

Lord, Am I Envious?

Rich Nathan

July 29 & 30, 2017

Silent Killers

1 Samuel 18:5-11, 17

In the early Middle Ages, monks in the Eastern church put together a list that became known as the Seven Deadly Sins. As they looked into their own hearts and saw their own weaknesses, they said that all of the sins in their lives came from these seven deadly sins. The seven deadly sins were like the trunk of a tree and all the rest of our sins were like the branches.

If you examine the list of the Seven Deadly Sins – many of the sins like lust and gluttony, greed and sloth - contain some element of fun. For example, think about the deadly sin of gluttony. Gluttony suggests a party. “I can’t believe how much I ate at Thanksgiving! Not only did I eat two heaping portions of turkey and stuffing and vegetables and potatoes, but I ate half a pie!” People love talking about the food they’ve eaten. In the last 15 years or so, folks even label themselves “foodies”.

Many of the so-called Seven Deadly Sins contain some element of fun in them. Certainly, lust does. Lust along with greed is what drives a lot of American culture. The most popular TV shows, movies, magazines, the music business, companies and marketing and consumerism – it’s lust and greed. Lust and greed have become widely admired. “Well, that guy must be really, really smart. After all, he has an enormous yacht. He slept with x number of women. He’s a billionaire. He must be a genius.”

The deadly sin of sloth is turned into someone who knows how to find the best vacation spot where you can lounge around in the spa all day long. Henry Fairlie wrote a wonderful book called *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*. In his book he contrasts envy with the other sins.

“It has been said that envy is the one deadly sin to which no one readily confesses. It seems to be the nastiest, the grimmest, the meanest. Sneering, sly, vicious. The face of envy is never lovely. It is never even faintly pleasant... Although all the deadly sins are morbid and self-destroying... most of the others provide at least some gratification in their early stages. But there is no gratification for envy, nothing it can ever enjoy. Its appetite never ceases, yet its only satisfaction is endless self-torment. It has the ugliness of a trapped rat that has gnawed its own feet in its efforts to escape.”

What a picture of envy: like a trapped rat that has gnawed its own feet off. Envy is the sin that eats you up on the inside.

We live in an age of envy. I read a really fascinating study of social media, simply titled

“Seeing Everyone else’s Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms.”

Isn’t that what social media is? We just watch everyone else’s highlight reels. Here’s our family smiling on the beach. Of course, I don’t show you a picture of our family fighting in the car on the way to the beach. I don’t show you a picture of the bad sunburn I got at the beach. Here’s my best picture of my incredibly beautiful family standing in perfect sunlight at the beach. Most of social media is highlight reels.

People who study this kind of thing say that if you spend a lot of time on social media, what you are going to be stirring in your heart are feelings of envy. Study after study shows that our envy spikes with our use of social sharing sites. People that you know take more luxurious vacations than you do, their relationships are closer and more loving than yours. Their children are better behaved and cuter. A University of Michigan study released last August found that the more people use Facebook, the worse they feel about their own lives.

Envy shows up in our entertainment. Just look at Disney cartoons. I think of the Queen from Snow White. You know the story of Snow White. She’s a princess who is forced into servitude by her envious stepmother, the Queen. The Queen stares at herself in the mirror every day asking the mirror who was the fairest of them all. One day the mirror informs the Queen that Snow White is now the fairest of them all. In a jealous rage, the Queen can’t bear the fact that someone is prettier than her so she plots to get rid of Snow White.

More recently, I think of the *Lion King* and Scar, the jealous brother, who wants to be king of Pride Rock. Scar murders his brother. He tries to murder his nephew because he’s envious of him. Envy is everywhere in our culture and drives so much of our behavior.

And yet, envy is the one sin that is hardest to detect in ourselves. As I was putting this message together, I thought, “Lord, I am not aware of envy being a problem in my life. I rarely consciously compare myself to other people. I really love my life. I love my wife. I love my kids and grandkids. I love what I get to do every day. I love what God has done in the church.” I thought, “Lord, I’m not really aware of being envious.” And then I called my mother. I called her for her birthday. My mom just celebrated her 90th birthday. She took about 10 minutes to tell me about the wonderful gift that my sister got her for her birthday. Apparently, my sister bought her a meal at a restaurant and Mom said, “Richie, the food was so incredible! We had chicken cacciatore and there was so much food that we had to pack it up and we ate it for two more days. And there

was a cheesecake and there was a rose for me.” And she went on and on talking about this incredible dinner that my sister bought for her.

