

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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The Opposite of Envy

Tim Challies

A thought struck me the other day: As far as I know, the English language has no word that expresses the opposite of envy. There may be phrases or sentences that can begin to convey it, but we have no single word we can use to express the virtue that sits opposite that nasty vice.

We can wish and pray that we would be less envious, but as we put off that sin, what's the righteous behaviour we ought to be putting on in its place?

Envy is a strange sin, in that it is a personal and often very visceral response to the success and failure of other people. It is a sin that involves comparing ourselves to others and forming our identity around that comparison.

Just as we can be affected by our own success and failure, envy affects us through the success and failure

of others. Envy is responding to the success of other people with resentment toward them and despair within ourselves, longing that their success was our own. Or, envy is responding to the failure of other people with joy, gleeful that their failure is not our own.

At its fullest bloom, envy is not just wanting the success of another person for ourselves, but also wanting that person not to have it; it is not just wanting to avoid personal catastrophe, but wishing catastrophe upon someone else. It is a sin that combines jealousy, hatred, and theft into an ugly, chaotic whole.

Sir John Gielgud summarised envy well in these despairing words: "When Sir Laurence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948, and the critics raved, I wept." The success of another person made him feel small. Had the critics panned Olivier, Gielgud would have felt big, so that the failure of another person would have been his triumph.

And here we see another ugly element of envy: It tends to alienate us from people who are much like us, people who ought to be our allies. A musician rarely envies an author and

a pastor rarely envies a historian. Instead, we envy people who have similar interests, similar gifts, similar callings – the very people with whom we could and should co-labour. But envy drives us apart. It turns potential allies into competitors.

Envy produces no good fruit. It is a sin that seems to offer happiness via comparison, but it is a lie.

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If we lose the comparison, we move toward despair and resentment. We hate our neighbour and eventually hate God for holding back what we consider an essential element of happiness.

But if we win the comparison, we grow in pride, in our sense that we are a unique gift to the world. Here too, we hate our neighbour and eventually see God as a power who exists to give us the success we are sure we are entitled to.

So what is the opposite of envy? I think the Bible speaks to it when it tells us to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

The opposite of envy is finding joy in the success of other people and feeling sorrow in their failure.

The opposite of envy is rejoicing especially in the success of the people who are closest to us, who received accolades we would like for ourselves, who took home awards we believe we deserved, who garnered praise for accomplishments much like our own.

The opposite of envy is feeling true sorrow at the failures of a person in the same field as ours or of a person who may be considered a competitor.

I've heard Sanskrit has a word – *mudita* – that refers to a joy that is pure and unadulterated by self-interest and

delights in the good fortune of other people. That seems to capture it well.

We can have that joy, but only if we first find our ultimate joy in Christ. And our joy in Christ comes by understanding and acknowledging that our deepest identity is not found in success or failure, but in our union with Him.

We have to know that our standing before God does not depend upon our accomplishments. Neither someone else's success nor our lack of success changes who we are in Christ. Neither someone else's failures nor our own has any bearing on who we are in Him.

It is only when we are secure before Him that we can be secure before others. It is only when we are secure in Him that we have secured the opposite of envy.

It is only when we are secure before Christ that we can be secure before others.



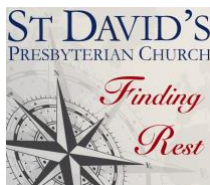
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