

Envy

Use in Biblical Literature

Envy is mentioned frequently in

- intertestamental literature (i.e. works written after the books of the Old Testament and before the books of the New Testament); see Wisdom 2:24; 6:23; 1 Macc. 8:16; 3 Macc. 6:7 (compare also the adjective φθονερός “envious” in Sir. 14:10 and the verb φθονέω “envy” in Tob. 4:7,16) and
- the New Testament; see Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:21; 1 Tim. 6:4; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1 and for the verb φθονέω, Gal. 5:26.
 - Things are done “for envy” (διὰ φθόνου), i.e. are prompted by envy in Mt. 27:18; Mk. 15:10 (why the chief priests and the crowd handed Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified); Phil. 1:15 (“some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry,” rather than goodwill); cf. also James 4:5 (πρὸς φθόνου ἐπιποθεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα ὃ κατώκησεν ἐν ἡμῖν): “does the Spirit which took up its abode within us (i.e. the Holy Spirit) long *enviously*?”

Meaning of the Word

Envy (φθόνος, *phthonos*) is the sin of **being saddened** (grieved, displeased, annoyed, indignant, or resentful) **when another person comes to have something good.**

Envy makes one see another person’s good as taking away from one’s own good.

- Cf. Ps.-Plato *Def.* 416: Φθόνος· λύπη ἐπὶ φίλων ἀγαθοῖς ἢ οὖσιν ἢ γεγενημένοις. “Envy: being distressed by the goods of one’s friends, either present or past” (ET J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, *Plato. Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, 1685).
- Aristotle *Rhet.* 1387b22: ἐστὶν ὁ φθόνος λύπη τις ἐπὶ εὐπραγία φαινομένη τῶν εἰρημένων ἀγαθῶν περὶ τοὺς ὁμοίους μὴ ἵνα τι αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ δι’ ἐκείνους. “Envy is pain at the sight of such good fortune as consists of the good things already mentioned; we feel it towards our equals, not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because the other people have it” (ET W. Rhys Roberts, *Aristotle. Rhetoric*, Dover, 2004, 81).
- Stoics (Diogenes Laertius 7.63,111): Envy is “distress at others’ good fortunes.”
- Basil of Caesarea *On Envy*: Envy is “distress over the success of one’s neighbor” and “pain caused by the neighbor’s prosperity.”
- Augustine *De generibus litterarum* 11-14: Envy is “hatred of someone else’s good fortune.”

- The opposite of envy is φιλανθρωπία (*philanthropia*), i.e. a love of one's fellow human beings that makes one happy to see another person receive something good (cf. Demosthenes 20, 165).
 - For this reason, envy is the ultimate human act of sin (ἔσχατον τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἁμαρτημάτων), because it causes us to leave behind our humanity and our fellow feeling for other human beings (Aelius Aristides 29,5 K.=40 p. 752D), i.e. our sympathy for other people in their difficulties, a willingness to help them, and being able to be sincerely happy for them in their successes/good fortune. Cf. Rom. 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep."
- See Milobenski, *Der Neid in der griechischen Philosophie*, Wiesbaden, 1964

Sources of Envy

Envy does not arise from one's outward circumstances (i.e. what one has or doesn't have) and it cannot be dealt with by changing one's circumstances.

Envy comes from

- pride, because we want to be superior to the person we envy; envy requires that one's own superiority be established and maintained at the expense of others.
- vainglory, because envy concerns good things that are seen by others; we want these good things to belong to us, so that others will see us in a certain way and honor us for having these good things.

Envy and Jealousy

(1) We envy those who we see as like ourselves.

- If we reflect on who we envy, we will discover how we define our own identity and where we feel that identity to be most vulnerable.

(2) The envious person establishes his/her self-worth only in relation to others (based on a sense that it would be wrong for oneself to be inferior to others).

- Envy has a competitive view of self-worth (seeing love/adoration/honor as something that is limited and in short supply, so that if one person has it, another cannot).
 - Envy "is glad when others are sad, and sad when others are glad. Charity turns enemies into friends; envy turns friends into enemies" (Tonne, *Lent and the Capital Sins*, 42).

Because of this, envy is closely associated with jealousy (=ζήλος [*zelos*], used in a bad sense)(cf. 1 Macc. 8:16; Test. Sim. 4:5; 1 Clem. 3:2; 4:7; 5:2).

One therefore refuses to

- agree that the other person should be praised or to
- accept the situation in which the other person has something good.

Instead one holds a grudge and thinks that the other person should be denied these good things or prevented from having them. If the envious person cannot achieve this, he/she will seek to diminish (make less of) the good the other person has by complaining and finding fault with him/her.