Now, the longer I listened to my mother talking about how incredible my sister’s gift was, the more I found myself vaguely annoyed. So I asked myself, why was I getting annoyed at hearing someone else praised? Could it be envy?

Over the course of the summer, we’ve been doing a series titled “Silent Killers”. Things that if left unchecked will kill our souls, kill our emotions, kill our joy. Today, because envy is so difficult to detect in ourselves, because envy is the one sin that almost no one confesses to, I’ve called my message, “Lord, Am I Envious?”

Let’s pray.


1 Samuel 18:5-11, 17

⁵Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul’s officers as well.

⁶When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. ⁷As they danced, they sang:

“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands.”

⁸Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” ⁹And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.

¹⁰The next day an evil  spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand ¹¹and he hurled it, saying to himself, “I’ll pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

¹⁷Saul said to David, “Here is my older daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the LORD.” For Saul said to himself, “I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!”

There are many stories about envy in the Bible. The first use of the word “sin” in the Bible shows up in Genesis 4 and has to do with Cain, who envied the favor that his brother Abel had from God. But whether it’s Cain and Abel or two brothers, Jacob and Esau, or Joseph and his brothers or Leah and Rachel, we see the sin of envy cropping up over and over again in the Bible – destroying relationships, making people miserable, and, in some cases, resulting in violence and even in murder.

Now, let me give a little background to the text that we just read from 1 Samuel 18. Because envy is so difficult to detect in our own lives, I want to hold before you a picture of what envy looks like in the life of someone else – a man by the name of King Saul. Maybe if we see it in someone else, we'll say, "You know, I do that! I sometimes feel that way. Lord, am I envious?"

To give you a little background, the date when this incident took place is somewhere before 1000 BC. Saul was the first king of Israel. King David was his immediate successor. We read this in verse 6:

1 Samuel 18:6

⁶When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres.

This is a fairly common and historically accurate scene of the way celebrations of military victories happened in the Ancient World. In ancient celebrations of military victories, the troops would come home from battle and there would be these enormous parades led by women. You read about these parades in a half dozen places in the Old Testament and in other ancient literature. The women would come out and lead a procession, often led by women dancers and singers. Some would be playing the tambourine. And they would be essentially shouting, "Saul, Saul, he's ok, but David's better in every way!" Only they did it with a little more inspiration.

We read in verses 7-9:

1 Samuel 18:7-9

⁷As they danced, they sang:

"Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands."

⁸Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" ⁹And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.

Because envy is so hard to spot in ourselves, let me give you four ways to detect envy.

Envy detected

The first is:

Envy blinds

Saul it says in v. 9:

1 Samuel 18:9

⁹And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.

Here's what we read in Mark:

Mark 7:21-22

²¹For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²²adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

The word envy here in Mark 7:22 is actually a translation of two Greek words:

Ophthalmos = Eye

From which we get our word “Ophthalmologist”.

Ponaros = Evil

Being envious of someone in the ancient world was literally giving them the “evil eye”. The picture of envy in ancient paintings are eyes formed into narrow slits. Dante in his *Divine Comedy* has the envious laboring with their eyelids sewn shut with wire. Envy blinds us to the bigger picture. When we are envious, another person is reduced down to the one quality, the one possession, the one relationship, the one success that we crave, that we want.

With envy, we hold up a microscope as we look at another person, narrowing our field of vision to this one thing. This other person has the baby that we want. This other person has the job that we want. This other person has the shiny new convertible or the house or the looks or the romantic partner or the money or the promotion or the praise that we want. We don't look at this other person as a whole human being. We don't say, “Here is someone made in the image of God. Here is a person who is someone like myself with worries, anxieties, burdens. Someone who may have worked really hard to get where they are at. Here is someone upon whom God has bestowed grace. We don't see another person in all that they are when we envy them. Envy blinds us to another's full humanity.

All of their struggles, all of their joys, all that they've done – we reduce them down by looking through a microscope to the one thing they have which we want. That's what Saul did with David. He looked at David through a microscope with an evil eye.

Think about it, Saul was the king. Saul had everything. He had all the power. He had a palace. He had virtually everything a man could ever want. But he didn't have one thing – the praise of these women. David is reduced down to someone who gets more praise than me.

Envy blinds. And...

Envy compares

We almost always are envious of someone who is very much like us but who is a few steps ahead of us in some area. We almost always are envious of a person who is near to us, not someone who is far away from us. So, envy is almost always directed toward someone whose situation in life is nearly the same as ours. They are in the same business. They are in the same class. They have similar giftings. They occupy a similar position. If you look at the people who folks envy, it's almost never people who are radically different than them.

