

The evil of ENVY James Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Two weekends ago was the most exciting weekend of my life thus far. Kay and I woke up one morning on Saturday morning and we went to a rock at Freshwater Beach and I proposed to her and she said yes.

It was a wonderful Saturday morning. Thank you. Thank you. Now, I didn't necessarily put a lot of effort into the proposal itself. It was pretty easy. I had it all planned out pretty much the night before. But something I did put a lot of effort into and did a lot of work for was trying to find the right engagement ring for Katie. You know, I wanted her to have the best ring I could afford.

And so I did so much research into the different rings, into the different diamonds you could have, into the colour, the clarity, the cut of the diamond and how each worked in its favour to produce a very wonderful sparkle and such.

And so I worked out how I could get the best diamond for the best value for my wonderful-to-be fiancée. But something I noticed myself doing on the day itself after I proposed, after I gave Katie the ring, was when we went back to celebrate with friends and family, I began to compare the ring I had given her to the rings that my other friends had given to their fiancés and their wives.

[1 : 16] And I began to get a little bit envious as I looked at some of their rings and saw that perhaps their ring, their diamond, was perhaps a little bit bigger than what I gave Katie. Katie, it was a bit shinier, a bit brighter, seemed to be a better cut than what I had given Katie.

And it made me really envious in the moment. I got really bitter and resentful to my own friends in that moment because they had given something far better than what I had given Katie.

It made me think, I should have gone out and gone all out, got the biggest rock I could have afforded, got the best diamond I could have gotten. In that moment, envy had consumed me.

Now, Katie and I are very happy with the ring and we're very excited to get married, so just to clarify that. But the temptation of envy can be all too easy to fall into straight away.

It was only for a moment that I felt that temptation. But in that moment, envy pretty much had consumed me. It's so easy and it's so dangerous. It's something that we are all at risk of every single day at every single moment of our life, which is why this evening we are continuing our series looking at wisdom in the book of Proverbs and particularly looking at the evil of envy.

[2 : 30] And so to begin, I want to unpack why evil is, so why envy is so evil. And there are two conditions that envy thrives on in our life in this world. Firstly, we envy those we identify with.

And secondly, we envy these people in the area we value the most. Now, these effects can have minor or major consequences for us in our life.

So, for example, I struggled with envy when I saw the engagement rings my mates had bought for their girlfriends and fiancés, so people I identified with. And it made me bitter in the moment because it made me feel less or less of a person because they had outdone me and such.

Now, that's a minor consequence, right? It was a moment and then it passed and I got over it.

However, in the Bible, there are instances where someone's envy has had major consequences for themselves and for other people in their life.

We already know the story of Joseph and his brothers that Steve mentioned last week. Joseph's brothers envied the attention that he received from their father and the gifts he would get, such as his wonderful coat.

[3 : 42] For them, the coat symbolized and expressed Jacob's favoritism towards his son, Joseph, that he was held in elevated status before them, a status that the rest of the brothers really wanted and valued themselves.

So their envy turned into bitterness, resentment and hate, which expressed itself through a plot trying to kill Joseph, their own brother.

Or take Cain and Abel, for example, brothers who, as far as we knew, had no tension between each other until God chose to accept Abel's gift over Cain's gift.

And again, Cain's envy sprouted out of nowhere, but it sprouted because from God's action to him symbolized that God had favored him over Abel.

And whereas Cain, he wanted and valued God's favor. And so he envied his own brother for being favored over him. And whilst he had the opportunity to not give in to his envy, that God had warned him, don't give in to your sin, eventually in the end, envy had consumed him so much that he did give in.

[4 : 55] He turned bitter, hateful, he resented the fact that his younger brother was favored over him. And so he ended up killing him. And he tried to cover it up.

Funny enough, just the same way Joseph's brothers tried to cover it up as well. Whether minor or major, envy targets the internal qualities of another person, and it makes you play the comparison game.

And these internal qualities are generally symbolized externally. So for example, Joseph's coat symbolized the favoritism he received from his father. His brothers didn't want Joseph's coat per se. They wanted the favoritism from his father that the coat had symbolized. They compared themselves to Joseph and saw they didn't match up to him, which led them to envy him.

This is the comparison game envy makes us play. Envy takes everything that we have in our life and it uses it to make us play this game of comparison, where we look down on people who are not as good as us, who don't have enough as us, or we look up at people in bitterness and resentment for what they have and therefore what that says about us.

[6 : 15] When we see someone wearing a nicer suit, who has a better job than us, who has a better body or nicer clothes than us, who drives a nicer car, owns a bigger house than us, it's easy to let these things, to let envy use these things to make us feel bitter and resentful towards them.

