

I. Comedy Video – MJW (cars and trike). Introduction¹

A. Envy. On a recent tour of Turkey I was reminded of just how small and petty we can be. At ancient ruins in cities like Ephesus, Smyrna and Istanbul I noticed how few of the statues feature faces with noses. (IMAGES) In town after town, ruin after ruin, museum after museum you see amazing sculptures except... no noses. Why? Do they fall off? No. Archeologists believe the statues were “de-faced” – that the noses were deliberately knocked off by those who were envious of the honor and acclaim these now deceased leaders enjoyed. Many think that this is what happened to the Sphinx.



B. Envy! Last week I said, Cain killed Able because he was angry at the way things were playing out. Well, envy is what led to the anger. Last week I said that Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery because they were angry at the way their father was treating them. Well, envy was is what led to that anger. Last week I noted that Saul spent years trying to kill David because he was angry over David’s popularity. Once again, envy was behind it all. It’s a common theme in the Bible. David envied the lifestyle of the wicked.² The Philistines envied Isaac’s flocks. Aaron and Miriam envied Moses’s relationship with God. Leah envied Rachel’s beauty and Rachel envied Leah’s children. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to call envy the deadliest of the seven sins, arguing that it was envy (not pride) that prompted Lucifer to seek the glory due only to God.



¹ Quotes: 1) Admiration is happy self-abandon; envy is unhappy self-assertion. Soren Kierkegaard; 2) A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. (Prv. 14:30); 3) When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, “May the whole world perish!” This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is, “If I cannot have something, no one is to have anything, no one is to be anything.” Friedrich Nietzsche; 4) We seem no longer able to admire, respect, or be grateful for what is nobler or lovelier or greater than ourselves. We must pull down – or put down – what is exceptional. Henry Fairlie

C. And there are plenty of examples outside the Bible as well. We can turn to literature, where Cinderella’s step sisters envied her beauty and inner-peace. We can turn to history, where Salieri envied Mozart’s talent. Tragically, I can offer my own example from earlier this week. An article was posted on a blog I read listing how much time a dozen of the more prominent preachers spend preparing their sermons. It ranged from one hour to thirty-two. (I spend about twenty.) But one guy – who is a very powerful, thoughtful communicator, and who leads a church of about 15,000 – spends one hour total getting ready. One hour. I spent two hours this morning revising the message after last night. He said that he retains everything he reads. He can tell you what he read twenty years ago and exactly where the quote is that he’s after. In my good moments I’m glad he’s on our side. In my envy, well, I’d like to push him in front of a bus.

D. I could go on. But I don’t have to. We are all familiar with envy. It is an ugly, joyless sin. To my way of thinking, it’s the most miserable because it’s the one sin that fails to deliver any upside. Most of the other vices – e.g., anger, lust, gluttony, sloth – are exaggerations or distortions of wholesome appetites. And pride – the only other vice that is “born bad” – at least feels good. But envy is the antithesis of enjoyment.

E. If you are feeling a bit envious today perhaps you will appreciate Psalm 73, one of the Psalms of Asaph. It’s a Psalm written by one who is trying to be good – to follow God – but is riddled with envy for the easy life and prosperity of the wicked. Listen as I read it.³

E.1. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.

F. Ever feel that way? Sure you. You know the feeling of envy. There is a lot of envy out there. But before we go further let’s get some agreement on the meaning.

II. What exactly is envy? Envy is desire gone bad.

³ Psalm 73:3-13

A. It's: I want what you have. Not: I also want what you have – e.g., I want a car like yours. That may be greed, but it's not an accurate description of envy. For starters, envy is often less about material possessions and more linked to personal qualities or attributes, even to the point of simply wanting to be someone else – wanting their life. But additionally, envy not only wants to win, it want's someone else to lose. Classic, unchecked envy is: I want what you have and I will not be happy until I have it and you don't. I want your job. I want your spot on the football team. I want your boyfriend. I want your life. And if I can't have it, I don't want you to have it either.⁴

B. The envious are not happy until other people are unhappy – and even then they are not happy for long. Aquinas described envy as "sorrow for another's good." Dante defined it as "a desire to deprive other men of theirs," and in his *Divine Comedy* he wrote that in hell the envious have their eyes sewn shut with wire to prevent them from seeing – and taking joy – in the suffering of others.

C. Envy is the opposite of kindness. Envy is what is being spoken against in the Tenth Commandment,⁵ which reads:

C.1. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."⁶

4 Envy is like jealousy in that they both feel discontent towards someone's traits, status, abilities or rewards. Jealousy and envy are often confused. Technically, envy is distinct from *jealousy* in that jealousy fears to lose what it has, while envy is pained at seeing another have it. Also, while jealousy can be either good or bad (God is jealous of the love due to him, just as a husband or wife should be jealous of their spouse's affections should they be visited on someone else, envy is always bad.

