain store owner who was visited by an angel. The angel offered him a wish that would give him anything he wanted, but there was one condition. His rival, who he envied intensely, would receive double whatever wish was granted. Without even hesitating, the envious man wished to be blind in one eye.

If you're dealing with envy you don't just want what other's have, you want to *them* not to have. You want to bring them down. You want to destroy what they have. This was Salieri right? He knew he could never have Mozart's gifts, so his only consolation was to destroy them. There's a line from the film where Salieri whispers about Mozart, "Your defeat is my success." And that is the attitude of envy.

Well, you might say, *I'm no Salieri*. My envy is not nearly that bad. And you may be right, but let me ask you — what do you feel when your coworker who has been at the company far shorter than you ends up getting the promotion you wanted? Or what do you feel when you're on Facebook and you see the new house and exotic vacations, the lifestyle of your high school classmate, who nearly flunked out while you were at the top of your class? Or when you see

that woman who is younger than you getting married while you're still single? Or when you see that family whose teenage kids seem perfect while yours are rebelling? Do rejoice in others' prosperity or do you rejoice in the thought of their failure? Do you begrudge them what they have? Do you resent them?

How do you know you're dealing with envy? You want what others have, you want their life, but more than that you don't want them to have it, you want to take them down a notch.

Well, that's great, but why do you need to deal with your envy? I mean it seems that envy isn't really that serious. If envy stays inside of you it's sort of a victimless sin isn't it? It doesn't seem to bother anyone, so why do you need to deal with it? Well, I have four reasons for you:

First you need to deal with it, because envy is so hidden. Envy is incredibly hidden in your life. I said that about anger last week, but envy is even worse. And it's hidden because you don't want to admit it. Nothing in you wants to admit that envy is a problem for you. Do you know why?

Every other sin that we talk about has some inherent quality that in our folly we can be proud of. Think about anger for a second. There is a certain power to anger, admitting we have an anger problem isn't shameful. We can see sort of a "positive" side to it. Or greed - same thing, we can spin it positively for ourselves. But envy's not like that.

Really there isn't a more petty, small-minded, demeaning, humiliating problem than envy. An author named Joseph Epstein wrote a book on envy, completely secular book, but he says this: "Other sins, though they all have the disapproval of religion, do not so thoroughly or deeply demean, diminish, and disqualify a person as envy. But you see, the stigma of envy is its enormous pettiness." Envy is absolutely humiliating because look what it says about you. It says that you see yourself as pitifully less than other people and you want to destroy them for it.

So because it is so hidden you really need to take a deep and honest look into your life to see if envy is lurking there, because it is serious. Proverbs says that envy makes the bones rot. Envy will slowly eat you up if you let it.

So think of some of the places you have issues with other people. Where you don't know what it is, but there is just something about another person in your life that just irritates you, they just get under your skin. Might that be envy? When someone else gets the very thing

you want but don't have, that raise, that car, that healthy marriage... look deep inside yourself - is envy lurking there? Some of you live life with a constant self-pity. You're not happy with the way your life is going. You're always feeling sorry for yourself, grumpy about everything in your life. Dig deep and take a look if that might be a pervasive kind of envy that is eating away at your life.

So that's first, you need to deal with envy because it's incredibly serious, but it's also incredibly hidden.

Second you need to deal with envy in your life because envy steals your joy. There is nothing enjoyable about envy. Compare it to other sins. When you give in to anger, or lust, or greed, there is some pleasure no matter how momentary, no matter how short term, there is some pleasure in indulging in the sin itself. But with envy there is no pleasure in indulging it. Envy only finds pleasure in its consequences. The pleasure is in the actual tearing down of the object of your envy. The pleasure is in making negative comments about that person or gossiping about them, but the act of envy itself does nothing. And not only is it joyless in and of itself, but it totally drains the joy out of your life.