For they have something that says something about them and when you compare yourself to them, it says something about yourself and when we seem not to measure up to them.

The envious person is consumed by how they stack up against other people and the consequences, whether seemingly minor or obviously major, are damaging either way.

See, from these examples, I think we can see two main things in the way that envy distorts and corrupts our humanity. Firstly, it distorts and compromises our character, leading us to do things we may have never have done, to bring other people down to our level or worse, below our level, like in the example of Cain and Abel.

And secondly, it distorts and attempts to destroy our relationships as it pits us against those we identify with and share similar values, like the way I struggled with the engagement rings.

[7 : 38] In the moment, my bitterness and my resentment was towards my own friends. And this, for me, is why envy is most evil and particularly dangerous in a church context.

Indeed, if any of us here harbour any envy towards each other here in this place, we are indeed under serious threat. Our unity, our fellowship, is seriously at threat.

Envy is truly evil. And what makes it so dangerous and even more evil is that it works insidiously. That is, it works without us even knowing it.

And it always works with evil intent behind it to make us fall into sin and to destroy our relationships. And this is why Proverbs is very, very strong.

If you look at 23 again, verse 1 and 2, when you sit to die of a ruler, note well what is before you and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony.

[8 : 42] The sage urges his son or his pupil here to restrain himself from envy as if there were a sword hanging over his head or a knife being put to his throat, threatening him that if he gives in to envy, he will cut his neck or cut off his head.

That's how strong the Proverbs are about giving in to envy. It's serious, not only because it distorts our relationships with each other and the things we value, but it also distorts and corrupts our relationship with God.

As the psalmist notes in Psalm 73, verse 1, Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped.

I had nearly lost my foothold, for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. The psalmist knew that God was good, but because he envied the wicked who were prospering when he wasn't, see there he's playing the comparison game already, he nearly forsook what was right

and true.

He was tempted to think that God was unjust, unjust to allow him to suffer. His envy began to distort his relationship with God, how he saw who God was and what his true qualities were.

[10:03] When he compared himself to the wicked and saw that he wasn't as blessed as they were, he nearly lost God altogether. Envy is so evil and so dangerous because it calls us to question God's goodness on the basis of our own experience, to compare that of the wicked and decide upon that experience whether he is good enough or not.

It's a dangerous, dangerous thing to do, to question the Lord of all creation, to question his own goodness as his creatures.

So how does one not fall into temptation of envy? How does one heed the sage in Proverbs 23, 17 that says, let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day.

The biggest problem with envy is that it can distort anything we value into a standard by which we play the comparison game. Whether it's your job, your wealth, your car, your wife, your husband, your boyfriend or your girlfriend, your phone, your skills, or your gadgets and possessions, your passions and your values, envy can take all these things, anything in your life, and distort it into a standard by which you play the comparison game, by which you play the game, which you compare yourself with other people and determine where do you sit.

Are you up here or are you down here? How high on the ladder are you? Up there or down there? Therefore, thinking through this logically, the only way to deal with envy is to value something that can't be distorted.

[11:53] To value something that envy can't distort and use to cause us to look down on people and to judge them and to think we're better, or to look up to people in bitterness and resentment for what that says about us.

But does such a thing in this world exist? And what on earth could it be? When David realized his sin of committing adultery against Bathsheba and his sin of murdering Uriah, he came before God in repentance, in deep, sorrowful repentance.

And he penned the psalm, Psalm 51. And in this psalm, he acknowledges the root cause of his sin, why he gave in to this sin and envy. In verse 12, he says this, Restore to me the joy of salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

The reason why David fell into this sin quickly was because his greed had blinded him to the joy he already had in God, the one who saves, the one who gives life.

David's joy had turned from being in God's salvation to being whatever his eye had seen that pleased him. Even if what he had seen was not his. But now David realizes that his covetous pursuits led him into shame and sin.

[13:22] And he asked God, Please, God, restore to me the joy of salvation. Restore to me what it is to be known by you and to know you. Having his eyes fixed on the wonderful salvation that comes from God is how David reorients his heart to not give sin a foothold.

And closely related to coveting, envy as well has the same ability to blind us to the wonderful joy in salvation. And it's only when we fix our eyes and remember the wonderful salvation that comes from God in Christ that envy is left powerless to corrupt and to distort.

Why is that? Because the salvation that comes from God through the gospel is the great equalizer of all men.

The salvation that comes through the gospel is the great equalizer among all men. Whilst envy perpetuates on playing the comparison game, playing the game that says you've got to work out where you are on the status level.

The gospel says no. Salvation through the gospel is the great equalizer of all men. There is no place in the gospel to look down at anyone for we are all sinful.

