

Envy

Much that Proverbs calls "strife" may involve components of envy. The distorted sense of justice behind wrath turns against the other party, in the case of envy, simply for who they are or what they have. Envy, though, is not merely coveting what someone else has, or feeling jealous over what should belong to oneself. Envy is wishing to have what someone else has and desiring that they not have it. Envy, in other words, has the neighbor as its object of attack, rather than focusing primarily on an object of desire. Envy is sadly central to the biblical story, almost from the beginning. Since there can be only one God, to desire the fruit of the tree for being "like God" attacked the divine sovereign directly. The narrative soon follows with Cain's murder of Abel, which transpired out of envy over God's approval. Envy deals even more deeply than covetousness or jealousy with who we are on the inside, violating both aspects of charity—love of God and love of neighbor.

Proverbs explicitly confronts envy more rarely than other vices, as we should expect. Proverbs addresses character, not just behavior, yet focuses—given its literary nature—primarily on the resulting social practices and public manifestations such as speech. Thus envy is difficult to confront directly with the kind of advice Proverbs usually gives. Nevertheless, Proverbs does baldly say, "Don't envy the wicked" and "don't envy the rich" (e.g., 23:17-21; 24:1-2, 19-20). Plus, many bases on which people envy others are confronted by material regarding other sins such as lust, gluttony, and greed. The reasons for not envying the wicked or the rich are familiar: their hedonism ironically leads to poverty; they introduce chaos and strife into the social order; and they have no future—even if we do not know exactly how God will deal with them. Proverbs describes envy of

the rich as an unfortunate fact of cultural life: "The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, / but the rich have many friends. Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor" (14:20-21). Furthermore, the ways in which the text confronts avarice suggest a basis that likewise confronts envy: "Better is a dry morsel with quiet / than a house full of feasting with strife" (17:1). Verses such as this laud loving harmony in the social order as a divine gift that offers life to the fullest. In so doing they point beyond rejecting avarice or lust or gluttony alone toward avoiding envy as well.

Other verses confront one's attitude toward a neighbor. "Whoever belittles another lacks sense, / but an intelligent person remains silent" (11:12); "The souls of the wicked desire evil; their neighbors find no mercy in their eyes " (21:10); "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, / or else the LORD will see it and be displeased, / and turn away his anger from them" (24:17-18); "An enemy dissembles in speaking while harboring deceit within; when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it, for there are seven abominations concealed within; though hatred is covered with guile, the enemy's wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, / and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling" (26:24-27). Read together, these verses suggest that, when struggling with envy, one should keep it to oneself; however, given the tendency for our true feelings to reveal themselves over time, we ought to overcome our envy or else expect it to ensnare us in due course—if not by natural processes, then perhaps due to divine intervention.

The power of this cluster of emotions is apparent comparatively in 27:4: "Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, / But who can stand before jealousy?" (NASB). The

terms are absolute in 14:30: "The life of the body is a healthy heart, / but jealousy is a rot of the bones". Jealousy can have a positive connotation in the context of covenant, when God or a married person is appropriately zealous for the loving fidelity of a partner. Here, though, the text is confronting the rotten envy that eats away at one's insides until, more than likely, it surfaces in a way that spreads the danger from oneself to others.

The only escape from this vice is to find a completely different foundation for our self-worth. Envy depends on a comparative self-value. The worth of the envious—at least from their perspective—is conditional on excelling their competitors. Moving out of envy into love is analogous to making the transition from dating to marriage. The premise of dating includes needing to outdo the competition to win your lover's affection and secure the relationship, while the premise of marriage is that one is working from an already secure relationship into greater and greater love.

In short, if we really fear God in covenant, then the opinions of others should not control us. Too often, though, we try to secure our own place in the world.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways is Envy contrary to the will of God?
2. "The only escape from this vice is to find a completely different foundation for our self-worth. Envy depends on a comparative self-value." How does understanding this help us move away from envy.
3. How do we help another person (or society) be released from envy?