

**Joy Sabotaged by Envy**  
Ecclesiastes 4:4-6; Genesis 26:14  
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Envy is a major hindrance to joy in your life. For where there is envy, there is discontentment and unhappiness. Since we shall consider this Lord's Day the effect that envy has upon the joy of the Lord in our lives, let us be clear as to what envy is.

Envy is a resentful and bitter attitude toward others because they possess or have achieved what you lack, but desperately want. When you are envious, you are jealous toward others. You also covet what others have. You are filled with discontentment, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness. One who is envious does not want to be another person so much as he craves what another person has. And it is that craving of what another person has that leads to anger, resentment, and bitterness toward that person. It ought to be evident to us all that there is no true or enduring joy in the presence of envy. It is a sin that begins in the heart and leads to every other sin, whether idolatry, covenant-breaking, Sabbath-breaking, rebellion against parents, murder, adultery, robbery, and lying.

Even the first sin, that was committed and that led to the murder of mankind, was due to the sin of envy. Satan tempted Eve with these words: Read Genesis 3:4-6. Likewise that sin above all sins, the murder of the sinless Son of God, was motivated by envy, as we see in Mark 15:10: "For he [Pilate] knew that the chief priests had delivered him [Christ] for envy." If envy will not be satisfied even to the point of murdering him who is envied, then it will never be satisfied or content. For dear ones, envy is never content or satisfied ("Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied" Proverbs 27:20).

Dear ones, if you would know the joy of the Lord in your life while yet in this world, you must recognize and crucify the envy that will seek at every turn to sabotage that joy that comes from Christ. Let us consider the following main points from our text this Lord's Day: (1) Envy Attacks Hard Work (Ecclesiastes 4:4); (2) Envy Destroys Hard Work (Ecclesiastes 4:5); (3) Envy Is Uprooted by Contentment (Ecclesiastes 4:6).

**I. Envy Attacks Hard Work (Ecclesiastes 4:4).**

A. Solomon proceeds now FROM OPPRESSION as a hindrance to the joy of the Lord (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3) TO ENVY as a hindrance to the joy of the Lord (Ecclesiastes 4:4-6).

1. The first item we note in Ecclesiastes 4:4 is that King Solomon returns to a consideration of those who "travail" in their work (or "work hard" as he has previously done in Ecclesiastes 1:13; 2:23,26; 3:10) and all those who are skillful in their work ("every right work").

2. Here Solomon shines the light upon all those who are esteemed as having a real gift, a skill, or an ability in a particular area of work. Solomon knows the value of hard and skillful work and in no wise seeks to disparage it in this place or any other place. But working hard in order to excel in any area (as important as that is) will not (in and of itself) bring an enduring joy and happiness. Why? Because, my friend, it is perishable. It will only prove to be a frustration and a vexation to a man/woman who relies upon it to bring joy, peace, and contentment. However, in the proper use of such gifts and abilities to the glory of God and to the good of your neighbor, the Lord does, indeed, grant you joy; but it is not the gift or ability that is the source of that joy, it is the Lord that is always the source of that joy. Joy comes while consciously serving God and others with the gifts and abilities He has graciously given to you. You find fulfillment and satisfaction in what you do as you find it connected to God's good plan for your life (Ephesians 2:8-10). To know that what you do in this life with the gifts and abilities with which God has blessed you takes you out of this perishable realm and into the eternal realm where everything has a purpose and a reason in your all-good and all-wise

God. Dear ones, your gifts and abilities are not given to you simply to make you feel good (though they do when they are used rightly), nor are they given to you simply to benefit others (though they do when they are used rightly). The world can know joy to some degree when gifts and abilities at least meet these minimum standards. But dear ones, you can only know the abiding joy of the Lord when you know that you are serving and glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ, as He has ordained from all eternity. Eternal issues are wrapped up in your temporal work here upon the earth. Your work matters. Your work (whatever it may be) is not inconsequential or unimportant to God. It is not perishable, if done in order to bring Christ honor and glory. It will survive death and be even rewarded on that final Day of Judgment. Dear ones, if you connect your work to only a meaningless and perishable act that serves no greater Divine purpose than what is found in this world, then satisfaction will be as short-lived as the work itself. However, if you connect your work to a meaningful and imperishable plan that serves an eternal divine purpose and satisfaction, then joy will abide forever.

B. Now Solomon turns from the gifts or abilities God gives to man, which ought to promote your joy in the Lord, to the envy which people have for those gifts and abilities (“that for this [travail and skillful work] a man is envied of his neighbor”).

