

## Jealousy & Envy: Sins We Hardly Discuss

By Shepherd's Theological Seminary

Jealousy, envy, rivalry. We read those words and recognize their sinful qualities. We know they're wrong. But it seems most of us can easily dismiss them as something fairly minor, as if no more than dandruff of the soul. "Oh, of course it's a sinful way of thinking and feeling." Then we just brush it off and everything's fine.

The more I've examined my own heart, the more I've cringed at the ugliness of jealousy and the more I see its ugly tentacles wrapped around my heart and mind. It's not something insignificant. It's a sin that can entangle and corrupt my soul like an invisible barbed-wire. And if I do not repent of this sin, it can lead to bitter and vile emotions and actions. Jealousy. Pride. Greed. Covetousness. Rivalry. Hate. Murder.

Ugly is not too strong a word to describe the sin of jealousy.

### THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

The catalogue of sins mentioned in the Bible is difficult to read and seriously consider. Throughout the first five books of the Bible all sorts of sins were forbidden and practiced and punished. The same is true in a most sweeping way throughout the Old Testament. Specifically in Proverbs 6:16-19 we read: "These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren." In the New Testament we read Romans 1:29-31 or Galatians 5:19-21 and shudder: "Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like" (Galatians 5:19-21).



Just stop and see buried within that vile catalogue of twenty-four sins listed above the supposedly minor and insignificant sins of jealousy and envy. That should give pause to the notion that these sins are merely dandruff of the soul.

Through the years, godly men and women have attempted to understand the nature of mankind's tendency to indulge in sin. As the Church developed, many Christians tried to correlate Proverbs 6:19-21 with Galatians 5:19-21 and Romans 1-3 and all the other mentions of sin in the Bible. This speculation led to some kind of consensus. And for centuries Christians have traditionally referred to The Seven Deadly Sins... but where did this come from?

The beginning of this concept of listing and ranking deadly sins is often attributed to the works of a 4th century monk named Evagrio Pontico. He listed eight evil thoughts: gluttony, fornication (lust), avarice (greed), hubris (pride), envy, wrath (anger), vainglory (boasting), sloth (laziness).<sup>[1]</sup> The list was widely disseminated and became well-accepted. Two hundred years later, Gregory I (often referred by Protestants as the first Pope) reduced the list to seven sins, folding vainglory (boasting) into hubris (pride) and ranking them from most serious to least serious sins: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust.<sup>[2]</sup> His purpose was to provide a list of sins that would be inclusive enough to implicate a vast range of sinful behavior, yet simple and memorable enough to cause guilt in illiterate peasants. He admonished Christians to behave morally by avoiding the Seven Deadly Sins and instead adhere to the Seven Cardinal Virtues: faith, hope, love, wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control.<sup>[3]</sup> Later theologians, including St. Thomas Aquinas, would contradict the notion that the seriousness of sins could be ranked in this way.<sup>[4]</sup> But the concept stuck. Through the writings of Dante Alighieri in his epic poem The Divine Comedy, and many others down through history, the Seven Deadly Sins (or at least the concept and phrase) became a well-known part of Western civilization. Debates about what sins should or shouldn't be considered "deadly" continue to this day.<sup>[5]</sup>

But what's striking to me is the fact that the Biblical catalogue of sin is so very much a part of our history, and right there in the list of Galatians 5:19-21 and in the traditional Seven Deadly Sins, we find the sin of envy and jealousy. This sin is seen as profoundly significant in God's Word and in Western civilization. Yet it barely merits more than a casual brush-off in the hearts and minds of all too many people today.

## EXAMPLES OF JEALOUSY

What are some of the sad examples of jealousy in life? These below would not involve all of them, but here are some to consider. We can become jealous of another person's:

possessions, wealth, financial assets (this is what covetousness is).  
recognition, opportunities, privileges, advantages.  
looks, appearance, beauty, health.  
personality, abilities, talents, skills.  
awards, accomplishments, achievements, popularity.  
position, job, status, placement at work, prestige.  
intelligence, knowledge, education.  
spouse, family, friends, relationships.

Those are just a few examples. All of them could be summarized with these words by Jerry Bridges in his book Respectable Sins: "Envy is the painful and sometimes resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by someone else."<sup>[6]</sup> Painful, resentful awareness of someone else's advantage over us. Such tragic words we can understand all too well!

### WHY IS IT SO BAD?

By now perhaps you are in agreement that envy and jealousy are bad ways for us to respond. But you may still be unconvinced. Are they really that bad? Aren't they more private sins that fail to rise to the level of even worse attitudes, actions and responses? Can't they just be brushed off since we are the only ones affected and no one can see into our hearts?

Jealousy and envy and covetousness are all declared to be sin in the Scriptures. That is reason enough to seriously consider the sinfulness of these related sins. God declares these attitudes of the heart to be sinful. That is all that is needed to condemn the sinfulness of such evil responses.

God also says that such attitudes are demonic. In James 3:14-16 "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there." When your heart devises its petty jealousies, you are thinking and acting like a demon!

A third reason why envy and jealousy are so bad is because they lead to other depravities. When you allow such vile attitudes to fester, other sins are given a foothold into your soul. That's exactly what James 3:16 says: "For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there." Jealousy leads to bitterness leads to hate leads to rivalries leads to violence leads to murder. That's what James 3:16 is implying. And that's what James 4:1-2 clearly states: "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and

covet and cannot obtain." Not a beautiful portrayal of humanity. Jealousy is the murderous spirit of envious hate.

