

Cut Off the Blood Supply

Like special forces, they're the first on the shore. They HALO-jump in (High Altitude Military Parachuting). They fly below the radar, underneath your defenses. They are already mingling like spies in your ranks. You're trying to do battle with sin, but the seven deadly sins are already there, performing all sorts of subterfuge and sabotage. They've located your weak points; they've targeted them and they are preparing the way for the entire evil army to land on your shores and kill you. This is why we are discussing the seven deadly sins. Because they are deadly. It's not exactly the seven deadly sins themselves that are so deadly; it's what comes after.

After pride comes arrogance. They may seem like the same thing, but I think they are not. In my opinion, hubris, which is not just pride, but excessive pride and self-confidence, is that final step right before sinners fall into the pit. After the basic sin of lust comes pornography, fornication, and adultery. After the sin of gluttony comes self-loathing and more gluttony. Coming in on the heels of greed is theft and embezzlement.

In those examples, you may begin to see that the seven deadly sins are the foundation of many other sins that we deal with in life. They are like tumors and we need to cut off their blood supply before they grow and kill us. If you can locate, expose, and battle the seven deadly sins—in other words, if you can cut off their blood supply, killing them before they kill you—you will do abundant good in your personal struggle against sin. In this chapter, we discuss how to go after envy before it grows into selfish ambition, hatred of others, malice, divisions, dissensions, rivalries, and church splits.

Greener Grass

We can go just about anywhere in the Bible to find an example of envy. There's not a chapter in the Bible that is the "envy chapter." The

ramification of envy is a theme throughout the entire Bible. But one of the best examples of envy in the life of a Christian is in Psalm 73:

Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me,
my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was *envious* of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace (v.1-6a, emphasis mine).

“Israel,” or “those who are pure in heart,” are Christians. The psalmist says, “God is good to Christians, but not to me personally.” He says that his “feet had almost stumbled” and his “steps had nearly slipped,” which is a metaphor for saying that he was struggling with doubt in his Christian life. The reason he was struggling is because he “was envious of the arrogant” when he “saw the prosperity of the wicked.” That’s a poetic way of saying he had a neighbor who was a jerk. He had a neighbor who beat his dog, performed abortions, and voted differently than him. He looked over at this wicked and arrogant neighbor who had bought a Lexus and had a bigger house, a prettier wife, a fatter bank account and said, “God, I thought you were good to Israel. What about me?”

The psalmist goes on to say that the wicked “have no pangs until death.” In our day and age, if we have a pang, we go to the doctor and very often, they can fix it. But in those days, if you had a cavity, it could kill you; it could turn into an infection that would get down into the roots, abscess, and eventually lock up your entire face, causing massive headaches. They didn’t have the technology to deal with those problems like we do today. So many people went to their graves because of a

cavity. And the psalmist says, “Look at my evil neighbor. He doesn’t have any pain in his life, all the way until the point of death, when he’ll just quietly slip away. But as for me, my teeth are abscessed, I’ve got an infected gallbladder, and I’ve got broken bones.”

He goes on to say, “Their bodies are fat and sleek.” That doesn’t sound like a compliment these days, but in those days, when there was drought and famine, to be a little husky meant that you were rich and successful enough to have plenty of food. The wicked people who this man is envious of are fat and sleek. They’re polished. They have all the expensive oils. The psalmist is sun-scorched. His skin is dried up and cracked. He writes, “They are not troubled like others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace.” They’re prancing around like peacocks. And that makes him envious.

You may not be envious of other people on account of their “fat and sleek” bodies, but are you still green with envy? Do you envy others’ body types, looks, abilities to make friends, positions, titles, prosperity, safety, and attractive wives or successful husbands? It may not be as easy for you to confess envy as it is to confess the sin of pride. “You got me. I *am* pretty talented. I do have good looks. It’s not as easy as you think, being the blond-haired, blue-eyed bombshell. We all have our own crosses to bear, and maybe I do have a little bit of pride.”

It’s easy enough to confess pride, because you can confess pride in a proud way and get away with it. Around here, you can confess gluttony and everyone laughs. Even with lust, there are circles of friends that joke about it together. But when you confess envy, it means you’re small. It means you’re the loser in the competition. It means you’re weasley and slimy. You want to be “number one” and you don’t mind slithering up the back of that other person to get it. Envy is humiliating, so as we talk about it, you can be sure that it’s hiding itself from you. As long as it hides in the grass, you can’t get a bead on it. As long as it crouches down, you can’t fight it accurately. So be looking for it as we talk about it in this chapter.

