

Sermon IV

"Envy, one of the Basest Passions of the Human Heart"

by

Eli Meeker

*"Yet all this avails me nothing,
so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."*

Esther 5:13

These words are the confession of Haman, and they are recorded as a reproof and warning to all mankind. My object in this discourse will be to show that envy is one of the basest passions of the human breast and dreadful in its effect. But what is envy? Envy is that affection of the human heart which grudges to others that respect or prosperity which it assumes should be given to us. Or envy may be said to be a sensation of uneasiness and disquiet arising from a selfish heart viewing the advantages of others, and accompanied with malignity toward them.

We should guard against envy, for it is a state of discontent not only with our fellowmen but with the providence of God. The Lord has not only the keys of life and of death in his hand, but he gives the kingdom to whomsoever he will. It was divine providence that rendered Joseph so beloved by his father and raised him to be governor over all Egypt. Therefore his brethren, in envying him, murmured against God. When any feel envy rising in their breasts in view of the natural talents, rank, or affluence of others, let him reflect that the Lord exalts and casts down. It is the providence of God that distributes favors to the righteous and the wicked. When competitors, superiors, inferiors, or enemies be envied, then let the inquiry be made, "Who has crowned their labors or enterprises with success?" To be envious toward others in view of their advantages or advancement is to be unwilling that the Lord should reign and dispose of the works of his hands as seems good in his sight.

We should guard against an envious spirit because an envious man is detested by all. Mankind abhors the one who cherishes in his heart a passion so base. Envy is so evidently repugnant to all religious or social enjoyments that an envious man is avoided, held in low regard, and detested. But how is the spirit of envy revealed? By the conversation and conduct of a man. If any man would be esteemed, let him show his good will towards his fellowman.

The spirit of envy should not be harbored, for it is the very temper of the region below [hell]. In the abodes of woe, where all restraints are removed, this deadly monster rages to an awful degree. But in the land of hope, let all the social virtues be cultivated, and let not man endeavor to resemble the fiends of darkness by yielding his heart as an abode for envy. The region of woe is filled with envious spirits, for it has not a solitary inhabitant who is not under its dominion.

The first risings of envy should be resisted, for it dries up all the comforts of the envious man. How did Joseph's brothers mar their own enjoyments by their envy towards him! This spirit excited such hatred in their hearts that they could not speak peaceably with him. Envy laid

waste the comforts of Saul, although he was clothed with royalty. And hear Haman in the midst of prosperity and grandeur exclaim, *"Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate"* (Est. 5:13). What a trifling incident this was which so completely destroyed a man's peace; and in ten thousand ways envious men are liable to be discomposed by the most frivolous circumstances. How small a matter can spoil all the satisfaction of the envious even when they have reached the summit of human greatness.

We should guard against envy because it leads to all manner of external crimes. What was it but envy that kindled in the hearts of Joseph's brothers the desire to take away his life! How did envy inflame Saul to seek the life of David--his benefactor--and to whom more than once he was indebted for the preservation of his own life. Haman was not content with seeking the life of Mordecai, but he determined on the destruction of the whole Jewish nation. Solomon states, *"Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent, but who is able to stand before envy?"* (Pr. 27:4).

Mankind should not harbor envy, for it draws down retaliation and vengeance on its own head. Let us attend to the confession of Joseph's brethren: *"We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us. And Reuben answered them, saying, 'Did I not speak to you, saying, Do not sin against the boy; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us'"* (Gen. 42:21,22). When their souls were overwhelmed with distress, how readily do they impute their sufferings to be in consequence of their unnatural and envious deed toward their brother. In a very signal manner divine vengeance pursued Cain for slaying his brother Abel. It was for envy that he slew him. But God set a mark upon Cain, and he was a vagabond upon the earth. And for his envious and murderous act, hear him exclaim in agony of soul, *"My punishment is greater than I can bear!"* (Gen. 4:13).

In these instances the divine hand is particularly to be noticed as an avenger of envy. But in others, the hand of man more evidently renders vengeance, and frequently the very designs which envious people form in order to promote their own honor and to injure others draw down shame and ruin on their own heads. This was strikingly exemplified in the affair of Haman and Mordecai. *"So Haman took the robe and the horse, arrayed Mordecai and led him on horseback through the city square, and proclaimed before him, 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!'"* (Est. 6:11). How great must have been the mortification of Haman to have all that honor, which he had pictured for himself, conferred upon Mordecai, whom he envied and detested. And now let us turn our thoughts to the gallows which Haman had made for Mordecai. *"Now Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, 'Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king's behalf, is standing at the house of Haman.' Then the king said, 'Hang him on it!' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai"* (Est. 7:9,10). Therefore, let not envy have a residence in our hearts, lest it draw down vengeance on our own heads.