[14:48] We are all in the same predicament. There is no place in the gospel for envy of any kind for no matter how prosperous you might be, no matter how well off you might be, no matter how high up the ladder you might think you are, we are all called.

to repent of our sin and to turn back to Christ in faith. And such opportunity, no matter how high you are, no matter how low you are, is given to all people freely, without distinction, the grace of God in Christ.

Galatians 3.26 makes this really clear for us. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. For all of you were baptized into Christ and have clothed yourselves with Christ, there is

neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The playing field has been leveled completely. There is no room for the comparison game at all to be played.

You can't compare each other's salvation at all. And Romans 3.23 further clarifies this. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and all are justified freely by his grace to the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

[16:12] Salvation in God is the great equalizer to which envy is rendered powerless against. Envy can't use this salvation as a means of distorting your relationship because everyone who knows this salvation, who trusts in Jesus that comes to know Christ knows they are sinful and deserving of death and along with everyone else and they know they are only made right with God through faith alone along with everyone else.

Envy thrives in this world because it's built on a social hierarchy. we are constantly told to climb some sort of ladder whether it's to build our wealth our skills our possessions our friends our fame we are told to climb this endless ladder and the only way to measure our success to see where we are going in this ladder is to play the comparison game and therefore to let envy take its hold on us to influence us but the gospel comes in and decimates that entirely and declares that all people no matter who you are have access through faith and repentance to the wonderful salvation that is on offer.

Indeed we don't climb any ladder anymore the world wants you to try and keep climbing this ladder to get higher and higher and higher but it's endless but on the contrary in Ephesians 1 we're reminded that for those who trust in Jesus you are already ascended to the very top you are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms and in him being at the very top in him we enjoy peace with God satisfaction and contentment we enjoy unity and fellowship together we enjoy our significance and worth being found in him he is supremely valuable whose blood whose blood is more precious than gold nothing can compare to him having him and therefore envy cannot take its stand against him it is rendered powerless so when the thing that captures your attention the most the thing that stirs the affection of your heart the most is the salvation that comes through Jesus envy will lose its grip on your life because not only do you have the best thing but you have the very thing that levels the playing field the great equaliser of all men but this is easier said than done although we have this knowledge of salvation we often fail to keep our eyes fixated on Jesus we are so easily distracted by what surrounds us by the world's message to sell the good life to us telling us what we ought to value the most in our life and because we are sinful and foolish we buy into it and take our eyes off of

Jesus every now and then even David prays in the same verse grant me a willing spirit to sustain me and the proverb says as well let not your heart envy sinners but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day there is still a need to persevere in our struggle against envy it's a daily fight a daily battle one which we need to let Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit help us in the fight but instead of just leaving it there we are in a series on wisdom and I want to provide I think what's best practice from my research in the last week or so so on the screen it's going to come up a summary of where we've just gone and then where we're going to next which I'll read for us as well to fight envy we need to realise that envy affects the way we interact with everything that is of this world drawing us to see everything we value as a means for comparison and therefore we need to counter envy by choosing to value that which is not of this world the gospel of salvation the way we do this is by training and cultivating the heart to value and love the gospel above all else through daily and weekly practice reorienting our hearts from loving and valuing the things of this world to loving and valuing the gospel we so often struggle to fight against envy and all sin for that matter because we think transformation has to do with this thing up here thinking deciding that as long as we can mentally assent to the truth we'll be able to change our habits but that's not how we work as human beings don't hear me say that thinking is not important it is that's not entirely the way we work we're not just thinkers we don't change our habits by simply knowing the truth about something and interesting enough the world doesn't work at that either the world doesn't convince us through mental assent to live the way it wants the world convinces us through shaping our hearts to love what it has to say is the good life through repetitive exposure pulling our heart strings the world is able to shape what it is we ought to value the most it's a it's a thing that happens without us even

knowing at times for example the tech giant

Apple is a great example of this they don't they're a company that advertises their products not through trying to get you to mentally just agree with them about how good their products are but they're a company that advertises their products by repetitively drawing upon your desires and wants constantly exposing their product to you all the time and this repetitive exposure eventually takes its effects in eventually forming our hearts to love their products to want them and desire them to which I have fallen completely for to put it simply we are not simply thinkers first we are lovers first we are lovers first and the reason why we struggle with changing our habits and therefore removing envy is because we approach the fight as thinkers and not as lovers therefore we must approach this fight not through mental assent but as lovers but how we do that