So, are you green with envy? How do you know what envy is? Do you feel like the runner-up beauty pageant contestant, who stands there and has a smile on her face, holding a consolation prize while the winner is

adorning her brow with a tiara? Beauty pageant runner-ups have to smile and applaud as their opponent gets all the adoration, because to let even just a small bit of envy show is humiliating. But really what she's thinking inside is, "I know what I'd like to do with these flowers." Is your life characterized by that feeling? To make sure, we're going to define, identify, and try our best to defeat envy in our own lives.

Defining Envy

The first thing to do when we want to define something in the Bible is to notice context. Context is, in fact, more important than looking up the word in a dictionary. If we look around the word *envious* in Psalm 73, we see that the psalmist is comparing himself to his neighbor and wants his life. He also doesn't think that his neighbor deserves it. Here we find the definition of envy through context. Envy is begrudging someone else's goods, gifts, and graces. God has given some people things such as the ability to make friends, a polished look, the ability to make money, and the ability to make the right decisions. And it makes you kind of irritated. This is envy.

Titus 3:3 lumps envy in with malice and hatred of other people. James 3:14 partners envy and selfish ambition. In this context, envy is something that is aimed at other people and is for your own benefit. When Martha Stewart, the envy of housewives, gardeners, and mothers everywhere, was dragged off in handcuffs, she "got what was coming to her," didn't she? The press drooled over her downfall, revealing something about one of the deepest sins in our nation, the sin of envy.

When a young man really likes a young woman, he might talk to his friends about her to ask them what they think. Maybe he just wants to make sure that he's made a wise decision. But maybe it's really because he's trying to gauge whether or not she will improve his status, making him the envy of his friends. I hope, however, that it goes without saying that when choosing a mate, you don't choose someone who's going to boost your status and make you the envy of all your friends but choose someone to love for the rest of your life. When wives are constantly looking sideways at other husbands, seeing their success, and comparing

their husbands to them, they're killing their husbands with their envy. God is the one who sits on the throne and gives goods, gifts, and graces to men. It is not up to us which goods, gifts, and graces we or others have. Envy literally means to "look in" or "look upon." That's exactly what we do with envy; we don't look at ourselves or God, we look upon other people's situations and compare.

One of the ten commandments has to do with coveting. There is a slight difference between coveting and envying, but it's worthwhile to talk about, because they are not far from each other. First, what's the difference between a shotgun and a rifle? Rifles are long-range weapons. Shotguns are short-range weapons. Envy and covetousness are similar to shotguns and rifles. Covetousness is a long-range weapon. You covet through TV screens, magazine pages, and shop windows. You covet things that you know you're not necessarily ever going to get. In other words, they're not really a worthy comparison with you. For example, you may want to be like a certain celebrity—walk like them, talk like them, and dress like them—but you don't mind them having their fame. You don't mind celebrity athletes being able to do fancy technical moves and getting paid for them. They grew up in a different neighborhood, went to a different school, and maybe their parents paid for them to put them in Juilliard or Yale. It makes sense, but you do want what they have. That's called covetousness. It's a long-range sin; you covet at a distance.

But envy is a short-range sin. Envy is a small town sin, a sin between friends. You only envy people who make a good comparison with you—from the same town, with the same upbringing, from the same school, with similar talents and opportunities. You say, "I grew up with that person, and they don't deserve all that! There they are with all of that and here I am with nothing, and it's not fair." With envy, you not only want what they have, but you don't think they deserve it in the first place. You begrudge them having it. When they rejoice, you weep, and when they weep, you rejoice. Envy is a short-range killer, church-splitter, and communion killer.

Diagnosing Envy

Now that we've defined envy, you may think you don't have a problem with it. But before you jump to that conclusion, I wonder if you would know if you had a brain tumor right now? Could you see it? How would you know that it was there? If you did have a brain tumor, you might only discover it when you started having really bad headaches. When those really bad headaches, which could also be a symptom of the fact that you didn't drink coffee that morning, are persistent, you go to the doctor. He examines the symptoms with a closer look and finds that brain tumor. You didn't know it was there, yet there it was. I just described envy to you, and envy, like a brain tumor, hides. You don't know it's there until you examine the symptoms. If you find that you have all of the symptoms of envy, you should entertain the notion that you are infected with envy.

