

Who Can Stand Before Envy?

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Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy? (Proverbs 27:4, ESV)

Envy is an insidious sin. Subtle and treacherous, it can quietly reside within people souring their relationships, fostering bitterness and resentment, and obstructing their ability to see the truth. **Proverbs 14:30** says, *“A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.”*

And envy is everywhere. The late investor Charlie Munger is noted for making the observation that the world is not run by greed, as many people claim, but by envy. He may have gotten the idea from the writer of Ecclesiastes: *“Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work came from man's envy of his neighbor” (4:4)*. Satan has done a good job of enticing people to compare themselves with themselves. The desire not to be outdone by others is what drives many people in this world.

This was part of the Pharisees' struggle with Christ and many of the Jews' struggles with the Gospel as it spread across the Mediterranean. **Matthew 27:16** and **Mark 15:10** point to the Pharisees' envy as the reason for their hatred of Christ. **Acts 13:45** and **17:5** say that the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia and the Jews in Thessalonica began their persecution against Paul because of their envy. In each of these cases, it was not the message nor the messenger's manner of speaking that infuriated the people. It was the attention Christ and the gospel were receiving from the people. In **Acts 13:44-45**, the scripture says, *“On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy.”* They were so blinded by this envy that they were unable to see the truth.

In the New Testament, **Romans 13:3**, **1 Corinthians 3:3**, **Galatians 5:26**, and **James 3:16** all associate envy with conflict and strife. The passage in James states that *“where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.”* Envy is the source of much conflict between people. The Bible provides a lot of examples: Cain and Abel, Rachel and Leah, Saul and David, and Joseph and his brothers, to name a few. Envy is noticeable in all these cases and even noted in the case of Rachel (**Genesis 30:1**) and Joseph's brothers (**Acts 7:9**). One person, or group of persons, desired the acceptance, the outcome, the admiration, or the love that another was receiving, but they were not. They became envious, and conflict was the result.

Through all these examples, the reason for **Proverbs 14:30** contrasting envy to a tranquil heart is apparent. Envy is disruptive. It creates chaos and fosters evil. It hides or distorts the truth. It makes a person feel unsettled and unsatisfied. It embeds deep within a person, compounding feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. When the object of desire is something someone else possesses, it often leads to fractured feelings towards that person, resulting in broken relationships. Envy truly makes the bones rot.

Part of the insidious nature of envy is that it can be hard to see within ourselves. Recognition of envy requires recognition of some sense of inferiority or insecurity, possibly about something trivial or a desire that is ungodly. It is a recognition that one sees oneself as somehow less than another person, or in some way inadequate as compared to another. It may require a recognition of resentment towards another, possibly someone we are close to, who possesses the object of desire that we do not have.

It is unpleasant to admit any of these feelings, but they are easy feelings to be entrapped by. Everyone experiences real and reasonable disappointment in life. Gracefully watching others' lives go well while suffering is not easy. Also, most people have probably been unfairly treated at some time and had to watch as others receive what they feel is due to them, possibly rightfully so. Again, not easy to handle gracefully.

But many of these feelings come from either valuing the wrong things, having the incorrect viewpoint, or not recognizing and feeling satisfied by the worth the Lord places in us. The Psalmist, Asaph, had a moment of recognition like this, recorded as **Psalm 73**. The first line of **verse 3** reads, *"for I was envious of the boastful."* He then proceeds to write of his observation of the ease with which the sinful appear to live and how much it upsets him. What he comes to realize in the Psalm is that he has the Lord. The boastful's possession would go away. Their good times would end. Their stature in life didn't matter. But God is my strength and my portion forever. It was a change to the correct perspective. Imagine his relief. He no longer had to look at those people with bitterness. He no longer had to feel inadequate and insecure, for He had the Lord.

Be cautious to keep envy out of your heart. It obscures the truth, fosters bitterness and resentment, creates chaos in relationships, and causes an unsettled and unsatisfied feeling. Whatever the envy is over, it's not worth those results. It is not worth feeling unsettled and feeling animosity towards others. Instead, see your worth to the Lord, embrace His blessings, and hold to His hope.