## DEFINING THE WORDS

It is helpful to understand the meaning of the words used in the Bible for the ugly attitudes being examined in this article. Similar words are used in both Testaments of the Bible.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word used is *qana*, meaning "zealous" or "jealous" depending on the context. In Genesis 37:11 Joseph's brothers were "jealous of him" and their jealousy led them to fake his death and sell him into slavery in Egypt. A similar use of *qana* in the negative is found in Numbers 5:14 (two times) and 5:20 referring to a husband who is jealous of his wife's behavior. But *qana* is also used in contexts where zeal and acts of deep devotion are seen in a positive light. Phineas was commended by the Lord for being "zealous for God" (Numbers 25:11, 13). Elijah claimed he was "very zealous for the LORD God" (1 Kings 19:10, 14). And then the word *qana* is used in a number of passages referring to God's jealousy for His people, a holy jealousy based on His claim for an exclusive relationship (Deuteronomy 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Joshua 24:19; Ezekiel 39:25; Nahum 1:2). In fact, the reason God gives for the Second Commandment is because "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). Because Israel followed pagan gods, God was jealous (Deuteronomy 32:16, 21; Zechariah 1:14; 8:2).

In the New Testament there are basically two Greek words used to describe jealousy and envy, both words being used in Galatians 5:20-21. The word translated "jealousy" is the Greek word *zēlos*, from which we get the English "zeal." It literally means "heat" or "come to boil."<sup>[7]</sup> Figuratively it is used in two ways (like *qana* in the Old Testament): positively it is a great enthusiasm for a cause, a person or an object, which we normally refer to as zeal; negatively it is the darker side of envy or jealousy.<sup>[8]</sup> In the New Testament the word *zēlos* is thus translated either as "zeal" or "godly jealousy" (John 2:17; Romans 10:2; 1 Corinthians 12:31; 2 Corinthians 7:11) or as "envy" or "jealousy" (Acts 5:17; Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 13:4; James 3:14, 16).

A useful summary of all the above is given once again by Jerry Bridges: "There are legitimate occasions for jealousy, such as when someone is trying to win your spouse away from you... Sinful jealousy occurs, however, when we are afraid someone is going to become equal to or even superior to us."<sup>[9]</sup> The root emotion of jealousy is pride, which leads to the fear that someone, somewhere has an advantage over us and will overtake our place in life.

The second Greek word used in the New Testament is the word phthonos. Unlike zēlos, this second word is only once used positively (James 4:5 referring to God's Spirit jealously yearning for us). The word phthonos is translated most often by the word "envy." Pilate knew the Jews handed Jesus over to him for trial out of "envy" (Mark 15:10). In Galatians 5:21 phthonos is listed in that catalogue of sins and translated "envy" and then the verb form in 5:26 is translated as "envying." In Titus 3:3 it is used as a description of our past lives outside of Christ: "we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and phthonos." The idea behind the word is a sense of rivalry due to ill-will and spite. But in actuality, the words zēlos and phthonos are very close synonyms easily used together as in Galatians 5:20-21.

Together jealousy and envy germinate in the soil of pride. They lead to an unhealthy competitiveness that demands and aggressively seeks to be number one in every circumstance. Rivalry is another way of describing this twisted attitude which always needs to be the center of attention, always on top, always in charge, always the best. It can never take the back seat nor will it ever leave center stage. Not being recognized and not being in control is something to be avoided at all costs. Envy, jealousy and rivalry see everyone as a competitor, everyone as a threat, and every question as a challenge to my authority. I see these attitudes all too often in my fellow pastors and people in our churches. And I am ashamed to admit that all too often I see these attitudes in myself.

## CONCLUSION

What can we do about these sins we hardly ever discuss? Is there any hope for miserable, jealous wretches like ourselves?

Yes, there is hope.

First, we need to understand the truth about ourselves. Our supposed secret attitudes of envy and jealousy are open scandals before the holy God. If you have never done so, you need to admit your sin and turn to the Lord in repentant faith, trusting in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior. If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will experience the washing of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit will cleanse your soul and indwell you and you will for the first time be able to live the life God commands you to live.

If you are already truly born again, then by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit you may grow in grace. And that is liberating! With each episode of sinful jealousy, you will have the option of confessing that sinful attitude and seeking to become more like Christ and less like the demons (James 3:16).

The true Christian is able to deal honestly with himself or herself. He or she can truthfully admit that nobody can do everything. So when someone is better than you at something, you can admit this is not a surprise. And if they are better at something that is REALLY important to you, then you should gulp hard and carefully admit: God created you as you are (Psalm 139:14-16; John 3:27); God gave you a certain family and set of experiences and giftedness and you choose to accept His calling for you (Psalm 75:6-7; Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 4:7) AND you choose to accept His calling for that other person; and you can humbly affirm your strengths and equally admit your weaknesses. And you finally admit that it is a sin to compare yourself to others, so you choose by the grace and power of God to stop with the uncontrolled resentment and insecurities and fears.

Jealousy, envy, and pride are not merely dandruff of the soul. They are ugly sins. You must guard against them with a serious and determined vigilance. And you must sincerely repent of them when they ooze into your attitudes and threaten to pollute your soul.

## END NOTES

1 Evagrio Pontico, *Gli Otto Spiriti Malvagi*, translated by Felice Comello (Parma, Italy: Pratiche Editrice, 1990), p.11-12.

2 Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4: The Age of Faith* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950), p. 523. See also Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975) and Catholic Encyclopedia: "Pope St. Gregory I ('the Great')" accessed at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06780a.htm>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Just type into your computer's search engine the words "seven deadly sins" and look at the more recent postings. Modern people continue to be fascinated with categorizing and ranking the degrees of sin, debate whether even such a concept is a valid one!

6 Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), p. 149.

7 Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988 Revised edition).

8 Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 338.

9 Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, p. 151.