

Sermon 44: 1 Corinthians 13:4: Love Delights in Another's Good

OUTLINE

Love does not envy
Love does not boast

INTRODUCTION

It has been an interesting week as I have had the opportunity to study on the topic of envy. It is universally agreed that envy is a bad thing. The Greek poet Ovid said, 'Envy, the meanest of vices, creeps on the ground like a serpent.' William Penn commenting on its destructive nature wrote, 'The jealous are troublesome to others, but a torment to themselves.' The Bible shows envy to be one of the most dangerous sins as we see it fueling the murder of Abel by his brother Cain; the brothers of Joseph to plan the murder of Joseph but finally only sell him into slavery; Saul's fixative pursuit of David. Envy is so properly basic to the human experience we see that it has become a major plot device in many of our movies and plays and even fairytales, Cinderella and Snow White are victims of a jealous stepmother. In fact it is one of the 7 deadly sins, and there was debate as to whether it should earn the honourific 'Mother of all sins', it took second place only to pride. It has also been interesting to see how people suggest we battle envy. I found many trying to use appeals to pride to cure us of envy. Napoleon Bonaparte said, 'Envy is a declaration of inferiority.' He is saying that if you envy anyone you are admitting that they are better than you are or have something better than what you have. Or another quote, 'Jealousy is the tribute mediocrity pays to genius - Fulton J. Sheen'. He is trying to get you stop envying by appealing to your pride. Don't envy or that is admitting you are weak/mediocre. This is the not the path of Christian sanctification. The more popular tactic I have seen given our context of the cult of the self is to battle envy with self-worth and self-affirmation. One blogger on living the fulfilled life says, 'There's only one antidote for envy: self-acceptance. Be who you are and love it.'¹ Here is another, 'Envy is a symptom of lack of appreciation of our own uniqueness and self-worth.' (Elizabeth O Connor)². Modern psychology looks at envy as a problem of self-image, and the cure is self-affirmation. Now psychology is not wrong in identifying that those who hate themselves will be bad at relationships and many other things in their lives. But this is where the truth of the Word of God becomes so important. The Bible teaches us that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made; that we are all equal in the image of God; that any differences between us are deliberate as God has fitted us for His will, for a purpose that matters, and that we all have true beauty in that image, and can increase that beauty by being more closely conformed to the image of Christ.

But the bible also has a lot to say about how we overcome envy, Prov. 23:17, 'Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off.' Proverbs recommends the fear of the Lord, and a future oriented hope as a way to overcome envy. Phil. 4:11-13, 'Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing

¹ <https://www.livinglifefully.com/envy.html> accessed 3/21/2025

² https://psychology-spot.com/motivational-quotes-envy-jealousy/#google_vignette

plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.' We all know that the antidote to envy is contentment through Christ. But Paul adds another way that we overcome envy, through love, 'love does not envy or boast.' Following the logic of what we have been saying so far. Paul is saying that the work of grace in our hearts, the new birth, which helps us to overcome our sins and cultivate a love like the love of God that saves us. This love is the cure for the envy that so often divides us.

A few words about dividing up the list of 15 descriptions regarding love. Last week you will have noticed that we too the first pair together, patient and kind. There seems to be a logical pairing between them and we were able to talk about the give and take of love. The question that confronts us as we look at this long list is this one: is there a logic behind how they have been arranged? I think there is. So let's look at the list and put them in their logic divisions. The first pair we have seen was an appropriate starting place as Paul looking at the saving love of God which has been patient and kind with us, sets the tone for our love to one another. Other pairings stand out as obvious, working from the back v7-8, 'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.' V6, 'it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.' 'It is not irritable or resentful,' seems to be a logical pair. 'It does not insist on its own way,' seems the odd one out as the only one in the list that does not seem connected. The only one that is not so obvious is where do you put 'boast'? Is 'boast' linked with 'envy', or is it linked with 'not arrogant or rude'? Boasting seems to be a natural fit with arrogant and rude, all of which could be related to bring proud, but I am joining boasting with envy. I think Paul's logic goes something like this: envy, generally speaking is wanting what another has; boasting is what you do when you have it and they don't. Taking these together I have given this sermon the title, Love Delights in Another's good, as a summary of this pairing. These will be our two points then, love does not envy; love does not boast.