1. You see, envy does not promote joy, but rather destroys joy in your life. For, dear ones, envy only wants that gift and ability in order to satisfy oneself (to be honored by others, to make more money, to have more fun, to increase in knowledge, or to exercise power and authority over others), rather than to serve and love the Lord Jesus and others. Envy inverts the way to find joy, which must be JOY—Jesus, Others, and You, and rather makes it a meaningless word: YOJ—You, Others, and Jesus. Envy is supremely all about me, whereas joy is supremely all about Christ: “HAPPY is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God” (Psalm 146:5); “He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the LORD, HAPPY is he” (Proverbs 16:20); “If ye know these things, HAPPY are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17); and “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, HAPPY are ye” (1 Peter 4:14).

2. Envy despises the gifts and abilities of others. Why? Dear ones, because others are honored for them, because others enjoy them, because others make more money by them, because others are smarter by them, and ultimately because others have them rather than you having them. Whereas, the joy of the Lord is thankful for the gifts and abilities that God has given to others and rejoices in the gifts and graces of others, freely given to them by God. Until you can sincerely be thankful for and rejoice in the hard and skillful work of others, in the gifts, talents, and abilities of others without becoming jealous and envious of those blessings, you will never know that blessed joy of the Lord, that blessed peace that passes all understanding, that blessed contentment in all circumstances of life, that blessed satisfaction that finds fulfillment in loving and obeying Christ in your own calling (regardless of what that calling is).

3. You can hate your job because you are not paid enough, because you are not treated right, because you are not respected or appreciated, and guess what? You will never know joy in that job. But Joseph was a prisoner (Genesis 39:20) and so was Paul (in Acts 16:25). Were they respected, appreciated, loved, or treated right? No! And yet they knew the joy of the Lord, because they could serve the Lord Jesus and others even in a prison cell. We are whiners and complainers. And I have never seen a happy whiner or complainer. Have you? But I have seen in the pages of Scripture and in the lives of faithful witnesses of Christ the joy of the Lord, when they are thankful for the gifts and graces of others, when they are thankful for the privilege of serving Christ, even suffering for Christ, and when they find it their greatest joy to serve Christ and others.

4. Now envy in your heart will destroy your own joy in the Lord (that is absolutely true), but our text does not specifically address our own envy toward the gifts and abilities of others, but actually addresses how the envy of others is a hindrance to the joy of those whose travail and skillful work is envied. For when your hard work is envied, when others are jealous of your skills and abilities, they will despise you, criticize you, mock you, treat you unfairly, and even lie about you. They want what you have, but are either

not gifted in that area or are not willing to sacrifice what is necessary to reach that level of competency. When it comes to the matter of envy, it is this in particular that Solomon seems to have in mind. It is this that Solomon says is vanity and vexation of spirit to all those who live “under the sun.” The question is this: Will you allow the envy of others to rob you of the joy of the Lord? You can allow them to rob you, or you can say, “No, you are not going to take from me the joy of serving Christ, even in the midst of your envy and jealousy.” Will you choose to be miserable when others envy your hard work, the honor you have received, the gifts and graces given to you by God? Or will you choose to rejoice in the Lord and see even the envy of others as a part of God’s most good, wise, and holy plan for your life in developing godliness in you? The choice is yours: misery or joy?

5. Isaac was greatly blessed by the Lord with great wealth that was envied by the Philistines (according to Genesis 26:14). So what did the Philistines do? They filled up the wells that Abraham had dug, so that Isaac could not use them for his family or for his flocks. Isaac did not give way to the envy of others, but dug out other wells. But each time the Philistines filled them once again. Isaac did not allow their envy to rob him of his joy in the Lord. He persevered in doing good, and the Lord eventually gave him peace.

6. Daniel was hated by the princes in the kingdom of the Medes, because he was a despised Hebrew who loved the Lord and had been exalted to a high place of authority (Daniel 6:3-4). Their envy of his gifts and graces led them to make a law against praying to the Lord. He persevered in doing good and in seeking the face of the Lord in prayer. He was cast into a den of lions. Even in such circumstances, Daniel did not allow the wicked (or the lions) to rob him of the joy of the Lord. The Lord delivered him and destroyed his enemies.

7. Paul was in a Roman prison for preaching the gospel of Christ. And yet while suffering for the truth in prison, some ministers preached Christ, not out of sincerity for Christ and his truth, but out of envy of Paul and a desire to add heartache to Paul while he was in prison (Philippians 1:15-16). Did Paul allow the envy and resentment of others to make him miserable? To the contrary, listen to how he turns this situation into one in which he can rejoice: Read Philippians 1:18. Paul knew he was suffering for Christ and that God had a most good and most wise plan in this for him and for Christ’s Church. In that he could rejoice and be thankful. The envy of others, the resentment of others, the hatred of others, need not destroy your joy in the Lord. It need not lead you to consider that all of your hard and skillful work is vain and futile. It will not (and cannot do so), if you by faith see the hand of Christ directing all such events for His glory and your good, if you glory in the gifts and graces given to you, if you continue to use them to serve Christ and others, and if you rejoice that you are counted worthy to suffer for Christ.