We should guard against an envious spirit, for envy prevents the blessings of heaven and torments the soul in which it dwells like death. The spirit of grace and an envious spirit cannot possibly reside in the same heart. Envy locks out any gracious affections of the soul more than locks and bars can secure a castle. Envy, like a vulture preying upon the vitals, is sickness and death to the soul. Says Job, *"For wrath kills a foolish man, and envy slays a simple one"* (Job 5:2). By this expression we are taught that the inward torments of envy are death to the soul, as

the taking away of physical life is the death of the body. Solomon says, "*A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rotteness to the bones*" (Pr. 14:30). This expressions shows that the mental wounds of envy are deep and destructive.

We should not harbor envy lest it should forever reign in us to a dreadful degree in hell. Surely an envious man must be on the road to death. And by cherishing an envious spirit he is fast preparing as a brand for the burning. Envy is one of the most fiery ingredients of torment in the region of despair, for it is exercised in the view of the most consummate happiness of all the inhabitants of heaven. All who cherish it are preparing to be forever filled with it against the blessed God and all his saints and holy angels.

Let us now make some practical applications.

1. Is envy so evil in its nature and dreadful in its effects as we have heard? Then the proverb is true--let envy alone and it will punish itself. It is so disquieting, restless, and tormenting in its very nature that it needs no opposition to render the envious person wretched. It is self tormenting, and in its very existence it is inseparably connected with unhappiness. The envious man is not only punished in consequence of his evil doings, but he punishes himself. Envy bites like a serpent and stings like an adder, not only as it respects the future but also for the present.

2. In view of this subject, we may see how reasonable and glorious are the doctrines and requirements of the gospel. They are all according to moral fitness, calculated to promote the peace and joy of individuals and the highest good of community. How safe and excellent is the precept, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Lev. 19:18). And how benevolent is the injunction, "*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*" (Phil. 2:4 ESV). As far as the requirements of the gospel have their due influence on the minds of men, so far they enjoy a heaven here on earth. As a selfish, envious spirit experiences in some degree the pains of souls in woe, so a benevolent mind has some foretastes of the joys of heaven.

3. From this subject we may be led to see how necessary it is for the true happiness of fallen man that they be born again, that sinful passions be not only restrained but subdued by grace. Mankind may do much for his own comfort by checking and restraining unruly passions, but his reason is unable effectually to subdue them. Instead of cherishing anger, hatred, envy, malice, and revenge, he may cultivate all the amiable social virtues. But these will not answer as a substitute for gracious affections. It is the spirit of God alone which can eradicate the seeds of wickedness from the heart and implant those graces which are essentially different in their nature. Grace can subdue the passions, give new vigor to our social feelings, and implant that love which is the fulfilling of the law.

4. We may be led to see that great must be the pains of hell, even from the direful ingredients of a wicked heart. When all the evil passions of the human heart are no longer confined by restraints but burst forth in all their ungovernable rage, how wretched must they render the sufferer. How they will prove a gnawing worm, an unquenchable fire to the soul. How painful and distressing are the stings of envy even in the present state, though held back for a moment by restraints. But how intolerable must it be to endure all the sinful passions of a wicked heart in that place where hope never comes.

5. By contrast, we may be led to see that great must be the joys of the righteous in the future world, even from a benevolent heart. Benevolent, friendly exercises of heart in the present state fill the soul with peace and joy. But these are faint foretastes of that future peace which passes understanding, and of those joys which flow at the right hand of God. The highest joys of mortals on earth when compared to those above are as the dim glow of a candle to the brightness of noon. Does a benevolent heart rejoice in the prosperity and happiness of its fellow mortals in this pilgrimage state? Then how will a sight of those joys of the blessed in glory kindle that heart into raptures of joy and transports of bliss! All the gracious and benevolent exercises of the soul in its tabernacle of clay are only in the bud, and frequently nipped by chilling frost. But in a glorified spirit in a spiritual body, how they will flourish and bloom in endless day!

Sermon IV (condensed) from *Sermons on Philosophical, Evangelical, and Practical Subjects* by Eli Meeker (Ithaca: Mack & Andrus, 1827). **Note:** Liberty has been taken for some light editing and paraphrasing. The NKJV has been used for quotations unless otherwise noted.