Sadness

When Evagrius, the desert monk, counted and codified the seven deadly sins, he actually called the sin of envy "sadness." Thomas Aquinas said that sadness is a symptom of envy. There is a direct correlation between the sideways glance and sadness. I think we have a perfect example of this in Numbers 11. The children of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt and they were in the desert region on their way to the promised land. They began to grumble and moan and eventually weep with sorrow. Numbers 11:4-6 says that "the people of Israel also wept again and said, 'Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'"

Here they are in the desert, on the way to the promised land, and they couldn't stop thinking about all the wonderful food that they had back in Egypt. What was causing them to weep over and over again with sadness was not the fact that they were in a desert or the fact that God had manna tasted like coriander seed formed from the dew of the morning and could be made into bread (Numbers 11:7-8). It was not

because God gave them water from a rock and gave them his presence 24 hours a day (Numbers 20:11, Exodus 13:21).

If you are in a desert with God and he's nourishing you with water from the rock and bread from heaven, you have all that is necessary to have the most joy-filled life. Their sadness was not on account of their situation or location; it was on account of the fact that they kept comparing their situation and location with all others. They compared their current situation with their past situation. Even today we might say, "Back in the glory days. Back when my husband cared. If I could only get over this one hurdle. The grass is greener on the other side." Comparisonitis, constantly comparing your current situation with past and future situations, is a disease that will suck the joy out of your life.

It caused the Israelites to be incapable of enjoying bread from heaven and water from a rock, which typified Christ, and the presence of God, which culminated in Jesus Christ. Your comparisonitis, your envy, is killing you and your joy. You're not going to be able to enjoy your own children, spouse, job, or situation because you can't stop being filled with envy for other situations.

Not only are the Israelites comparing their current situation with past situations, they are comparing their current location with their past location, Egypt. We do that as well. Everyone has their own promised land. If you're a "real" Christian, maybe it's Dallas. Or if you're me, it's Louisville, with the seminary that has all the books I can read. Everyone has their personal holy city. If we could only get there. "If only my husband would get a better job or he would get promoted and we can get out of this dump." The joy is being sucked out of your life when you are constantly comparing your current house with other houses, your current spouse with other spouses, and your current location with other locations.

Contentment is the key to happiness, but envy brings about sadness. You who say, "No, Pastor, they are sad because they are in a desert." That makes sense. And they are even saying, "Our strength is dried up" (Numbers 11:6). Do they mean physical strength or spiritual strength? It's hard to tell because the original Hebrew word can be translated as both "strength" and "life." In this verse, I think they

actually think that their physical strength is drying up, because sadness begins to affect us physically, doesn't it?

But aren't they out of touch with reality? When they were back in Egypt, weren't they crying out for God to rescue them? They were enslaved, yet now they think they had it better. They were being abused and exploited. Their children were being taken and murdered. But here they are longing for "the glory days." Their envy has made them delusional. Have you ever envied another person's spouse and told them? They probably laughed in response and said something like, "You don't know what you're talking about." The grass isn't greener on the other side. Envy creates a delusion in your mind. And here they are with another delusion, that they can barely take another step in this desert.

God says to them in Deuteronomy 8:4, "Your clothing did not wear out and your foot did not swell these forty years." It may sound strange, because the only kind of foot swelling that we know of is when women are pregnant. But if you were a pirate, and you didn't have enough fruits and vegetables, you'd eventually get scurvy and your feet would swell. Feet swelling is a sign of malnourishment. But God said to Israel, "I gave you manna, your clothes never wore out on you, and you were never malnourished. I always took care of you" (Deuteronomy 8:3-4).

It wasn't really their physical strength that was dried up. It was their spiritual strength, because envy causes us to not even be able to enjoy the very presence of God, from whom all life flows. Even in the garden of Eden, with God's full-blown presence and all the trees and plants with fruit to eat in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve found reason to be discontent with a little prodding from Satan. He enters and says, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" Eve replies, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Genesis 3:1-3). And Satan keeps prodding. "I bet it is the best one. I bet it is the one tree that could cause you to be like God." So envy comes from the heart of Satan into the hearts of Adam and Eve, and suddenly they are unhappy with the garden of Eden. If envy could ruin the garden of Eden for you,

don't think it couldn't ruin your current situation with sadness. Are you marked by this symptom?

Separation

Envy originated in the heart of Satan, and He was separated from God because of it. Envy was also introduced into the hearts of Adam and Eve, and then they were separated from God, too. Cain killed Abel over envy, and then he was cast out of the garden of Eden. Sarah envied Hagar, driving Hagar to flee from her harsh mistress. Jacob and Esau took turns envying each other, which resulted in many years being separated from each other. Rachel and Leah, sisters, envied each other, too, fighting over who could bear the most children to Jacob. Then Joseph's brothers all envied him, leading them to sell him into slavery and separate him from his family for many years. The book of Genesis contains one story after another about envy tearing apart families.