## **II. Envy Destroys Hard Work (Ecclesiastes 4:5).**

A. The man that was envied for his gifts and graces in Ecclesiastes 4:4 becomes a fool in Ecclesiastes 4:5, because he allows the envy, bitterness, criticism, and even lying of others to lead him to give up, to throw up his arms in defeat (as it were) and to stop working. This is one possible way that you might respond to the envy of others. You may say, “If they are going to resent me, criticize me, slander me, and mock me because of the gifts and graces given to me by God, I will just quit.” Perhaps you will not resort to begging or become street people, but perhaps you will quit your job because of the envy of others. In so doing, Solomon says you do not help yourself, but actually destroy yourself. For in folding your hands and quitting, you eat your own flesh by driving yourself into poverty. For where are you going to go as a Christian where you are not going to be envied for the gifts and graces God has given to you, or for the truth God has given to you, or for the love God has given to you, or for the obedience God has given to you? Dear ones, if you just fold the hands and give up, you will find that you will not be eating the fruit of your labor, but rather will be eating the flesh of your own body (in a figurative sense), because there will be no fruit of your labor to sustain you. For, dear ones, you will not work where you are envied and criticized.

B. As we saw from the biblical examples cited earlier, when Joseph was sold into slavery because of the murderous envy of his brothers, he did not quit. When Daniel was envied and hated for his obedience to God and thrown into a den of lions, he did not quit. When Paul was envied and despised for his suffering for Christ, he did not quit. Dear ones, what would have happened if the Lord Jesus had quit and had folded His hands and had refused to go to the cross because He was envied by the chief priests (Mark 15:10)? If Christ had folded His hands, you would be forever lost and condemned to hell. Dear ones, folding the hands or giving up when you are envied, despised, and criticized for the gifts and graces God has given to you is not an option. It is no way to have an abiding joy in the Lord. It is, however, a sure and certain recipe for misery. Let us see finally in our last main point a godly option for us to pursue when we face the envy of others.

### **III. Envy Is Uprooted by Contentment (Ecclesiastes 4:6).**

A. Rather than folding the hands and giving up when the bitter envy of others would seem to overwhelm you, Solomon offers an alternative that will eliminate the devastating effect that the envy of others will have in your life: a spiritual contentment in the work, gifts, abilities, and graces God has given to you. Solomon says in effect, "It is better to be quiet and content with even the little (a hand full) that God has given to you, than to be all stressed out and vexed over much (two hands full) that you have labored to get." It is not wrong to have much or to have little in gifts and abilities. The point that Solomon is driving home is that quietness and contentment in whatever God has given to you is that which uproots envy and its evil effects in your life and mine. It is not wrong to pray for gifts and abilities to serve God and others, or to pray that the ones God has given to you might be increased (that you should do). But can you be content with the gifts and abilities God has already given to you, and can you use them to serve Him and others? Or have you rather buried them because the gifts of others seem so great and yours seem so small?

B. Paul said he had learned to be content in all circumstances. He had even learned to be content when he was jealously envied by others. He did not give up. He rather embraced the secret to contentment: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Dear ones, when your life is Christ (trusting Christ, loving Christ, serving Christ, obeying Christ, hoping in Christ), the bitter envy, the sharp criticism, the hateful actions, and even the murderous jealousy of others will not cause you to fold your hands and quit. You may feel bruised by the envy of others, but you will rejoice that you have been counted worthy to be bruised for the sake of Christ. When Christ is your life and your reason for living, the bruises of others who envy you will become a push and a shove toward the Lord and toward the everlasting joys that are prepared for you in heaven. Even when you and your loved ones walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil, for Christ perfumes even the cross and the grave with His everlasting and redeeming love for such wretched sinners like you and me. So the question is: Who or what is your life? You will never know contentment or joy in this life or in the life to come, if Jesus Christ is not your life and reason for living. All of life will be vanity and a vexation of spirit to you. Embrace the Lord Jesus as your life. Renew your covenant right now with the Lord Jesus to be your life and your reason for living, even when facing the bitter envy of others. Find your joy and contentment in Christ, and then let the world say or do whatever it chooses to say or do against you as a Christian. You will not quit. You will not be moved. Amen.

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