5 Many theologians consider the Tenth Commandment one of the big ones. Numbers two through nine are weighty in their own right, but the argument is that numbers one and ten are the real heavyweights – they are the book ends of God's law.

6 As you may remember, the Ten Commandments are stated twice in the Old Testament – once in Exodus and then again in Deuteronomy. In Exodus the word that is used is *hamad*. You know this word from its use in Arabic. Some of you are thinking, "Gee, I didn't know that I knew Arabic." Well, you know this word because it's found in the name "Mohammad," which means "to praise Allah." When *hamad* is used in Arabic it is always positive. But when it is used in Hebrew – which is what the Old Testament is written in – it's always negative. It means to praise too much. In the Tenth Commandment we want what our neighbor has too much. When the commandment is repeated in Deuteronomy 5 a different word is used: *ana*, which means "to earnestly desire." But when *ana* is intensified, like it is here, it become a negative thing It's to earnestly desire something too much. To want something "too much." So, what we are being told – what we are being commanded in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) is to keep our desires in check. Do not covet your neighbor's house, your neighbor's wife, his manservant, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor. What we are being told is that we cannot want things that are not ours too much. We have to fight the tendency to envy, jealousy, greed and lust. Whether its honor or power or gold or fame or your neighbor's wife – or husband – if you don't have it you need to stop wanting it.

III. Three Key Insights. In order to appreciate what's going on here – more to the point, what is going wrong – we need to back up and get a running start at this. There are three things to understand.

A. First: We are dependent beings. We are creatures who were made by God and who are dependent upon God for life. We need: air, food, water, warmth, love. Unlike God, who is perfect, who lacks nothing, who has no needs – who existed in the perfect love and friendship of Himself, and who had and has perfect peace and joy and who needs nothing at all, ever.⁷ Unlike God we are incomplete. We are dependent. We were made for a relationship with God and will always need God and the things He provides. This is not a bad thing. But we are broken (fallen, sinful, bent) and consequently, we do not like having needs. (We don't like being dependent.) And our needs have been corrupted as well.

B. Two: Some of our desires are disordered. There is nothing inherently wrong with desire. It's not wrong to desire the things we need. We are taught to pray, "give us this day our daily bread." And God is glad to provide for us. But:

B.1. We do not simply want what we need – we want more. We don't simply want bread for today, we want bread for the next thirty years. And we want steak and ice cream. And we want to eat all of it without gaining weight. We don't simply want a car for transportation, we want a nice, new, low mileage vehicle that says, "We're cool. I made it."

B.2. And we expect these things to bring us joy and meaning beyond their design. We look to them to fill our heart (or tank or whatever you want to call it) in ways they cannot because we were not made that way. We were made for something much bigger and grander and more holy and wonderful than food or cars.⁸

⁷ Theologians refer to God's utter independence as His aseity, which comes from the Latin words *a se*, ("of oneself") means that: God is entirely independent and self-sustaining. He is neither defined by nor dependent upon anything outside of himself. Though we – and the rest of creation – bring him joy, he does not need us or anything else for any reason. (FencePost II, Chapter 3).

⁸ By way of example, food can satisfy an empty stomach but it cannot provide meaning. Those who try to find meaning in food – or find ultimate joy by having more food – are prone to the vice of gluttony.

C. Number Three: We have a contentment problem. Our disordered desires lead to a contentment problem, which lies at the root of the vice of envy. Rather than finding a growing sense of peace and joy in our relationship with God, we look to find it in other ways. These other ways do not ultimately work. We end up: 1) wanting things we don't need; 2) wanting more of the things we do need than we need; or 3) simply wanting the things other people have because we think that when we have them then we'll be happy. The desire for what we need is not wrong. It's God-given. But disordered desire makes us miserable. And expecting anything other than God to provide ultimate fulfillment will not work over the long haul because God is the only one – the only thing – big enough and good enough to satisfy forever. Men and women, we have to understand that envy is never quenched by anything other than God. Trying to calm your desires by having the things someone else has is like drinking salt water because you are thirsty. It will just make it worse. Envy is mortally wounded when we accept that we exist for God's glory not the other way around. God is God and we are not.

IV. Four Truths we need to embrace.

A. Let me come at this from a different direction. I just shared three points: we are dependent beings; some of our desires are disordered; and, that leads to contentment problems. Let me try this from a different angle. Here are four ideas to ponder.

