

# Sermon 80, The Virtue that Kills Envy, Proverbs 23:17-18

**Proposition:** A God-fearing hope will kill envy dead.

- I. Don't Envy Sinners, v. 17a
  - II. Envy God-Fearers, v. 17b
  - III. Fear God and Find Hope
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- I. The Problem of Envy, v. 17a
    - A. The Definition of Envy: Sorrowing at Another's Good
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  - II. The Hope that Kills Envy, vv. 17b-18
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## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, sermons against particular sins are a dangerous business. It's only too easy to think that so long as you warn people against a particular sin, they can just stop sinning that sin. You all will hear that envy is really bad, and so you'll quit being envious. It doesn't work that way, though. A sermon against envy has to replace it with something better, has to give you something positive to latch onto. Indeed, genuine preaching will give to the Christian who hears it the same thing every time: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The way you can stop your heart from envying sinners is to see Jesus, the righteous one. And there is a particular way of looking at Him that we call "hope." That is what this particular saying of the wise tells us to do. A hope that's built on the fear of God will poison envy, kill it dead. And that's the hope you and I need to have.

### **I. The Problem of Envy, v. 17a**

We begin by looking at envy. This is the thing we're told not to do. Do not let your heart envy sinners.

#### **A. The Definition of Envy: Sorrowing at Another's Good**

What is envy? Envy is the sin of being sorry or upset about someone else's good. As we have said, envy is saying "I hate you" to the person who got 95% on the test when you got 75%. Envy means being upset that something good happened to someone else. It is wanting all good for yourself and hating those who have something you don't. Eventually, of course, it progresses from hating those who have more than you have all the way to hating even those with less than you have, and all the way to hating that anyone else has anything at all. Yes, that's right: This sin

would starve the world. This sin would destroy everything that exists in order to prevent anyone else from having or enjoying anything.

Now, you shouldn't need me to tell you that envy is bad. If you are single today and you're secretly peeved that I have a wife and that she is beautiful, that's envy and that's wrong. If you're a mother of small children who's upset that her sister-in-law doesn't have small children to take care of, that's envy. If you are displeased that your coworker got the raise and promotion while you were denied it, if you are mad that your older brother went to a better college than you, if you are upset that your parents are driving Cadillacs while you're driving Hondas, then you are suffering from the sin of envy.

### **B. The Worst Kind of Envy: Envy-ing Sinners**

The worst kind of envy, though, is the envy that looks at what sinners have and wants it. You see, what do sinners as such have that you don't? They have sins! Oh, it's bad enough to envy their prosperity, their security, their fun, their stuff. But at least those are real goods. It's infinitely worse to envy their sins — to say, "I wish I could have an affair and get away with it. I wish I could watch porn without feeling bad about it and trying to stop. I wish I could just get an abortion and not be bothered with my children. I wish I could swear, lie, cheat, steal, get drunk, go to nightclubs," and on and on and on. Brothers and sisters, don't lie to me: All of you have envied sinners. All of you have wanted the ostensible good that they have, the "good" of sinning and getting away with it. I know you have, because I know I have! My heart has wanted to do the evil that evil people do and get away with it. I've wanted to do what they do without feeling bad about it. Why have I wanted this? The same reason you have: My heart is rotten. I'm a fallen human being.

So we all know that envy is bad, that envy of sinners where you want something evil as though it were a good thing is the worst kind of envy. But what do we do about that? How should we respond to our own envious hearts?

### **II. The Hope that Kills Envy, vv. 17b-18**

The answer, in a single word, is hope. You don't need to envy sinners if you have this virtue. Now, what's so virtuous about hope? If I hope that someday I'll be able to swear as well as Samuel L. Jackson, or if I'm hoping that someday I'll have as many beautiful girlfriends as Hugh Hefner, or if I'm hoping that my enemies in this church will all get coronavirus and die — is that virtuous? Of course not! What makes hope a virtue is the object of the hope. What you're hoping for determines the moral value of your hope. If you are hoping for Jesus Christ to keep His promises and come back in glory, that's a virtue. That's up there with the greatest virtue of all — love — because if you don't love Christ you can't hope for His return. Hope is like faith, which trusts Christ, but hope focuses on the thing hoped for. It focuses on Jesus keeping His promises and coming back.

And hope will kill envy dead. If you are living for the return of Christ in power and glory, then you are living for the time when all your desires will be fulfilled, all your needs met, all your wants satisfied. And if you have that time in mind, why would you need to be upset that

today, somebody has something you don't have? You don't have to be mad that your friend has a better car than you do. You don't have to be upset that your sister has more free time than you do. You don't have to be upset that sinners appear to be getting away with all kinds of garbage while you can't seem to get away with anything. Why? Envy withers and dies in the light of hope, because hope promises something better than anything envy can even talk about delivering.

### **A. A Hope Founded on the Fear of God**

The first thing our passage tells us about this hope is that it's founded on the fear of God. Remember, the fear of God is an overwhelming respect and awe for His glory and majesty. It is being afraid of what His dynamic, rushing energy will do to you if you get in front of it. Now, what is the connection between the fear of God and the hope for Christ's coming?

