

HOW TO ESCAPE THE TRAP OF ENVY

John 3:22-30

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. A few years ago I heard that a church down the road had died, and they had donated their building to another new church. Now, that's a wonderful gift. Of all people, I know that. We've been a portable church for fifteen years now. Getting a building, and for free, that's a pastor's dream come true! As a pastor, I should have rejoiced. I should have celebrated the good news with this church. This was a great victory for the kingdom of God. Now that church would be able to be more effective at reaching people for Christ in our area. That's great news! But I didn't celebrate. I didn't rejoice. I was upset. I was disappointed. I resented that pastor. I complained. Do you know what that's called? Envy. And pastors struggle with it all the time. We envy each other's budgets, buildings, and butts (attendance). We don't rejoice with one another, we criticize one another. We complain about one another. We compete with one another. That's how tempting, insidious envy is. If even pastors struggle with envy, then it's no surprise that envy is a huge problem in our society.
2. What is envy? The **New Unger's Bible Dictionary** has a good description: "That discontented feeling that arises in the selfish heart in view of the superiority of another, nearly tantamount to jealousy. That malignant passion that sees in another qualities that it covets, often resulting in hate for their possessor. Envy is ill will, malice, spite. It always desires and often strives to degrade others, not so much because it aspires after elevation as because it delights in obscuring those who are more deserving. It is one of the most odious and detestable of vices."
3. If I could add my own definition, envy is an unhappy, angry, and unfriendly attitude toward someone who has something that you want. It rejoices when others fail, and it is disturbed when others succeed.
4. Here are some examples of envy. You get sad, angry, and/or mean when someone gets something that you want; when someone gets a new toy; when someone gets a new house/car; when someone gets a promotion; when someone gets in good shape or loses a lot of weight; when someone kicks a bad habit; when someone inherits a lot of money; when someone gets a lot of attention; when someone gets a lot of praise; when someone gets a good grade; when someone wins a competition.
5. The Bible very clearly condemns envy:
 - i. **Galatians 5:26** "Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."
 - ii. **1 Peter 2:1** "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander."

6. James had some strong words about the evil and danger of envy. **James 3:14-16**
 “14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don’t boast and deny the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.”
 - i. First, he describes envy as unwise, earthly (worldly), unspiritual, and demonic.
 - ii. Second, he tells us where envy leads: disorder and every evil practice.
7. Envy begins as negative feeling about someone, and then it turns into a negative attitude toward someone, and it eventually leads to negative actions against someone.
8. We certainly see the destructive nature of envy in the Bible:
 - i. Cain was envious because God approved of Abel’s offering but not his own, so Cain murdered his brother (Genesis 4).
 - ii. The Philistines were envious of Isaac’s wealth, so they stopped up all of his wells with dirt and forced him to leave the land (Gen 26:12-16).
 - iii. Joseph’s brothers envied him because he was the object of their father’s favoritism, so they decided to kill him, but changed their mind and sold him into slavery (Gen 37).
 - iv. When Saul heard the women of Israel sing, “Saul killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands,” his heart was filled with envy and from then on he hated David and tried to murder him (1 Sam 18).
 - v. Envy was ultimately the motive that led the Jewish leaders to have Jesus crucified (Mt 27:18).
 - vi. Envy was also the driving motive behind the persecution of the early church. The Jewish leaders saw the huge crowds flocking to hear the apostles, and they were “filled with jealousy” (Acts 5:17).
9. Envy is not just a negative feeling, or even just a bad attitude. It can lead to the worst forms of sin.
10. So how do we escape the trap of envy? John the Baptist is going to show us the way. On one occasion Jesus called John the greatest man who ever lived up to that point, and we’re going to see why today.

II. TEXT: John 3:22-30

22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went to the Judean countryside, where he spent time with them and baptized.

23 John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there. People were coming and being baptized, 24 since John had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Then a dispute arose between John’s disciples and a Jew about purification. 26 So they came to John and told him, “Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him.”

27 John responded, “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him.’ 29 He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom’s friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice. So this joy of mine is complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.”

III. 5 STEPS TO ESCAPE ENVY

1. Recognize that you have it better than you deserve.

- i. Jesus and John were both baptizing people at the same time, but in different locations. John’s crowd was rapidly decreasing as more and more people flocked to hear Jesus. This worried John’s disciples. It bothered them. They were envious of Jesus. So, they came to John to report the alarming news. The first thing John said was, **John 3:27** “No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven.” In other words, the only reason that we had such big crowds, and such widespread influence, is because of God’s grace. In His mercy He decided to use us for His purposes. We didn’t deserve it. It was a gift of God. So if God now wants to decrease our crowd and our influence, then it’s perfectly within His right.
- ii. The reason that we envy is because we think we deserve more; we deserve better. But the truth is that we deserve God’s wrath. We are sinful; we have offended and rebelled against almighty God. If we deserve anything, it is punishment. If we have anything good, it is an undeserved gift from heaven.
- iii. In other words, our attitude should be that of gratitude and not envy. And if we remember that all we have is a gracious, merciful gift from God, and not deserved, then we can escape envy.
- iv. How can you recognize that you have it better than you deserve? Take time every day to count your blessings. Take time every day to thank God for all of his gracious gifts to you.
- v. **1 Thessalonians 5:18** “give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
- vi. Are you sick?
 1. Could it be that you are destroying yourself with envy? **Proverbs 14:30** “A tranquil heart is life to the body, but jealousy is rotteness to the bones.”
 2. Modern medical research reveals that when you consistently focus on your blessings and what you are grateful for each day, it has positive effects on your physical and mental health. Rick Warren, Daniel Plan,⁴⁴
- vii. Envy is caused by focusing on what you don’t have, or by focusing on what others do have. We can escape envy by thanking God regularly that we have it much better than we deserve.