Sprinters don't envy swimmers. They envy another sprinter who is a little faster than they are. Musicians don't envy plumbers. They envy other musicians who are a little more popular than they are.

And envy doesn't just show up out there in the world. People struggle with envy here in the church. Singers on the worship team don't typically struggle with the success of accountants or counselors or teachers. Who is it that members of the worship team are going to struggle with if they are going to be envious? They are going to struggle with other singers. "Why does she get to sing and I don't? Why does he get to lead and I don't?"

A person who runs a business is not going to be envious of someone in an entirely different line of work. If you run a restaurant, you are not going to be envious of the local dentist, but you may be envious of the restaurant owner whose restaurant is more crowded and whose restaurant is getting all the press.

Parents, have you ever struggled as you listen to other parents go on and on about how gifted their particular child is? "Why, my child could identify all the colors on the color wheel when he was 18 months. Not just the primary colors, the secondary colors as well! My child rides her tricycle around our little cul-de-sac and she's not even two years old. But she's so athletic! You know – she was walking at seven months."

Now, if you don't have a child or you don't have a child at the age of another parent's child or you don't struggle with envy, then you can thoroughly enjoy learning about the gifted child's latest exploits. "My child just finished Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in the original Russian. It was a little challenging because he had other

middle school projects to complete.” Now, your child’s greatest gift is shoving a crayon up their nose and sneezing it out or burping the National Anthem, if your child not only can’t read *The Brothers Karamazov* in Russian but is struggling to read at all, if your preschooler can not only not recognize their shapes, but every time you give them a particular shape they shove it into their mouth and try to swallow it, you might struggle with envy.

Envy blinds us. Envy compares. And here’s the third thing,

Envy feels self-diminishing

Here’s what we read in verse 8:

1 Samuel 18:8

“Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?”

The thousands that Saul slain is nothing in his eyes anymore because David was credited with more. “Yes, I got an A on the exam, but it doesn’t feel that great because someone else got an A+.” “Yes, I’m a millionaire, but what is that when I’m around a billionaire?”

Envy feels self-diminishing. It’s not envy unless you feel about another person that their success diminishes me. Envy says, “The fact that they’re doing well makes me feel small. It makes me feel less than.” You see, we can look at someone who is more successful than us and desire to emulate them. Back in the 1990’s there was an incredibly successful ad campaign about Michael Jordan that revolved around the slogan, “Be like Mike.”

Michael Jordan was so successful that lots of athletes who grew up in the 1990’s were inspired by that ad to be like Mike. To work really hard. To emulate Michael Jordan’s competitiveness, his toughness. Michael Phelps, the great Olympic swimmer, said that growing up in the 90’s, those commercials drove him on. He wanted to be like Mike – one day to be a great success. Emulation is not envy. It’s only envy when you compare yourself to someone else and that comparison causes you to belittle yourself. “Look at me in comparison to them. I am so ugly. I am so fat. I am so dumb. Their success diminishes me. Because I see them as being worth more, I must be worth less. Because they have succeeded, I have failed!”

Envy blinds us. Envy compares. Envy feels self-diminishing. And here’s the fourth and last thing:

Envy destroys

Look at verses 10 and 17:

1 Samuel 18:10, 17

¹⁰The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand ¹¹and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

¹⁷Saul said to David, "Here is my older daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the LORD." For Saul said to himself, "I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!"

Saul out of envy wanted to kill David. And if Saul couldn't kill David, he would delegate the murder to someone else. Envy wants to kill another person. The Bible says that it was out of envy that the Pharisees sought to murder Jesus. It was because of envy that Cain killed his brother, Abel. And it was out of envy that the brothers of Joseph were going to murder Joseph. The way that envy is manifested so that we really see it in our lives is that envy always seeks to destroy the object of our envy.

Now, we may not want to physically murder that person. But we do want to take them down a peg. So we destroy them through gossip by chipping away at their reputation. We do that by explaining away their success or reminding people of their flaws. "Her child may be gifted, but, you know, she drills him every day with flashcards. I'm not sure that's a good way to raise a child. I think children ought to be free to play and stuff crayons up their noses and burp the National Anthem." In other words, "The reason that child is succeeding is because that mother is cheating." Yes, he may be incredibly successful in business doing way better than you're doing, but it's important for you to point out that his child is struggling with drugs. We need to take that other person down a few pegs. Or we tell a joke at their expense.

