

**Ecclesiastes 4: 4; “The Vanity of Envy”, Sermon # 26 in the series –  
“Remember Your Creator”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall,  
on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

What does it mean to envy someone else? Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary says that it is, “Pain felt and malignity conceived at the sight of excellence or happiness.” “Repining at the prosperity or good of another which we want, or any advantage another has above us.” Webster’s Complete Dictionary of the English language says that envy is, “Pain, uneasiness, mortification, or discontent excited by the sight of another’s superiority or success, accompanied with some degree of hatred or malignity, and often or usually with a desire or an effort to depreciate the person, or with pleasure in seeing him depressed.” In Matthew 27: 18 it says that Pilate knew that the chief priests and elders delivered Jesus up because of envy. What is the difference between jealousy and envy? Well the Century Dictionary says that jealousy is the malign feeling which is often had toward a rival, or a possible rival, for the possession of that which we greatly desire, as in love or ambition. Envy is a similar feeling towards one, whether a rival or not, who already possesses that which we greatly desire. Jealousy is enmity prompted by fear; envy is prompted by covetousness.

It seems pretty evident to me that the two concepts of jealousy and envy overlap each other at various points. Webster’s 7th Collegiate Dictionary says, “Envious suggests a grudging of another’s possessions and accomplishments and a spiteful and malicious coveting of them.” “Jealousy implies a grudging of something as properly belonging to or peculiarly befitting to oneself.” Biblically, both involve enmity against a rival. In the case of jealousy this can be a righteous jealousy as instanced in the spirit of jealousy which might come over a husband in Old Testament Israel if his wife had been unfaithful to him. (Numbers 5: 14, 30) And it should always be remembered that our God is a Jealous God. He will brook no rival with Himself in relation to our affections, love, and worship. We properly belong to Him. Exodus Chapter 32, verse 14 says, “For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous is a jealous God.” But what we are talking about here this afternoon is not righteous jealousy, but rather sinful envy. Sinful envy leads to vanity; it is empty and unprofitable in every case.

Our text says, “Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor.” This is envy that is based upon covetousness or malice. Here is a person who has done his job or executed his work with skill; he has done the job in the right way, and because he has been successful, he is envied by those who either cannot do what he has done, or will not do what he has done because of lack of their own diligence. There are some people who do not appreciate a person who can do something that they cannot do. They wish they could do it, and because they cannot, then they have thoughts and feelings which are sinfully bad toward the one who can. This is something that all of us need to deal with in ourselves. The way that we deal with it, is with the grace and help of Christ. This afternoon I would like to first commend to all of us here the beauty and excellence of skillful work. And then secondly I would like us to consider the vanity of anyone envying those who are able to do what they cannot do, or have not done.

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – I want to show you that God in the Scripture commends to us the beauty and excellence of doing skillful and diligent work.**

Turn with me to Proverbs Chapter 22, verse 29. “Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown (or obscure); or before shabby men. The word, “excel” is translated “diligent” in some translations. It is always right to take all that that God has given to us, in terms of our abilities, and use it to do the best job that we can for the people that we work for, or the projects that we want to accomplish. If we have gifts we ought to use them to the glory of God. If we have the time to learn to be diligent, and to apply ourselves; then we ought to make good use of that time, especially when we are young. It was said of Henry Martyn that he was

known at college as "the man who had not lost an hour." The principle of truth which is found here in verse 29 is true even if the person using it is not a godly man. Turn with me to 1 Kings Chapter 11, verse 26. While King Solomon has played the fool and married many foreign women; provoking the Lord to anger, we find that Jeroboam was cultivating his talents. Solomon did do many mighty works; and he had other men do them for him in an exceptionally skillful manner. He no doubt knew that he was the envy of many. But even though most of Solomon's works were skillful, not all of his works were right. He multiplied wives for himself, and his wives turned his heart away from the Lord for a time. They had him build altars and high places to the Baals and the Ashtoreths.

And so God who is a jealous God, had to show him the vanity of the works that he did do, that were not right. He chose to do so, in part, through a man who was totally unworthy of being promoted to king; a man who, however, was diligent. "Then Solomon's servant, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite from Zereda, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow, also rebelled against the king." "And this is what caused him to rebel against the king: Solomon had built the Millo (the fort at Jerusalem, mentioned in 2 Samuel 5: 9) and repaired the damages to the City of David his father." "The man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valor; and Solomon, seeing that the young man was industrious, made him the officer over all the labor force of the house of Joseph." You can see here from this passage that God will reward bravery and diligence and industriousness, and He will often promote the one who thus applies himself to his tasks and his work and his studies. God's eye is upon the young men of the up and coming generation, to test them, to sort them, and to promote them according to their deeds. Proverbs 20, verse 11 says, that "Even a child is known by his deeds, whether what he does is pure and right." But Jeroboam was a man who had potential in the Lord's eyes. He was a man whom the Lord placed His hand upon, and even though he was unworthy, God advanced him to become the first king of the ten tribes of Israel during the time of the divided kingdom.

You and I, however, need to understand that diligence by itself is not enough to please God. Each of us needs something more than a hard work ethic. Look down at verse 35. This is God speaking to Jeroboam through the prophet. "But I will take the kingdom out of Solomon's son's hand and give it to you – ten tribes." "And to his son I will give one tribe, that My servant David may always have a lamp before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen for Myself, to put My name there." "So I will take you, and you shall reign over all your heart desires, and you shall be king over Israel." "Then it shall be, if you heed all that I command you, walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as my servant David did, then I will be with you and build for you an enduring house, as I built for David, and will give Israel to you."