Let me start with this question. What strengthens hope? In other words, how do you determine how strongly to hope for something? How do you determine how likely some event is to happen? At least part of the calculation has to be the trustworthiness and power of the one who made the promise about the event. If an addict who has never, to your knowledge, done what he said was going to do makes a promise to you, how much hope do you have that he will keep it? But if the U.S. Army makes you a promise, how much hope do you have that that promise will be kept?

Well, that's the connection between the fear of God and hope for the coming of Christ and fulfillment of His promises. The better your knowledge of God's power, the stronger your hope that Christ will keep His promises and return. And, of course, the better your knowledge of God's power, His dynamic activity, the stronger your fear of Him. The fear of God and the hope in His promises stand in direct ratio to each other. Your hope is founded on God's ability to keep His promises; that ability, in turn, is the same ability that makes it certain that He will punish sinners and destroy those who stand against Him.

So how well do you know God? How certain are you that Jesus will return and provide a future of infinite bliss for everyone who trusts Him? The greater your certainty about that promise, the greater your certainty that sin is a bad idea because it is offensive to God and He can crush you like a bug.

So the first step in progressing to a hope that will kill envy is to train your heart to fear God. These are the sayings of the wise, and they are telling you that if you want to be wise, you need to fear God. You need to not just fear Him occasionally, but all day long. Continue in the fear of the Lord all the day! How do you do that? Well, you have to remind yourself of God and His power at the beginning of the day, in the middle of the day, and at the end of the day. In other words, you need to create habits that bring your heart back to the contemplation of who God is. You have to pray for His Spirit to help you fear Him. And you need to be around people who will encourage you to fear God. If you wanted to get good at any other skill or practice, you would get involved with other people that did it. If you want to be a great chess player, you find other people who want to play chess. If you want to be a good furniture-maker, you find other

furniture-makers. If you want to be an expert at the stock market, you find other investors and chat with them. In other words, if you want to live in the fear of the LORD all day long, you need to spend time with God's people in order to learn to fear Him.

### **B. A Hope that's Future-Oriented**

But continuing in the fear of Yahweh all day long, though fundamentally important, is not the only thing you need to do to kill envy. You also need to live with a future orientation. We already talked about this a little bit. But the wise remind you that surely there is a future. If your life is all about now, then of course you're going to struggle with envy, because right now others have things you don't have. If it comes to that, you're going to want to overeat at every meal, because you don't take into account the further good you're going to enjoy at your next meal. If you ignore all the future good that's coming to you, then of course it's easy to envy sinners. In fact, it's almost impossible not to. But if you recognize that your life is set up in such a way that you enjoy some goods today, but will enjoy further goods tomorrow, and more the day after that, then you can have a lot more peace and contentment! If I demand the pleasures of grandchildren today, when my oldest children are 3, then I am doomed to disappointment. I will end up envying my parents and their friends, who have grandchildren. But if I'm prepared to accept the good of having young children now, and the good of having grandchildren later, then I can be content with the good that I have and the good that I hope to enjoy.

Brothers and sisters, surely there is a future. The sum total of your life doesn't have to fit into the next five minutes! You can afford to wait for your pleasures. You can afford to wait for God's good gifts. That's what the wise mean when they assure you that there is a future. And if you die in the next thirty seconds? Well then, your future is brighter than ever. You'll miss out on all the suffering and disappointment of the next thirty years on Earth!

### **C. A Hope that Envy God-Fearers**

In fact, the verse really seems to be exhorting us to flip our envy around. Rather than envying sinners, you and I ought to "envy" God-fearers — not in the sense of being upset over the real good that they have, but rather, in the sense of wanting what they have. You should desire the good things that come to those who live in the fear of God all day long. You should want what the righteous have, not by being sorry that they have it, but rather by being delighted that it belongs to them and wanting to enjoy it as well as they do. If you have a hope that counts on enjoying Christ at the end, and even now, then you have a hope of enjoying what God-fearers enjoy.

### **D. A Hope that Wishes Good Even to Sinners**

Ultimately, at the end of the day, your hope needs to be strong enough to kill envy. And how will you know that envy is dead? You'll know it when, far from sorrowing at another's good, you are excited about the good things that others have — even sinners. Humility is the ability to enjoy another's good as if it were your own, without the least shadow of envy or pride shoving itself in. Thus, the humble man can enjoy someone else's cathedral, or someone else's success, without

thinking “I wish I pastored the big church; I wish I were the successful one; I wish I had won that election, composed that symphony, written that novel.”

Is your heart so full of hope that you genuinely desire for sinners to enjoy the same good Christ that you know and love? Are you so delighted in Jesus that you want others to enjoy Him too? Do you honestly wish the very best to sinners? Can you even delight in every real good that they have? Can you be glad for your neighbor’s McMansion? Can you be glad for his Jaguar and his lawn? If your heart is full of hope in Jesus, you can. You will be glad for all the good that your neighbor has, and your dearest wish will be that he have even more, including the best good of all — a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

So don’t let your heart envy sinners. Instead, continue in the fear of the LORD all day long. If you do, you have a future of many good things, and your hope will not be cut off. Your hope will get what it hopes for. You’ll see; just wait. Your Jesus always keeps His promises. The wise say so, and they know Him. Amen.