B. One: God is God and we are not. God is God and we are not, consequently, His plans trump ours. This is a really big point. So big that I'd say getting it often feels like a second "conversion" – and this second conversion is one some people never get. Most of us come to faith for what God can do for us. And it is very common to believe that, because we are now one of his children that He is going to reward us by fulfilling our dreams. Rather than signing up to be part of his plan, we think He is now going to baptize ours – He is going to advance our career, make our dreams come true, provide good parking, to give us what we want. This is never the promise. God is God and we are not. What happens over time is that as we grow – as we understand who He is and as our heart changes – we buy in more and more to his plan.

C. Comparison is almost always a bad idea. I'm not done with the God is God point, but I need to add something to the discussion. Envy is driven by looking around more than looking up. It's fueled by comparison, which is such a flawed exercise. I want to show you a sixty second video of what happens when Capuchin monkeys compare what they are being fed. This is from a TED video based on the research Frans de Waal has been conducting on the moral behavior of animals. These monkeys have learned that when they hand back a rock they will be given a slice of cucumber, which they like. And as you will see, the first monkey is OK with the deal until he notices that the second monkey is getting grapes. Let's watch: TED Video of Capuchin Monkeys.

C.1. The comparison being made by the monkey in this video is fair. Let me start by noting that most of the comparing we do is not. In fact, comparison is often unhelpful for a few reasons. For starters we tend to compare ourselves from a distance – never really knowing the full situation. (We envy people because we think we know what their life is like when we really have no idea). Secondly, we compare selectively. We choose to contrast our net worth with Bill Gates’s, our appearance with Kate Upton or Brad Pitt, our wit with Jimmy Fallon, our compassion with Mother Theresa. Or the opposite. We can compare our looks with Bill Gates or our IQ with some ditzzy celebrity. We can find reasons to feel good or bad about ourselves based on what we are focusing on. And thirdly, even when we do not do that – even when we compare our situation to those much closer to us – the situation is still skewed because of where we live. We are swimming in a very narrow cross section of the global pool. (To own a house in the US puts you in the top two percent of the world’s wealth.)

C.2. And – and! – the Bible doesn’t encourage us to compare our lives against our neighbor’s but against Christ or The Law. You want to know how you are doing, measure your life against the Ten Commandments. These are the right answers.

C.3. So, one of the big truths we need to understand is that comparison is a flawed exercise and if we want to deal with our envy we need to rethink who, what and how we are making these comparisons.

C.4. But, the other big truth is, God is God, and per his plan we are all different. And things are not equal – not the same. There will be people who are richer, taller, smarter, faster, quicker, funnier, happier, better than you. And that’s OK, because that is God’s prerogative. And we honor Him by being faithful with the opportunities we are given, not by spending all our time wishing everything was different.

C.5. God does not promise us equal gifts or equal opportunities or equal lives. In Romans 9:20 Paul points out that it is God’s prerogative to set things up as He chooses.

C.5.a) But who are you O Man, to talk to God. Shall what is formed say to Him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble use and some for common use?”

C.6. God is God and we are not. This may grate on you. Many of us think that things should be equal.⁹ Let me simply remind you, He will judge justly. And to those to whom much has been given -- whether that is money or talent or opportunity – much is expected. And those who have fewer opportunities will be judged against those fewer opportunities. We need to let God be God.

C.7. I hate envy. Really. The times when I am consumed with a desire to be more like someone else – it is just so unsatisfying. It is so much more fun to take genuine joy in the success of others.

C.8. I don't struggle with this sin as much as I used to. To be honest, my concerns have tipped in the other direction. The reason I find comparison so unsettling is because I've been given so much: white males with lots of education, money and opportunity have it a lot easier in this culture than just about anybody else. I do not have to feel bad about that, but I recognize that I was born somewhere between second and third base, and the fact that I'm standing on third doesn't mean I'm great, it means I'd better score. I've been given a lot – am I using it, stewarding it, in ways that honor God?¹⁰

D. Point three: Our desires are both skewed and preyed upon. God is God. Comparison is riddled with troubles. Point three: Our desires are both skewed and nurtured. I've already commented on this first point. Our wants are skewed by our broken heart. What I want to emphasize now is that we live in Envy Central. We are assaulted with more advertisements in a week than people living one hundred years ago were exposed to in a lifetime. Smart people wake up every day with the goal of creating envy in your life so you will buy their product. We want things – we are persuaded that we need things – that our lives are incomplete without things – that didn't even exist six months ago. The disordered desires that are resident in our heart are cultivated by our culture. We need to see past all of this. We need to learn how to play “spot the lie” when we are watching ads. To develop the ability to see the ways we are being misled and envy is being fostered.¹¹

⁹ In fact that was – or is – the premise behind the PC movement. It's a misplaced application of the idea that everyone has value. And it led people to say that everyone's skills are also equal. In some circles it's not OK to suggest that the writings of Shakespeare are any better than the writings of a five year old child - especially if that five year old child grew up in the inner city. Those kind of statements are considered prejudicial because everything has to be valued equally. I understand the desire to promote justice. And I understand the desire to value the efforts to those who have been neglected or oppressed. And if I thought this life was all we got I'd be even more troubled by the inequalities of this world. But this life is not all we get.

