

Envy - An “Owner’s Manual”

Envy is a symptom of lack of appreciation of our own uniqueness and self-worth. Each of us has something to give that no one else has.

(Elizabeth O’Connor, spiritual writer)

It’s a funny thing envy, well, not really, but you know what I mean. We don’t really want it, we certainly don’t need it, and yet so often there it is. Where does it come from and why, and what is it all about?

By definition it’s a feeling of resentment brought on by contemplating someone else’s possessions, qualities or achievements, typically with a strong wish that they were one’s own. The word jealousy has almost the same meaning though it sounds slightly worse than envy in as much as it seems to have a nastier streak to it somehow. It’s the negative aspect to envy that usually tends to bother us - and so it should – and that’s probably why it comes up in confession as much as it does.

Envy is the ulcer of the soul. (Socrates, Greek philosopher)

The catechism defines envy as “sadness at the sight of another’s goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly”. In this respect envy moves toward being sinful in that any such sadness could be a sin against charity, a resentment of someone’s apparent well-being. It could even verge on breaking the commandment not to covet what belongs to another, and even, in the extreme, lead to stealing. We don’t really know where the feeling comes from and we don’t really like it because, left unchallenged, it can dominate us. Why should someone else’s situation be such a problem to us? Why are we not content with our lot? Does it reflect a lack of gratitude to God for the blessings we have and which we perhaps don’t appreciate as much as we should? – a thought we’ll return to later.

I rather suspect that most of the time the seeds of envy are all in the mind. The things we find ourselves being envious about could well be figments of our imagination. We look at other people and we decide that they are infinitely happier, infinitely better off, than we are and we base this judgment purely on what we imagine to be the case, but often without any real evidence. How do we know how happy someone else actually is? How do we know how content they really are? We imagine that they must be simply because they appear to be, but we have no real idea what is actually going on in their lives. For all we know they may be putting on a façade of contentment and well-being in order to appear happy – and clearly it has worked, hence our envy.

But surely we have to ask ourselves, once again, why this becomes such a concern to us? - especially as it’s none of our business. Why are we so fixated

on someone else's apparent well-being? And why are we allowing it to so negatively affect us?

Love looks through a telescope; envy through a microscope.

(Josh Billings, America humorist)

Perhaps we need to begin by asking an even more basic question: what sort of things tend to make us envious in the first place? Typically it is likely to be how together someone's life seems to be; how well-off they are; what a nice house they have; the places they go to on holiday; how perfect their family seems to be; how many friends they have and therefore what their social life is like; another's good health and mobility, even their younger age (especially if we are struggling); the talents and abilities someone has... and so on, and so on. Some of these things may be real, but they may just as easily be imagined – we don't really know, looking in from the outside as we are. Either way being envious doesn't do us any good, nor does it change anything. Why can't we simply be content with our lot instead of setting ourselves up for dissatisfaction by comparing ourselves unfavourably with others?

In a case of what we might call “para-envy”, a reverse of envy, people sometimes also compare themselves *favourably* with others, a para-envy of how badly off others are. That's my theory as to why so many people watch, and are apparently entertained by, television dramas such as *Casualty* and *ER* and “soaps” such as *Eastenders*. If people can watch the (albeit fictional) suffering of others in Accident & Emergency units, or watch people screaming and shouting at one another in “soap opera” pubs and marriages and families coming apart at the seams, it makes them feel better about themselves and their own situation. It's a “there but for the grace of God go I” thing, rather than the “I want what they've got” aspect of normal envy.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous and is not resentful.

[1 Cor 13 v 4-5]

On several occasions Jesus teaches in the gospels about the danger of being judgmental – and that is what we are doing when we find ourselves being envious of others. We are looking at them, or their situation, and we are making a value judgment, saying that what they have is better than what we have. Humility goes out of the window also because we are saying that we deserve to have what they have – otherwise why are we envious? And this can then lead us to be uncharitable because of the resentment the situation causes us to have toward that other person. Worse still, as we said earlier, it may also lead us into being covetous – desiring the things that someone else has – and here we are getting into the area of breaking commandments. In so many ways, therefore, envy is not a good place for us to be and so how can we help avoid it?

Envy comes from people's ignorance of, or lack of belief in, their own gifts.
(Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities)

Jesus spoke about stewardship of the talents that God has given us and how we will one day be asked for an account of that stewardship. We should be less concerned with what someone else has, what they can do, the opportunities offered to them and so on, than in how we are using the gifts and talents and opportunities entrusted to us. That's all that God is going to be concerned about. He won't want to hear how much better we might have done if only we had had the opportunities so-and-so had, or had we been as gifted as such-and-such a person. Rather it will be a matter of what we did with what was entrusted to us and how well (or otherwise) we used them in his service and to the glory of his name.

Envy is the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own.
(Harold Coffin, American humorist)

Do we sometimes fail to fully appreciate what God has given to us? It can be all too easy to fail in this area (not seeing the wood for the trees, as the saying goes) and a basic solution would be to reflect honestly and generously on just what we do have compared, certainly, to vast numbers of people throughout the world who don't have a roof over their heads, don't have adequate food or clean water, are suffering in poverty, and for whom death and disease is a way of life. Even here at home many people are a lot worse off than we are. An appreciation of, and gratitude for, God's providence to us will hopefully help to counter any envy on our part over what he may have given to others.

To be rich in admiration and free from envy, to rejoice greatly in the good of others, to love with such generosity of heart that your love is still a dear possession in absence or unkindness – these are the gifts which money cannot buy. (Robert Louis Stevenson, poet)

Offering a particularly challenging thought, one of the prayers of intercession in Evening Prayer (Thursday Week 3) of the Office ends: *help us to delight in the truth, and rejoice in your gifts to others.* If and when we look at other people and their situations, why is it easier to go down the road of envy than of rejoicing? We are fellow members of the body of Christ and our task is to build up his body, rejoicing in the "health" of its member: the gifts, the abilities, the freedoms, the strengths, the resources. It takes generosity of spirit – I was going to say *great* generosity, but it really ought to be our normal generosity. If we look at someone and see how well they are, how comfortably off they seem to be, or how free from concerns they are, then good for them, be glad for them. Being envious and resentful is self-destructive and serves only to detract from the health of Christ's body.

There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit working in all sorts of different ways in different people. The particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose. [1Cor 12 v 4-7]

Having said what we have said about the negative aspects of envy, there is a more positive side to the word which the dictionary defines as: “a more moderate feeling aroused by admiration rather than resentment”. We can say that we envy someone their talent or ability or the way they do something, but in that particular context we are paying them a compliment - there isn't really any actual envy on our part, nothing negative or resentful as such. If anything it is, as we were just saying, our rejoicing in their giftedness. In fact it's the sort of thing we would normally say out loud to others precisely because it is meant to be a compliment, as opposed to the negative feelings of envy that we usually keep to ourselves.

So there we are. We know where envy comes from and we know where it can lead, the question is: do we want to go there? Will envy control us, or will we control it?

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