Envy destroys! Envy destroys teamwork. It damages relationships. It undermines workplaces. Envy disrupts friendships. It ultimately will destroy not only our own success, but envy can destroy our own health as well. When we become obsessed with someone else's success, our own self-respect suffers. We can neglect or even sabotage our own performance when we envy.

Envy destroys! Researchers tell us that envy can lead to health problems such as infections, cardio-vascular diseases and cancers. Researchers also tell us that mental

health problems like depression, anxiety and insomnia can result from envy. We are literally self-consumed, self-destroyed by envy.

You know, for me, the great test for whether we envy someone or not is found in Romans 12:

Romans 12:15

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

If you can freely rejoice with those who rejoice and freely mourn with those who mourn, your heart is free from envy and bitterness toward someone else. If you are envious toward someone else and they tell a good joke and everyone else laughs but you, you know you've got a problem with them. Maybe it's envy! Or if another person suffers some loss, some defeat, some public embarrassment, some failure and instead of mourning with them you secretly rejoice, then you may be struggling with envy. Friend, do you really "rejoice with those who rejoice and more with those who mourn?"

Envy is such a destructive thing! It destroys relationships and trust. It destroys organizations and churches. Envy destroys families. It destroys our joy and, indeed, our own health. So, how do we get rid of envy? What's the cure?

Envy healed

The healing of envy is really rooted in two very basic things. The first is:

Bask in God's love

You see, if you know that you are supremely valued by the only one whose opinion really matters, if you allow your personal identity to be formed, not by what everyone else is saying, not by the relative level of accolades or achievements you have versus someone else. If you allow your identity to be formed by what the Judge of All, your Creator, your Maker, your Lover, your Father in Heaven says about you and you soak in that you'll be freed from envy. If you soak in verses like 1 John 3:1-2

1 John 3:1-2

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Verses like this can be a protective wall around our hearts, keeping us from envying. Friend, do you spend any time soaking in the love of God? Do you spend any time

reflecting at all, not on what others think of you, not what the boss says about you or what your parents think or someone at work or someone in your school or even what you think of yourself. Do you spend any time ever reflecting on what God thinks of you? God, the Supreme Being, the one who made us and to whom we will one day give account. Do you spend any time simply basking, soaking, bathing in God's love? God's love is a cure for envy. Here's the second cure:

Give thanks for God's blessings

Thankfulness will kill envy. Psalm 103 says:

Psalm 103:2
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—

I love the statement from the great 19th century evangelist, D.L. Moody. He said,

"If you can't remember all God's benefits, just don't forget them all."

The psalmist says,

Psalm 103:2
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—

If you want to deal with envy in your life, forget not all his benefits. We often approach God with a kind of "what have you done for me lately"? We become obsessed with the thing that we don't have, the prayer that's gone unanswered, the friend that remains unhealed, and the thing we have not achieved. And we look at all the things someone else has, the prayers they've gotten answered, the things they've achieved.

Slide Psalm 103:2
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—

Sometimes we're simply too busy to pause and to look up to God to say thank you. For what? How about your body? The fact that your heart still works. That your organs work. That your hands can move. If you can hear, that you hear. If you can see, that you see. Thank God for the material gifts that he gives us, like our bodies. The cup of coffee you drank this morning. A good night's sleep in a bed. The TV that you watch. The roof you have over your head. Thank him not just for the material gifts, but for the mental gifts that you possess. Your ability to think. If you can read for your education. Thank God for your spiritual blessings. For church and Bibles and worship and Christian

brothers and sisters and small groups and preaching and kindness and service and counseling and prayer and prophecy and relationship.

Let me ask you: do you ever take time to thank God for all his benefits? Have you ever journaled and written down all the things that God has given you? I do that as a spiritual exercise every so often. I just take 10 minutes and write as fast as I can everything that I can think of that God has given me. And I say, “Thank you, God! Because none of those things have to be. It’s all grace!” Sometimes, we not only need to say thank you to God, but we need to write a thank you letter to someone else who has made a difference in our lives.

Basking in God’s love and giving thanks for God’s gifts will kill envy. The Lord wants to set each of us free. He wants our hearts to be liberated from Silent Killers – anxiety, bitterness, shame. And God wants to set us free from envy!

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I. Envy detected

A. Envy blinds

B. Envy compares

C. Envy feels self-diminishing

D. Envy destroys

II. Envy healed

A. Bask in God's love

B. Give thanks for God's blessings