¹⁰ About fifteen years ago Ann Richards – the then governor of Texas – said that George Bush – the first, George HW Bush, the father – was born on third base and thought he hit a triple.

E. Point number four: Contentment is a heart issue not a “stuff issue.” The path towards contentment is much more about wanting what you have than getting what you want. There is a base line. We need things. We are dependent beings. We have to have food, air, water, a place to sleep. And in this culture we likely “need” transportation and an education and a host of other things. There is a base line below which some measure of hardship and suffering is unavoidable. But, most everyone in this room has seldom dropped below that line. Being content is so much more about shaping our heart than it is about having things.¹²

E.1. I remember when we were first married and living on less than \$20K per year – no benefits, no insurance, paying both sides of social security. We ate a lot of pasta and potatoes and shopped in the generic aisle. And one day, without telling me, Sheri upgraded my lunch from a 25 cent pot pie to a 33 cent pot pie and I came home ecstatic. I was thrilled! But... well, don't try to feed me a thirty-three cent pot pie today. I have moved past it. My expectations are much higher now.

E.2. Being grateful for what you have is a lot less about what you have than it is about you. We do not overcome envy by getting what we want. We overcome envy by being content with what we have. More God, less stuff.

E.3. Paul writes about this. In Philippians 4:11 he says: “. . . for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances. I know what it is like to be in need, and I know what it is like to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

E.4. After a base line, the secret of not coveting is not more stuff, it's more God. Some people never learn this.

V. There is more than could be said.

¹¹ We grow numb to the effect of advertising. I remember getting a real wakeup call about a dozen years ago when Austin was about three. He was in watching cartoons and I was in the other room when all the sudden I hear: “Dad, I need this.” Or, “Mom, we're supposed to watch this. They are telling us that we're supposed to watch this. March 20th . . . 7:00 . . . Eastern time.” And if you think about it we don't really grow past much of that. I remember watching an ad for trucks and thinking, “Boy, I'd like a truck. A man's vehicle. Every guy should have one. My life would be better if I did. Just think of all the times I've needed one lately.” Now, the truth is – I don't need a truck. I've got car written all over my face. I carry books and a lap top computer not lumber and tools. I've got three kids. What am I going to do? Tie two of them in the back?

¹² The hedonists learned this. What thrills us today becomes expected tomorrow and we end up wanting more and more and more, and our expectations just keep resetting.

A. Hey, we'd be in much better shape if we simply believed the Gospel. If we could keep our eyes on God and what He has done for us, and what awaits us. If we did that, a lot of the things that consume us now would lose a lot of their luster. We need to stop looking around so much and start looking up. The Psalmist finally got this, by the way. I read the first part of Psalm 73. "I envied the wicked. They had an easy life. Why was I trying to be good?" Let me return and pick up with verse 23:

A.1. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

VI. So how do we move forward?

A. If envy is your problem, let me encourage you to do a few things. In addition to seeking God – More God less Stuff – let me encourage you to:

A.1. Make a list of the things you are thankful for. Count your blessings. Someone says that envy is the ability to count other people's blessings. Count your own. It works. It really does.

A.2. Give some things away. Deliberately go with less. Give simplicity and less a chance. Instead of spending money on yourself, spend it on someone in need. Slay the green-eyed monster of envy. Sheri did this years ago. She was volunteering at a Food Bank, working with an older woman who had almost nothing – and was always cold. When Sheri asked her about it she said something about the heat in her place – she didn't control the thermostat or something – so Sheri came home and said, "Let's give her our space heater." I wasn't thrilled about the idea. On cold mornings I camped out in front of the thing, but she felt strongly about it so we gave it to this old woman. And Sheri said, to her disbelief, the old woman gave it to this young mother about 10 minutes later. And she did so with great joy. That was a real lesson for both of us. Joy comes from serving, not from having.

A.3. Pray for the prosperity of those you envy. Go right at it. Pray for their well-being. Pray that God shows them favor. Work towards finding joy in their success not their failure. I promise you, you win when you move in that direction.

VII. Announcements

A. In Proverbs 14 Solomon states, "Envy shoots at others but wounds itself. Envy eats at nothing but its own heart." Men and women, you cannot be envious and joyful at the same time. Unlike other sins, this one has no upside. Give it up. Call it sin. Count your blessings. Pray for those you envy – not that they fall, but that they thrive. Learn to love them and ask God for help finding an unshakable contentment in your relationship with him. You will find so much more joy in life if you decide to love others, not stuff.