Envy completely robs you of the enjoyment of what you already have. You can't even see the good in your life, you're blinded to it. All of us compare. We're constantly comparing ourselves to others. That's one of our problems. But envy takes comparison to a new level. And so envy steals the joy out of your life because nothing you have is ever good enough. Your job, your body, your friendships, your interior decorating skills - none of them are good enough. There's always someone who has it better. And my goodness does social media ever give opportunity for this to explode in your life. Facebook is comparison on steroids. So you can't find joy in what you have, in the blessings in your life, at all. You try to fake it by sending out happy Facebook updates with everything all the great things you did that day. You try to post pictures of all the great things in your life, but really you're just trying to convince yourself how great they are. Envy has robbed you of authentic joy. And what ends up happening is you become a negative, cynical, joyless person. Envy steals your joy.

And so you need to deal with the folly of envy because once it steals your joy, it will end up stealing your relationships. Cornelius Plantinga, puts it this way. He says that, "wherever we find envy, we find the wreckage of human and Christian community." Why?

It's because envy is in opposition to how God has designed community to operate. In Romans 12 Paul gives the marks of Christian community - and here's what he says starting in verse 15 - 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.' What does envy do? It

weeps when others rejoice and rejoices when others weep. It's totally opposite, completely upside down to God's wise design for life in relationship!

There is nothing that breeds the stuff that destroys community like envy. Gossip, backbiting, slander... envy is the air these things breathe. Listen to Cornelius Plantinga again:

"The envier gossips. He saves up *bad* news about others and passes it around like an appetizer at happy hour. The envier grumbles. He murmurs. He complains that all the wrong people are getting ahead. Spite, bitterness, discord which undoes all friendships, accusation - all these things flow from envy and together turn friendship and good fellowship into shambles." So you need to deal with envy because it steals your joy and it will steal your relationships.

But lastly it steals your worship. At its core envy is idolatry. You see, God made us for himself. He made us to display his greatness, his worth through lives that make him central. And it's only when we live in line with that purpose that we experience real joy. Envy robs us of the purpose God created us for by substituting gifts for the Giver. Envy steals our worship because envy makes something more central to our joy and satisfaction than God himself.

Look at how you respond when other people get things you want. You know there are good things to want. **Christianity is different than Buddhism which says to kill all desire because desire only leads to suffering.** It's not inherently bad to want to be married or to want to have good kids, or to want a job that you love. But how you respond when you don't get what you want and someone else does. That will be a huge indicator of whether or not envy is stealing your worship. If you get irritated and angry and bitter it reveals that envy has stolen your worship of God and transferred it to the stuff of life. You need to deal with your envy because it's incredibly hidden. You need to deal with it because it's stealing your joy, it's stealing your relationships, and it's stealing worship that belongs to God.

But how do you deal with it? How do you deal with the hold that envy has on your life?

Well, there are two things that Proverbs gives us and they are both right here in these two verses we have as our central text this morning. Let's look at the first.

Pr. 23:17 *"Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day..."*

Here is the alternative to envy. Here is the remedy for your envy. Continue in the fear of the Lord. Well, what is the fear of the Lord? We have to understand this, because you'll remember that this concept is central to the entire book of Proverbs. Where is it that wisdom begins? Prov. 1:7 tells us that it is with the fear of the Lord. If you want to be wise in anything,

whether it relates to sexual sin, or anger or envy, you need to understand and walk in the fear of the Lord. So what is it?

Well, when the Bible talks about fearing the Lord it isn't talking about being scared. It's not talking about running and hiding in terror. It is talking about living life with a god-centered orientation. The great saints of old used to talk about this as living life *Coram Deo*, which literally means "in the presence of God." To fear the Lord means to live *Coram Deo*, in God's presence, before his face, under his authority and for his glory.

So this fear of Lord, this life *Coram Deo*, is the only thing that makes us wise. Wisdom doesn't come from a program. We can't institute daily self-affirmation that will wean us off of envy. Our sin goes too deep. It's this life lived in the fear of the Lord, under God's authority, before his face that transforms us.