If your life is characterized by a high friend turnover rate, in which you change friends like Burger King changes fry guys, are constantly sizing up your friends and knocking them down, you may be green with envy. In this case, envy is tearing apart your relationships. It is a sin that causes separation. In the book of Galatians, Paul lists the effects of the sin of envy as rivalry, dissension, and division (5:20). He is showing that envy starts in the heart and begins to pull friends apart from each other. It begins to breed competition and rivalry. And the friends begins to gossip, slander, create false narratives about each other (as opposed to giving the benefit of the doubt [1 Corinthians 13:7]), and marginalize each other. I believe the Australians call it the tall poppy syndrome. Any time there's a flower that's a little bit taller than the others, the others come together and knock it down. That's why envy drives a person to do. Perhaps envy is driving you to do that to your friends, and all of sudden there will be dissension, in which everyone is gossiping about each other. There's dissension in the ranks of your social clique, your church, your school, etc. Dissension eventually breaks down into full-blown division in which people are taking sides. This leads to rivalry as you begin to compete against each other. This is how churches split and friendships

end. If you have a high friend turnover rate and there is constant separation in your life, you might be green with envy.

Slavery

Solomon, the wisest man who ever walked on the planet other than Jesus and possibly pre-Fall Adam, said, “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor” (Ecclesiastes 4:4). The reason some people get up in the morning, work hard, and develop skills is because they envy their neighbors. Is that you? Do you work hard because you have someone you’re competing with—because you have a rival? Is that why you’re getting out of bed in the morning, because you’re a slave to envy?

When the press interviewed the woman who started one of the largest maid services in the nation, they asked her what motivated her to establish this huge and successful business. And she said, “Well, all those days I was cleaning those rich people’s houses, I began to think that they were a lot like me, and I wanted what they had.” Her covetousness, envy, and discontent eventually led her to establish a business. Is that your motivation in life? Are you working as unto the Lord, or are you working out of envy, as a slave (Colossians 3:22-24)?

Sloth

Envy not only causes slavery and workaholism; it also causes sloth. When people are filled with envy and they’re always looking at another person, never looking at themselves or what God has given them, they will be prone to say things like, “What’s the use? I do all this work and nothing ever works out. He might barely lift a finger and everything works for him. He has the Midas touch; everything he touches is successful.” They just give up and sit on the couch, saying, “Why even try? What’s the use?” Sadness, separation, slavery, and sloth are the headaches caused by the brain tumor of envy.

We had a diagnostic test for pride, and now here's one for envy. If any one of these is you, you probably have a problem with envy. You might be green with envy if...

...you are highly critical of others.

...you always discern the difference between a Tahoe and an Escalade.

...you constantly remind your wife that Channing Tatum is a bad actor.

...you are constantly rooting for the underdog.

...you give up easily and tend towards laziness.

...you resent others, not just for their stuff, but for their traits, their looks, their families, their positions, etc.

...you treat powerful, polished, talented, and/or rich people with contempt, always assuming the worst of them.

...you have negative feelings towards those people in groups who are cool, polished, or successful, very often believing the worst of them.

...you are prone to judging people immediately on their appearances.

...you feel threatened by people with similar giftings to you.

...you size people up all the time.

...it is difficult for you to enjoy the successes of others.

...you meditate on the fact that some have things that they don't deserve.

...you are constantly discontent.

Envy is killing us softly, quietly, and slowly. How do we fight it? For the two or three of us who can admit that we have an envy problem—to admit it *is* humiliating—I guarantee you there is a cure. There is an antidote. Here's how to fight it:

Defeating Envy

Follow the envy trail.

One way to fight it is to use it. “Pastor, are you saying I’m supposed to *use* my sin? I thought we’re not supposed to *have* any sin?” Envy is probably always going to be with us this side of heaven. Hopefully hatred towards others, malice, selfish ambition, division, rivalry, and dissension—all those little grandbabies of envy—aren’t going to be around all the time, but envy is probably something that’s always going to be fighting you, like our archenemy—our besetting sin. So you use it. Paul tells us that “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). In ancient times, a conqueror was someone who destroyed a whole people. Back in those days, you didn’t just defeat your enemies, however; you’d enslave your enemies after beating them. That’s what it means to be more than a conqueror. When it comes to sin, Satan, trials, and suffering in our lives, we are not just conquerors. We don’t just beat them; we use them. We exploit, oppress, and enslave them to our purposes.

We can beat envy up and make it our slave in the power of the Holy Spirit, by what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us. They say if you want to know where someone’s heart is, you follow the money. If you want to know where your idols are—where the shrine of your heart is, what your false righteousness is, the thing that you are trusting other than Jesus, the thing that is the highest competition to God in your life—follow the envy trail.

