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over our hearts in regard to envy and covetousness

## *Freedom from Envy*

*August 6, 2017*

**Sermon Text:** Genesis 4:5-8

**Scripture Reading:** Genesis 4

I have at least three sermons rolling around in my head this morning but I can only deliver one of them. I will try to keep them sorted out-

- A biblical theology of poverty and riches – how to help the poor and needy without a false theology of “wealth means God’s blessing”
- The danger of antinomianism – distortions of the doctrines of grace, examples from church history in the 1700’s and in our present day
- And this present study we will consider today – keeping watch

As we have just heard already from the Scripture reading, envy and covetousness were what led to murderous rage in Cain’s heart.

Genesis 4:5-8 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. (6) The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? (7) If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (8) Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

Notice then the very close connection between envy and anger. You see the same thing in James:

James 3:13-18 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works

in the meekness of wisdom. (14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. (15) This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. (16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

(17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (18) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James goes right on with the topic in chapter 4, which we will consider more closely in a moment.

Every Christian should be wary and fearful of this tactic of our enemy – jealousy, pride, envy, covetousness → anger, rage, murder. It is a nasty and wicked dynamic that many have fallen prey to. It was even pre-Cain in that Adam and Eve were led to be envious of the Lord's glory as God, wanting it for themselves just like the serpent.

Consider how envy and its nasty synonyms are really at the root of every other sin –

Galatians 5:17-21 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the

desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (19) Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, (20) idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, (21) envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Every single one of us has this potential in our sinful flesh and if we are not wise and cautious, the enemy will miss no opportunity to fan this diabolical spark into a flame. It is in my flesh and it is in yours.

James 4:1-7 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (2) You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. (3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

(4) You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore

whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (5) Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? (6) But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (7) Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

We read much – many books, many sermons, some good and a lot bad – about so-called “spiritual warfare.” And the Christian IS at war, constantly. We know this from passages such as Ephesians 6 – the armor of God and so on.

But as we see here in James’ words, the fundamental means of doing battle with the enemy is *to humble ourselves*. To put to death, by the Spirit in us, the works of the flesh such as coveting, envying, desiring what belongs to another, jealousy.

***Jealousy is murder in the making. Jealousy and coveting and envying set us against God, and set God against us. God is opposed to the proud. Jealousy divides and destroys.***

And jealousy is rooted in pride. The tentacles and evil roots of jealousy are a tangled mass, a can of devilish worms, and once they are allowed to

grow in us, untangling them is not easy and the damage they do can be devastating.

Where to begin in studying it? Let’s go back to Cain and see what we can learn there, then return to this passage in James.

Genesis 4:3-7 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, (4) and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, (5) but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. **So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.** (6) The LORD said to Cain, "**Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?**" (7) If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

That really was and is the question, is it not? WHY? *Why* was Cain angry and downcast? I think we can be quite certain of the answer. *Cain was jealous*. Cain, in his pride, thought of himself as quite important. And all wrapped up in his pride is this business we talk about all the time in confronting evil domestic abusers – *entitlement*. Cain had a mentality of entitlement. That is to say, he considered himself entitled to God’s

special favor.

So what happens when such a person does not get what they covet, what they see themselves as holding title to? You know the answer:

Genesis 4:8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

*When we are tempted to this sin of envy, we must understand that it is a vicious beast crouching just outside our door, ready to pounce upon us and destroy us as soon as opportunity affords it. We MUST master it.*

We notice another fact in this account of Cain's sin:

*Covetous people are not joyful people. Because they never HAVE all that they believe they are entitled to. They are quickly offended and quickly angered. When YOU or I are covetous, WE are quickly offended and quickly angered.*

Cain's countenance was downcast. Why? Are we to feel sorry for him? No. Cain is downcast because of his own jealousy and he is the one who must repent of it and master it.