[23 : 17] I have already kind of given you a clue the only way in which we can grow in our love for something is by repetitively being exposed to it and allowing it to train and cultivate our heart to be something we love you see you grow in love for your wife for your husband your girlfriend or boyfriend for your family and for your friends or for anything for that matter when you choose to actively expose yourself daily to it when you choose to engage with it when you continue to practice relationship with that person you are in regard you might not put it this way but you are training yourself to love this person you're training your heart to love them by daily choosing to do so and then growing in that love in the same way of the gospel the way in which we train our hearts to love the salvation that comes from Jesus is to repetitively expose ourselves to the message of the gospel to practice it daily and allow for our hearts to be trained and to grow in the love of the gospel and to do this in a counter formative way that is as we grow in our love for the gospel to then allow the gospel itself to root out any place in our heart which might give in to envy so that when we are tempted to envy our hearts natural reaction ought to be to turn to the gospel and let the gospel shape the way we proceed from there to not give in to envy and the question is now where do we begin with this the practice

I've suggested is something that should be used in fighting all sin in general but what about envy in particular when we where in our daily repetitive practice of the gospel do we begin in regards to envy well I believe in general use but I think particularly for envy Psalm 73 is one that provides a helpful pattern that helps us to acknowledge our own struggle with envy and gives us a voice to tell God our struggle but then helpfully provides a corrective for us that will lead us away from envy and finding joy in God's salvation the first three verses the psalmist acknowledges he struggled with envy and says he almost fell away from God because of it and then he provides why in verses 4 to 15 explain that the wicked were prospering but they were mocking God at the same time the psalmist though who was obedient and righteous he was suffering so whilst they were prospering he was suffering he was struggling to put the two or two together eventually till we get to verse 16 he admits it's too much for him to handle he can't understand why he is suffering in this way and why they are prospering so what does he do what's his response he goes to God in verse 17 to the temple he brings this confusing state before God and gives it to him and being in the presence of God he realizes the true fate of the wicked in verses 18 to 22 he realizes what's going to happen to those even if they're prospering what does eventually happen to the wicked and he talks about that in those next few verses and then in verse 23 again after being with God he realizes his own state and what's going to happen to him he says in verse 23 nevertheless

I am continually with you you hold my right hand you guide me with your counsel and afterward you receive me to glory whom have I in heaven but you and there is nothing on earth I desire besides you my flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength in my heart and my portion forever for behold those who are far from you shall perish you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you but for me it is good to be near God I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of your works do you see how the psalmist recounts his emotions and thoughts as he goes along he doesn't just simply tell us don't envy trust God he recounts his own journey and progression towards understanding and seeing the truth and it's through that journey he was able to write the reality that God is his joy and strength that he need not to envy because he enjoyed God's presence and God's salvation and so since we have this psalm written down for us when we are tempted to feel envious when we are tempted to play the comparison game we can turn to this psalm to help us fight envy to use as a guide for the way we should struggle with it you notice that the psalmist doesn't just conclude okay I'm going to trust God now he actually voices his opinion to God he tells God I'm struggling the wicked are prospering and me the righteous I'm suffering what's

going on but then he provides that helpful corrective in verse 17 he turns to God that's the difference between him and us sometimes do you turn to God after voicing your opinion to him after telling him you're struggling do you turn to God to try and understand what's going on when we repeatedly practice this helpful pattern in psalm 73 but also help we practice on a broader level the gospel through the reading the speaking aloud as well as in our mind and the singing of scripture and the psalms when we allow it to sink into our hearts that's when our joy will begin to turn to be fixated on the salvation of God and then only then we'll be able to counter the message of this world that is to climb the social ladder to play the comparison game that envy wants us to play envy is truly evil and like all sin it requires us to fight daily but brothers and sisters when we respond to envy by encountering the gospel each and every day envy we rendered powerless when we work through the scriptures and the psalms in our response practicing and training our hearts to love the gospel to see it as the thing we value the most envy will be stopped in its tracks and the gospel the great equalizer will take its seed and flourish and grow in our hearts giving us the freedom to enjoy to worship

God without fear of measuring up to each other but then also giving us the power to love each other to serve each other to be with each other and not fear that we don't measure up to each other because we all here enjoy the wonderful salvation of God as in Christ Jesus let me pray for us heavenly father we thank you so much that we enjoy peace with you through your son we thank you that through your word you've given us life and we pray father that you would help us to always have our eyes fixated on your son for him to be the thing we value the most in our life for the salvation that comes through him to be the thing that gives us confidence in this world would we not envy each other or envy sinners but father would we know that we enjoy the great salvation that comes from you that puts all of us on the leveling playing field that stirs all of us to love each other and to serve each other help us father to go out now into the world to show forth your love and your light to those around us to so many people who are trying to play this comparison game thinking it's going to fulfill them thinking it's going to help them progress but father only leaves them feeling bitter and resentful and hated hateful father we offer them the peace that comes from you only through the salvation that comes also from you we pray this in your son's name amen