Love does not envy

What is envy? Envy we know is a sin of the heart that has to do with illegitimate desires towards what is another's. Jonathan Edwards defines it as 'a spirit of dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the prosperity and happiness of others as compared with our own.' It is closely related to both coveting, which is wanting what belongs to another, and jealousy. The bible does use envy and jealousy interchangeably, 1 Cor. 3:3 is an example where the same Greek word is translated as jealousy, 'for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?' There is a common distinction that is made between them. The Bible talks of godly jealousy, like in 2 Cor. 11:2 where Paul is jealous for the Corinthians devotion to God. Likewise God Himself is called jealous. Jealousy can describe something correct when it is appropriate, for example a wife is legitimately jealous of her husband's time and attention by virtue of their one flesh union and the covenant obligation he owes her. Likewise God legitimately demands that we worship and obey Him for He alone is God and no other. The Bible does describe godly jealousy and ungodly jealousy, but there is no godly envy.

The word used for envy here is the Greek word 'zeloi' from which we get our English word zeal or zealot. It is a word which means passion and can be used negatively or positively, it holds the connotations of strong emotion. Envy has

always been underestimated as a sin, but this strong emotional word reminds us of its power. Prov. 14:30, 'A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.' Prov. 27:4, 'Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?' Think about how terrible this sin is and how it poisons the whole person. In particular think about how envy poisons us in things that relate to godliness and worship and the service of the Lord. Cain could not abide that his brother's religious worship was accepted by God and his was not, he was not envious over his looks, his riches, or his wife, but his acceptance before God. His sense of entitlement as the firstborn; his sense of entitlement due to the sweat of his brow that had produced his crop; his competitive spirit that sought to be better than his brother in everything; his public humiliation and rejection when one he perceived to be inferior was advanced before him ate him up. He could not abide it so he murdered him. Joseph's brothers could not abide his dreams that they would bow down to him, and their father's affection for him. Gen. 37:4 tells us that their envy resulted in their being unable to speak peacefully to him, they were always angry, always defensive, always combative, always harsh, all driven by envy. This ripened into a plan to murder him, but they consented to selling him to slavery instead. What is in your heart if you are willing to dehumanize someone to be sold, to become property, to be treated in who knows what way without concern. Envy poisons the most natural affections in our hearts. Saul could not abide that David was being blessed by God in battle and winning the war for Israel against the Philistines. Even though David was fighting the Lord's battles, was obviously blessed by God, and doing all of Israel, envy will not abide these spiritual goods. Saul took back the gift of his daughter; the gift of office in leading his armies; grudged his family's love for David trying to kill Jonathan who defended him, not allowing any good to be said of him; Saul was so fixated that he pursued him through the wilderness trying to kill him in an all absorbing hatred. But the greatest example of the religious being full of envy is the Pharisees who were jealous of Christ. They could not abide that He corrected their errors; spoke against the hypocrisy; and had the favour of the crowds through the miracles He performed and the love and acceptance He showed. Their envy was so powerful that knowing the power by which He did the miracles was by God they blasphemed the Holy Spirit and committed the unforgiveable sin. And then upon that they manufactured lies and schemed to murder Jesus. It seems to me that envy is a favoured sin of religious people, and a sin that leads to all other sorts of evil, hence the debate about whether envy should be given the title 'Mother of all sin.'

Which brings us to Corinth. We know that Paul is giving a list that addresses their problems and envy is one of them. You will remember in chapter 3 that Paul rebuked the Corinthians for acting in a fleshly and unsaved way, 3:3, 'for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?' The word for jealousy is the exact same word for envy. Remember their problem with divisions, where they were divided into following different men, and how these competing groups became contentious and divisive and was splitting the church. Paul spent the first 4 chapters of the letter dealing with this issue. Envy was a major contributor. James warns us, 3:16, 'For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.'

So we must test ourselves, are we who have been saved from envy, even though we are religious people engaging in the sin of envy? There are a few tests for envy. Firstly, are you able to rejoice in the prosperity or success of others? Envy wants good for itself but not for others. Envy will criticize another's blessing as

excessive and grudge them their good. Envy can't stand another to be praised unless they are praised, another to be recognized unless they are recognized. I googled 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' and this is what came back to me: "'Tall poppy syndrome' is a cultural phenomenon, originating in Australia and New Zealand, where successful individuals are criticized, undermined, or resented because they stand out, with the phrase 'cutting down the tall poppy' used to describe this behavior.' Secondly, does your reason for living abide in having something someone else has? Gen. 30:1-2, 'When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!"' ² Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" Rachel wants to die because her sister has children but she does not. Thirdly, have you found your envy driving you to disobey God and sinfully manipulate the situation to get what you want? Gen. 30:3, 'Then she said, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her."' Fourthly, have you armed envy with words and actions? You will know you are envious and resent someone if you cannot speak nicely to and have proper dealings with that person in question, Gen. 37:4, 'But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.' Even leading you to banding with others who are discontent and planning harm upon them, v18, 'They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him.' How many have spread gossip and slander and misrepresented those they envy? Has this led you to serving God for the wrong reasons? Phil. 1:15-17, 'Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.' How many are in private competition against those they envy? Families and churches are torn apart by this sin. Envy can lead to destructive and irrational behavior. We see with Solomon's case of judging which mother had lost a baby in the night, that envy can lead even a mother to wishing another mother's child to be dead.