2. Realize that God is in control.

- i. There is something else going on in John's statement when he said, **John 3:27** "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven." He is also talking about the sovereignty of God. God is in control of all things. The reason why Jesus' crowd is growing is because God has decreed it.
- ii. Often the reason we envy is because we fear that the world is out of control. We're not getting what we deserve. They're getting more than they deserve. We're not getting what we need, and what is best for us; and they are prospering more than they deserve.
- iii. But we have to remember that God is in control. We have what we have because God has decreed it; and they have what they have because God wants it that way.
- iv. "But that doesn't help me, because they don't deserve what God has given them, and God isn't giving me what I deserve and what I need!"
- v. We must realize that the God who is in control is good, and loving, and just, and fair, and wise.
- vi. God is going to give to us what is right for us, and He is going to others what is right for them. He is going to work it all out according to His good and perfect plan. And in the end, He is going to do what is just and fair. He is going to right all wrongs. He is going to punish the wicked and reward the righteous accordingly.
- vii. The God who is in control promises to meet your needs (Phil 4:19). That means that He is going to give you what is best for you. If it's in your best interest, then He will give it to you. But if it's not good for you, He won't give it to you.
- viii. You have to remember that often what we think is best and what God thinks is best are not the same thing. Sometimes what we think is best will only hurt us. We can't see it, but God can.
- ix. Sometimes the worst thing that can happen to a person is success and prosperity. Prosperity is harder on a man spiritually than adversity. God knows what we can handle. He knows what is best for us. And He is working it all out with our good in mind. Sometimes the fact that you have less is God's blessing to you, and the fact your neighbor has more is God's punishment against them.
- x. **JC Ryle** "It is a sad fact that constant worldly prosperity, as a general rule, is harmful to a believer's soul. We cannot stand it. Sickness, losses, crosses, anxieties, and disappointments seem absolutely necessary to keep us humble, watchful, and spiritual-minded. They are as needful as the pruning knife to the vine and the refiner's furnace to the gold. They are not pleasant to flesh and blood. We do not like them, and we often do not see their meaning. No chastening at present seems to be cause for joy, but rather for grief; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness

(Hebrews 12:11). When we reach heaven, we will find that it all worked out for our good.”

- xi. That’s why it’s not fair to compare. God has not promised equality. He has promised to take care of you. He is going to do what’s best for you, but what’s best for you may not look anything like what is best for someone else. If He gave you exactly what He gave to someone else, it would make you miserable.
- xii. **Thomas Watson** “A staff may help the traveler, but a bundle of staffs will be a burden to him.”

3. Remember that it’s not about you.

- i. The next thing John said is, **John 3:28** “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I’ve been sent ahead of him.’”
- ii. In other words, John said, “It’s not about me, guys. It’s not about us. It’s about Jesus.”
- iii. We tend to get envious because we forget that’s life’s not about us. We get all wrapped up in trying to achieve success; trying to keep up with the Joneses; trying to live the most enjoyable, comfortable, safe, luxurious life we can. And when life doesn’t turn out like we want, when others have it better than us, then we envy them.
- iv. Pastor **Rick Warren** wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*, one of the best-selling non-fiction books of all time. The opening sentence of the book is four words: “It’s not about you.”
- v. To escape envy you have remember that it’s not about you. This life is not about you. Your purpose is not to become healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. And God hasn’t promised those things to you. Your purpose is to glorify Jesus; to point people to Jesus; to serve Jesus. And God has promised to use you if you will let him.
- vi. Your purpose in life is not to enjoy life and have fun. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus. Your purpose is not to be famous. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus. Your purpose is not to get rich and have all the nicest things. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus. Your purpose is not to be healthy and feel good. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus. Your purpose is not to keep up with the Joneses, and to have everything that they have. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus. Your purpose is not to make much of yourself. Your purpose is to point people to Jesus.
- vii. And that means that God may lead you to a place of suffering, and poverty, and danger, and obscurity. He might give you less than someone else. You might not be able to keep up with the Joneses. You might not get all the attention and praise that you deserve. If you’ll remember that it’s not about you, then you’ll be content with that.

- viii. Ed Searcy met a pastor in Romania who was arrested for preaching the gospel. He was sentenced to the harshest punishment under Romanian law – to be an exterminator. He had to spend the rest of his life as an exterminator. But instead of being depressed he rejoiced. He said that as he goes from house to house killing rats he gets to share the gospel with all those people where people don't know Christ. This man could have been envious of others who had better jobs, but because he lived by a higher purpose – pointing people to Jesus – he was able to escape the trap of envy and find contentment.

4. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

- i. Look at what John says next. **John 3:29** “He who has the bride is the groom. But the groom’s friend, who stands by and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the groom’s voice. So this joy of mine is complete.”
- ii. Israel is often called the bride, and God is the groom. In the NT the church is the bride, and Jesus is the groom. John compared himself to the friend of the groom, or the best man, and Jesus to the groom. In ancient Judean culture the friend of the groom played an important role in the wedding. He essentially oversaw the entire wedding and celebration. When it was time for the ceremony, he was the one who brought the bride to the bridegroom and gave her away. John was saying that was his purpose – to bring the bride to the bridegroom. And then at the end of the ceremony, when it was time to consummate the marriage, the bride would be brought to the bedroom, and the friend of the bridegroom would stand guard and not allow anyone to enter. He would wait for the bridegroom, and when he would hear the bridegroom’s voice, he would give the bride away and rejoice at their happiness. John was not envious because he was rejoicing over Christ’s victory.
- iii. To escape envy you have to learn to rejoice when others rejoice. Celebrate their success. Cheer for their prosperity. This is called sympathy. Put yourself in their shoes.
- iv. **Romans 12:15** “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”
 - 1. To overcome envy, rejoice with those who rejoice.
 - 2. AND, weep with those who weep.
- v. **Luke 6:31** “Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them.”
 - 1. How do you want others to treat you when you prosper? Do you want them to be happy for you, to celebrate with you, to congratulate you, or to resent you, and criticize you, and chop you down?
- vi. Here’s the challenge. You have to do this even when you don’t feel like it. You will feel like criticizing them. You will feel like grumbling about them. But resist that. Instead, rejoice with them.

- vii. If you have a hard time celebrating when others prosper, try praying for them. In London, a contemporary with young Charles Spurgeon was an older preacher who had been in the city for a generation. He'd spent years laboring faithfully in his ministry. And along came Charles Haddon Spurgeon, this fiery, winsome, young, dynamic individual who arrived at London when he was about 20 years of age. And rather immediately, I mean, not even in a year or two or three, but immediately when he hit the scene, he had such an impact that people just flooded to hear Spurgeon preach. He was like a star that appeared in the sky, just flashing. And the older minister said that when the throngs began to crowd around the young man, envy and jealousy began to enter my heart and it ate me up...it ate me up. There he was, a famous preacher in London, but the throngs were listening to Spurgeon. And the older pastor said he got on his knees and cried out before God and he told the Lord all about it. And then he said the Lord began to put in his heart praise and intercession and pleading for the young man, Spurgeon. He said, quote: "The day came, after I prayed and took it to God, when upon every victory Spurgeon won, I felt as though I had done it myself." God gave him victory.

5. Rest in God's place for you.

- i. Notice John's words in verse 30. **John 3:30** "He must increase, but I must decrease." John was content with the role that God for him. John was content to fade into obscurity. He was content to lose his crowds, his popularity, his audience, his attention, his fame. He was content to be outshined by someone else. He was content to be second place. He was able to rest in God's place for him.
- ii. **Jeremiah Burroughs** "Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."
- iii. To escape envy you have to learn to be content. You have to learn to rest in God's place for you.
- iv. Be content to decrease. Be content to downsize. Be content with your house. Be content with obscurity. Be content with simplicity. Be content being middle class. Be content with your used car. Be content with poor health. Be content with a small ministry. Be content with having two jobs. Be content with meeting in a movie theater. Be content with being a single mother. Be content with the spouse God has given you. Be content with your parent's rules. If you are content, then won't be envious. Envious people are discontent people; they are people who are not happy with their own lives.
- v. How can you be content and not envious? The content person says two things:

1. All I want is what God wants for me. They trust in God's sovereignty. God is going to give them what's best; God is going to lead them to what's best; God is going to withhold what is not good for them. They don't want anything if God doesn't want it for them.
2. All I need is what God wants for me. They are not dependent on this world for their happiness. They don't need good health, and wealth, and luxury, and comfort, and fame, and recognition, and position to be happy. They don't need to keep up to be happy. All they need is God. They have found that as long as they are close to Jesus, that He is enough for them to enjoy life to the fullest.
 - vi. To escape envy you must be content with your contents.
 - vii. **Someone** said, "Discontentment makes rich people poor; contentment makes poor people rich."

IV. CONCLUSION

1. I read a Grecian story of a man who killed himself through envy. His fellow citizens had reared a statue to one of their number who was a celebrated victor in the public games. So strong was the feeling of envy which this incited in the breast of one of the hero's rivals that he went forth every night in order, if possible, to destroy that monument. After repeated efforts he moved it from its pedestal, and it fell, but in its fall it crushed him. (Nena T. Dickerson)
2. Envy is not just destructive to your walk with God, it can hurt others and yourself.
3. This morning you probably realize that you struggle with envy. Let this be a reminder of two things:
 - i. You are a sinner in need of a Savior – Jesus Christ.
 - ii. You need to abide in Christ so that He can change you.