The Apostle Paul also warns us about the terrible danger of coveting –

Romans 7:7-11 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (8) But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. (9) I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. (10) The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. (11) For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Paul it seems could do pretty well with the first 9, or so he thought. But that last one – that "you shall not covet" – was the one that got him. Sin nailed perhaps history's most perfect law-keeper (besides Christ of course) with *coveting*. It is that deceiving and that dangerous.

Listen again to James:

James 4:1-7 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (2) You desire and do not

have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. (3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Over the years as a pastor, I have seen case after case of “quarrels and fights” among people who claim to be Christians. Among pastors too! We have seen it in this church more than once. James is telling us what the root cause of it is – sinful passions that desire what the sinner thinks he or she is entitled to, and when it is denied them, look out. Murder. Fighting. Quarreling.

Could we make the observation that Cain had “low self-esteem”? I think that if meant in the right way, the answer is “yes.” This is a common and exponentially deceiving trap – the way we view and think of ourselves.

People who have a low view of themselves might be thought to be eminent saints when in fact the truth is quite opposite. When we fail to perceive ourselves rightly, to rightly understand who we are and where our real worth comes from, then the doors of our minds and hearts are flung open to invite jealousy in.

Do you see that this battle is fought in

our minds, primarily? We must, by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, guard our minds from these kinds of thoughts:

- He/she is better than me
- He/she thinks they are better than me
- Why does all the good stuff happen to that guy and not me?
- No one likes me
- She is popular – people flock around her
- They take all the praise for themselves – what about me?

Do you see that in all these examples, the problem is that these thoughts leave Christ out of the picture? That is to say, who we are in Christ? This thinking looks to the wrong place for value and worth. And when we go there, when we have this wrong lack of self-worth, envy is crouching at the door of our hearts. Notice carefully once more just how dangerous this beast of envy is. Why do you think these people who go out and start slaughtering people in a school or a mall or on the street do it? Because in their pride, in their worship of themselves, they hate anyone who has what they do not have. Who they perceive to be “better than” them.

Jealousy, envy and covetousness all

lead to or are bound up with, as we have said, this matter of *entitlement*. "I am entitled to have that, to be that, to do that. It is mine. I demand to have it." So deceiving is this kind of evil that it causes the person snared in to offer up warped prayers:

(James 4:3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

God of course never answers those prayers motivated by covetousness. "I want that, God, because I deserve it." "I want a bigger church. I want a bigger farm. I want that woman. I want fame. I want recognition. God, why don't you ever answer me!!!" And the answer is, because such prayers are motivated by evil desire, a coveting for the thing so that the "pray-er" can spend it on himself.

### **Conclusion:**

The Christian has no need to be prideful and therefore no need to be envious. For at least two reasons:

1. We are nothing. From the "greatest" to the "least," we are nothing.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly

standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27) But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (28) God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (29) so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (30) And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (31) so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 3:1-7 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. (2) I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, (3) for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? (4) For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? (5) What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. (6) I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. (7) So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who

gives the growth.

All glory belongs to the Lord alone. Only HE is entitled. This is very, very freeing when you think it through carefully. YOU do not need to BE “somebody.”

2. In Christ, we are and have everything!

You have heard the list many times before. Child of the king, heir, citizen of the kingdom, the beloved of God, sons of Abraham, lavishly forgiven, a holy priest entered into the holy place, owner of a vast estate in the new heavens and earth, personally known and named by Christ...and on and on we could go. What else is there to desire?

Now, one final note. Sometimes when I am preparing a sermon, like this one, I find myself wondering – will it make any difference? And I suppose that is what Jesus meant also when He gave His letters to the 7 churches through His Apostle John and in each one of them said:

***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'***

These warnings and encouragements we have heard this morning are given

to us right here in God’s Word. Do you have an ear to hear them? Does the Spirit of Christ dwell in you so that you see and hear? Then hear. Hear it. Heed it carefully so that you won’t be like so many, many, many down through the centuries who have fallen to this device of the devil called pride and envy.