I have a wife who loves to cook. There is no competition between us when it comes to cooking. Do you want to know why? Cooking is not my righteousness. But if my wife were a preacher, there would be some competition, because preaching is probably an idol of mine. I’ll admit that. I have friends who are great chefs. I applaud them with absolute sincerity. I rejoice with them. Because cooking is not what makes me feel like a somebody. Whatever your righteousness is, whatever makes you feel like a somebody, or whatever you worship in competition with God is also what is hard to applaud others for. You might hesitantly applaud, or you might malign or make excuses about their success. You don’t want to be in comparison with them. You want to make sure that you’re not too close to them, because someone might look at you both side by side and

see that they're better. If you follow the envy trail, you can find out where your idol is. Use that enemy in your heart.

Count your blessings.

The Christian life is not merely a life of passivity, sitting on your couch and waiting for God to zap you with the holiness wand. It doesn't work that way. You have to be active. You have to train yourself up for godliness, taking part in the spiritual disciplines, studying to show yourself a worker who need not be ashamed, "work[ing] out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (1 Timothy 4:7, 2:15, Philippians 2:12-13). If you want to become more like Jesus, you have to actively pursue righteousness through reading your Bible, praying, and being faithful in covenant with your church in corporate worship, which includes singing, listening to God's word, taking the Lord's Supper, and witnessing baptism together. Grace comes to us through faith in remembering the gospel of Jesus Christ as a church. You can't skip church all the time and expect to become more like Jesus.

One of the spiritual disciplines by which we receive grace is the discipline of thanksgiving. Make a list, in your head or on paper, of the blessings you've received. Pull out the other list you've been making all your life of the things that God hasn't done. In fact, you probably don't even have to pull it out; it's always right there in your lap. Take that list and compare it to the list of blessings. The top of the blessings list may look something like this:

- Water from the rock
- Manna from heaven
- Redemption from my past
- Forgiveness of all the idolatries and sin I've ever committed
- The hope of future glory in the promised land where I will eat milk and honey in the presence of God for all eternity

Don't you see how irrational it is to have a list of all the things that God hasn't done for you in light of the neverending list of all the things that God *has* done for you? Add Ephesians 3:7-8 to your list of blessings. Paul says that the blessings that God gives us in our life are innumerable—boundless, endless, unsearchable. They go on for all infinity. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Add that to the list as well. If there is something that God is withholding from you right now, there's a good reason, isn't there?

Because he gave you his most precious possession, Jesus Christ, if he's withholding anything from you, there's a good reason. If he's causing you to be the guy behind the camera, there's a good reason. If he's causing you to be the guy in front of the camera, there's a good reason. If he's causing you to be childless, to have ten kids, to be single, to be married, etc., there's a good reason. He has concocted a plan for your life that will turn you into Jesus Christ. He knows exactly what you need. He promises to give you all things. Add one more verse, Romans 8:18, which says, “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Now you have these two lists next to each other: a list of a few things in life that you wish you had versus a list of infinite blessings that you can't even imagine (Ephesians 3:20). You can't even imagine the blessings you have in store for you when you cross over the Jordan river and enter the land of milk and honey (Deuteronomy 27:3). Count up all the blessings you *can* imagine, then let it dawn on you that you can't count that many, and then let it dawn on you that you can't even imagine all the blessings that God has in store for you. And then you put those two lists next to each other and realize that you shouldn't even be comparing them, that you have been out of touch with reality. Realizing this, you should no longer be envious.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is bad news and good news. The bad news is that nobody deserves anything. The good news is that Jesus Christ came down and gave us everything despite that. Matthew 27:18 says, “[Pilate] knew that it was out of envy that [the Pharisees] had delivered

[Jesus] up.” Jesus Christ was crucified because of envy—the envy of the people in the mob back then and the envy of us today.

Though our hearts were filled with envy towards Jesus Christ—we wanted the power that he had—he came down to earth to give us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of power! He came down to earth to give us all the affirmation that we would need, through faith. We wanted the position that Jesus Christ had—to be sons of God—and he came down to earth to freely give us an inheritance and adopt us as children of God.

We didn't have to be envious of Jesus. We don't have to be envious of anyone. It was because of our envy that he was murdered. Yet he said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The most important thing in defeating envy in our hearts is knowing that Jesus Christ did not begrudge us receiving the world when we didn't deserve it. Therefore we should not begrudge anyone getting the things that they don't deserve. When we get this, we become less green with envy and are made more like Christ.