And the psalmist knew this. Go back to our case study in Psalm 73. Look at v. 16-17. "*But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.*" Envy was too much for him. He couldn't get a handle on the problems of his own heart. He couldn't change himself. He was exasperated. Later on in the psalm in v. 22, he recognizes that he was brutish and ignorant, like a beast toward God. But something changed all that - look at v. 17 - he couldn't understand himself, he couldn't get a handle on his envy... "*until I went into the sanctuary of God.*"

You see for the psalmist, under the Old Covenant to live life *Coram Deo*, in the presence of God you had to go to a place. To the sanctuary. The sanctuary was in the temple, it was where you went to meet with God. Going to the sanctuary was putting yourself under his authority and before his presence. The sanctuary was where God's presence dwelt with his people.

So how does this relate to how you deal with your envy? Well, to deal with it, Proverbs is saying you need to live life *Coram Deo*. Like the psalmist you need to go to the sanctuary. But how do you do that?

When Jesus came to earth he said something no first-century Jew would ever have expected. Instead of pointing to the temple, instead of pointing to the sanctuary as the place to meet with God, as the place to live in his presence, Jesus pointed to himself. Instead of saying "there is the sanctuary", he said I am the sanctuary. He was saying if you want to live *Coram Deo*, in God's presence, under God's authority, for God's glory, you have to come to him. He is the place you go to meet with God. To come to him is to fear the Lord. He is the beginning of wisdom.

If you want to wake up from envy you have to go before Jesus' face and look at him. Jonathan Edwards in that sermon I mentioned earlier said this profound thing. He said to deal

with envy in your life you need to think about what Jesus has done for you. In all the folly of your envy, in the middle of all its ugliness, Jesus came, and in the most unenvious way, instead of grasping at what he felt like he deserved, he gave away everything. Though he deserved the highest seat, he willingly took the lowest. He saw nothing as too much to be done for us, or as too great or good to be given to us. You see we envy and begrudge other people what they have, but Jesus didn't begrudge us anything. Instead he lavishly and generously gave us everything. Phil. 2 gives us this picture of the Triune godhead, this eternal community of God, where there has never existed any envy. Jesus didn't envy the Father, he didn't envy the Holy Spirit for their roles in the Trinity. He didn't consider equality with God something to be grabbed at, but instead made himself nothing, become obedient even to death on a cross.

Now when you see that, when that hits you, when you see the generosity and lavishness of Jesus love for you, and when that becomes the center of your life. When you are able to say like the psalmist did *Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you, my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* What does that do to your envy? It crushes it. When put yourself *Coram Deo*, before the love of Jesus, it disarms all of your envy and transforms you into a person that rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. Someone who is lavishly generous like Jesus.

But there is a second thing that deals with the envy in your life. Look at v. 17-18 again. *"Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off."* How do you deal with envy? You need to look ahead. You need to see your hope.

Jesus death on the cross shows you his unenvious love toward you, but his resurrection shows you even more. It shows you that this earth isn't all there is. There is something more that awaits you. Jesus is coming back again to right every wrong, to set everything the way it should be, to make all things new. Do you see what this does for you?

Envy is so petty. Your eyes are so focused down here, on the smallest things. Take your eyes and lift them up. If you are in Christ, then one day you are going to dwell forever with Jesus in the new heavens and new earth. You are going to rule and reign with him and enjoy the pleasures of his kingdom forever. Doesn't that free you from the pettiness of envy? What do the pleasures of this world matter when we have that to look forward to?

I shared earlier that near the end of the movie *Amadeus* there is a scene where Salieri is lamenting the 32 years he has lived tortured under his envy of Mozart. And he says this: "All

these years my music grew fainter, all the time fainter, while his grew louder and louder. I was slowly watching myself become extinct." Envy rots your bones. It brings about your extinction.

But the gospel wakes us up. It brings us to life. And there's a wonderful irony for us in Salieri's words. You see, as God deals with envy in your life the result should be that your own music should grow fainter and fainter as your eyes move off yourself. And as that happens God's song is the music that grows ever louder into eternity - where we'll experience the exact opposite of extinction - the life the is life eternal.