- Cf. 2 Clem. 15:5 (cited in BAGD, 3 ed., 1054): “Let us not begrudge each other the gaining of such benefits” (μη φθονήσωμεν ἑαυτοῖς τυχεῖν τοσοῦτων ἀγαθῶν)
- The envious person is made sick by another’s good health; what another person received justly becomes the reason the envious person gives for acting unjustly.
- The more glory or brilliant success another person has,
 - the more energetically and harshly the envious person attacks them (detraction and consistently putting a negative interpretation on what the other person says or does);
 - the more the envious person
 - is pleased by the other person’s misfortunes and/or
 - wishes to take the other person’s place
 - Example: the way the private struggles of famous people are described in celebrity tabloids.
 - An envious person is only able to speak of another’s good fortune when it is lost or has been compromised by some misfortune. (In this case, the envious person can speak about the other person’s good fortune only because he/she takes pleasure in its loss.)
- Envy (as wanting to withhold a good from some other person) is the opposite of
 - wanting to imitate what is good in another person and obtain these same things for oneself (=ζήλος [*zelos*], used in the good sense of “emulation,” i.e. the healthy rivalry of two or more people who want to obtain the same good thing)
 - Cf. Jerome *Expositio in Galatas* 5.20: “Emulation may also be taken also in a good sense when someone endeavors to emulate that which is good. Envy, in truth, is tormented by another’s good fortune.”

- idem 4.17: “They emulate properly who, when they see graces, gifts, and virtues in others, desire that they themselves be such persons.” (ET of R.C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, ed. R.G. Hoerber, Baker, 104)

In emulation, two people can want, pursue and receive the same good (“both win”); in envy, one person only can and must have it (a zero-sum game; “only one can win”).

Envy and Malice (Hostile Thought and Action)

Envy always leads on to some kind of hostile action

- looking at a person with a desire that they be harmed or suffer evils (“the evil eye” of Mk. 7:21-22; cf. Ecclus. 14:8,10; Mt. 20:15; and 1 Samuel 18:9 “Saul eyed [i.e. envied] David”)
 - See Spicq, v. 3, 434 n.2; BADG, 3 ed., 1054
- envy is associated with malice (κακία) (Tit. 3:3; Rom. 1:29; 1 Pet. 2:1) and strife (Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:20-21; Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 6:4)
 - Envy caused the Devil to fall and Adam and Eve to be deceived (“where, by envy, death entered into the world”; Origen *Comm. Jn.* 32.2, citing Wisdom 2:24).
 - Envy led to the murder of Abel (Gen. 4:4-8; cf. 1 Clem. 4:7: “Rivalry and envy brought about the murder of the brother”).
 - Envy introduces disorder into the church (1 Clem. 3:2).

The Power and Effects of Envy

Other sins gain power over a person by the pleasure they bring.

Only envy gains power by the pain it brings; it is pain and lack of pleasure which make envy strong.

Envy is a sin one is continually being wounded by. It gnaws away at one, the same way a worm gnaws away at the inside of an apple or moth larvae eat away at cloth.

Because it eats away at a person, it continually makes them less of what they are. First, envy produces hypocrisy (an outward appearance of charity, while the person’s inner life is dominated by envy, malice and hostile feelings). As the envious person deteriorates further, the outward appearance is lost and the ugliness of one’s envy can be seen by others. Often the envious person himself/herself cannot see what others see because he/she is so concerned with waiting for the person he/she envies to fall into misfortune. This obsession with his/her relationship to the person he/she envies can become so consuming that the envious person will not seek help for himself/herself, but stays in a pattern of life where he/she continues to deteriorate.

This is why :

- the Greeks often said that envy (*phthonos*) was derived from the verb φθίω (*phthio*), “to pine away, waste away, decline, decay” and
- Proverbs 14:30 describes envy as a “rotteness to the bones.”

Envy makes one ungrateful to God both

- for the benefits we ourselves have received and
- for the good things God has given to others.

Envy also leads us to injure others and in hurting them we sin against God.

God’s Healing of Envy

Envy’s hold on us depends on envy’s leading us to see the good things of this world as

- being good in and of themselves
- the best and only goal for us to strive after
- the basis of our identity.

God heals us from envy by showing us that

- the good things of this world point beyond themselves to Him
- our identity and our self-worth lie in the fact that we are loved by God as His own children, because through His Son Jesus He has adopted us as His own sons and daughters, to be His forever.
 - Cf. Romans 8:14-17: “because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are God’s children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

By this, God also gives us the freedom to love other people for His sake, because we no longer have to base our identities on competing with them for some lesser good.