How do we overcome envy? The most common answer is contentment. And this is a good answer. When it comes to our own hearts and being satisfied with our portion in life, knowing what we have in God, knowing that riches that we have in Christ, trusting in the sovereignty of God who has chosen all of what we have for us, this certainly does help us to be content and to stop looking longingly at the portion of others and illegitimately wanting it and wishing they did not have it. But Paul's solution is more positive than that, he says that love does not envy. Love is not merely the absence of ill will but the presence of good will towards another. And when it comes to producing love in the Christian's life there is a basic rule: God's love precedes our love, we love because He loved us first. God's love changes us by causing us to be born again and filled with the Spirit so that we are now able to put to death the selfishness that dominated us and produce the Spirit of love. And secondly, the most heart wrenching, sacrifice inspiring, life reorienting, coldness melting example of love has been portrayed for us by the one who is God becoming man for us and dying to save us from our sins. I am not a tear jerker film fan; I don't like being manipulated through music and contrived narratives. But in the gospel we have the ultimate story of gracious loving sacrifice that can move every stony heart to sacrificial selflessness, being the most tear worthy story of heroism, sacrifice, love and rescue. Every major plot theme of a hero dying to save the world; an unfaithful spouse being forgiven and accepted back into the marriage; of the headstrong

self-destructive child being pursued and won back through forgiving love; of enemies saved from the brink of death; of adoption of the parentless child; all of these pale in comparison to the love of Christ. He was the opposite of envious. Though He had equality with God, He did not selfishly insulate Himself from becoming a man, a servant, and our needed sin bearer enduring the unimaginable torment of justice that our sins deserved. Love is generous towards others not merely not envious. And the reason why love is not envious is because it is too busy seeking the others good not goods.

Love does not boast

The next of the 8 negative descriptions in this list of what love is not, it does not boast. This is an interesting word because it only occurs once in the NT here. Some have explained its meaning as 'not vainglorious;' or 'a pompous windbag;' or 'talk conceitedly.' If envy is wanting someone to not have what you want; boasting is having what you want and gloating that others don't have it. Envy seeks to deprive others of what you want; boasting likes to rub others noses in the fact that you have and they don't. We can see how this would have been a problem in the Corinthian church. The worship services of the church were being disrupted by those with the gift of tongues putting themselves forward, making a big song and dance of their spectacular and miraculous gifts and feeling themselves self-important. This is a case of where some were taking things over and imposing themselves loudly into the church situation. A simple way to apply this is ask yourself, have you ever been a show off in the church? Have you ever tried to drag all the attention to yourself instead of facilitating the attention to God and His glory? Or have you ever felt the need to defend your own superiority, your qualifications, your expertise, while walking rough shod over others, justifying harsh words, slander, and the cold shoulder based on the fact that you are the most qualified? Have you ever had to remind people about what makes you so great? Have you ever promoted yourself while putting others in a bad light so that you used them as a way to advance your own superiority? Have you ever deliberately humiliated someone else to prove you are better? Have you ever spoken about your strengths without giving glory to God or others who have helped you get to where you are? Self-important people can't give the glory away but must grab at it.

Love is not merely the absence of boasting but the opposite of boasting, it not only does not promote itself, but seeks that others would be raised up. You may already be an unassuming person that does not like to put yourself in the limelight, but are you loving, do you seek for others to be raised up? Jesus was someone who had full bragging rights, He was fully entitled to all worship, all obedience, to not become man and suffer what we deserve. He did not have to endure being hated, lied about, despised, tortured, mocked, spat upon, murdered. Not only did He not grasp the equality that He had with God, but became of no reputation, He humbled Himself, He became the servant of all, the footwashing one, the least. He did all of this because of His love. And more, He then takes us out of the gutter, out of the filth of sin and the wreckage of our own making and He adopts us, cleanses us, promotes us, employs us, dresses us in righteousness, strengthens us, rewards us, crowns us, shares His inheritance with us, dignifies us as a royal priesthood. He did not spot a weakness and exploit it; see something inadequate within us and despise us and humiliate us. This is the love that not only does not boast but exalts others, and this is the love that we are to imitate in the church.