The thing that each of us needs, more than sheer hard work, is that "we do what is right in God's sight". In fact, this is what our verse is saying in Ecclesiastes 4: 4. In the King James Version it reads this way – "Again I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor." The American Standard of 1901 says, "Then I saw all labor and every skillful work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbor." Which is it? Is it skillful or is it right? In fact, it is both. Loyal Young in his commentary on this verse says this. "Some translate it 'every successful undertaking', instead of, "every right work". The original is susceptible of both translations." "But our translation seems preferable." "For doing right multitudes have been envied and even persecuted." It is hard to believe that King Solomon, the man who wrote the verse that we are studying tonight came to the place where he sought to kill Jeroboam, the very man whom God used to be his adversary, and teach him that his work of marrying foreign wives was wrong. And Jeroboam, himself, went on not to do right works, but to the vanity of trying to compete with Rehoboam for the hearts of the people. Out of fear that the people would kill him, he set up the golden calves in Dan and Bethel and had the people worship them.

Oh vanity of vanities! When will we see that there is a greater danger to the Christian of displeasing God, than of displeasing men? Jeroboam had such great promise, but he failed so badly.

He started out so well, but he ended up in hell. Skillful and right work is always commendable in the sight of the Holy God whom we serve. He will take notice of it; and He will promote the one who is right in it. But it is possible to do something well in a skillful way; in a way that leaves God's commands out. It even introduces sin into the equation. It is not a righteous skill or work unless God is recognized and obeyed while we are doing it. Just pleasing ourselves, or other men by doing skillful work does not mean that we are righteous. We must learn the mind and the will of the Lord in terms of whether we should do a certain work. We should take council with His word to know how we should do it, and ask ourselves whether we are doing it for his glory. We may be envied for this, if we are successful, but God's purposes will be being fulfilled in us.

**But 2<sup>nd</sup> – I would like us to consider the vanity of anyone envying those who are able to do what they cannot do, or have not done.**

“Again I saw that for all toil and every skillful work (every right work), a man is envied by his neighbor.” “This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.” I would say that it is grasping for the strong wind of the Lord's judgment. I would like to give you two examples of this in the Bible. Turn with me first to Genesis 4, verse 1 and we will find the first example of this. It is an excellent work to worship God in a right way. “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the Lord.’” “Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel.” “Now Abel was a keeper of the sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.” “And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord.” “Abel also brought of the first-born of his flock and of their fat.” “And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering.” “And Cain was very angry and his countenance fell.” “So the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry?’” “And why has your countenance fallen?” “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” “And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door.” “And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” “Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.”

Now it ought to be obvious to all of us that Cain did not master the desire of the sin that was working within him. He became very angry, and vexed, and sullen in his countenance because his brother was accepted by God for his offering, and he was not. This is nothing other than the sin of envy, at the root. Abel was doing a deed which was excellent in God's sight; a deed which was right in God's sight, but Cain wanted God to accept his offering simply because he brought it and because it was suitable and acceptable in his own sight; so why would it not be acceptable in God's sight? Since his offering was not a right offering in God's mind; since his offering was rejected by God, then Cain envies Abel because he has something that Cain does not have; God's favor and blessing. And his envy turns to anger, and then his anger turns to murder.

This is the reason that religious people can become the greatest of persecutors. It is because people envy those whose offerings are accepted by God, and then they hate the truth that salvation is not going to be based upon their own works, or their own thoughts of what ought to be acceptable to God. They hate those who bring the excellent offering of a living sacrifice and the offering of a broken and contrite heart. They believe their own thoughts and observations of what is right and true ought to prevail, ultimately, over God's. This is vanity of vanities because it will ruin their entire life and determine their eternal destiny as well. Cain did not deal with his own heart and master his sin of envy.

Turn with me to 1<sup>st</sup> John Chapter 3, verse 10. “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother.” “And why did he murder him?” “Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous.” “Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.” “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.” “He who does not love his brother abides in death.” “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and

you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” We see here that a skillful work must also be a righteous work. The wicked one will work in the heart and life of anyone who will give in to envy. Abel’s work was a right work in bringing the offering that he did. It was a skillful work which was based upon his faith in God; his faith in believing that he personally needed to bring to God a sacrifice which showed God that he knew that he could not save himself from his sins, but that he had to believe in the promise of God that there would come a Savior, even the one whom his parents had told him about, who would “crush the serpent’s head”, the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew that it was right to rest in that present promise and that future sacrifice. He knew that it was not right to hate his brother. He knew that he loved him enough to talk to him about it.

But Cain truly hated Abel for this skillful work; for his right work, and so he killed him. It became the vanity of vanities in his life. God said to him in Genesis 4: 9. “Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’” “He said, ‘I do not know.’” “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “ And He said, ‘What have you done?’” “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” “So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.” “When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you.” “A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth.” “And Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear!’” Vanity of vanities. Cain has found the Lord’s strong wind of judgment! Let us learn the Lesson, that envy leads not only to vanity; the emptiness of all that we will do in our life while tolerating that sin in our hearts, but it will lead to our eternal judgment if we continue to let it crouch at our door, and do nothing about it.

I believe that this is one of the lessons that God would have us to take with us from this study. You and I who would be zealous Christians; fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; must realize that when we go about to attempt to do every work that we do in a skillful way, and in the right way, that we will be envied for it by other people. It is vanity in men’s eyes, in that it does not seem to profit the person who is trying to do the good work in the right way. The lesson that we must learn goes deeper than the obvious; as is all truth is, which God and Christ would teach us. It does not mean that we who would follow Christ should compromise and not do our work quite as skillfully as we could, or a little less right than we should do it; it simply means that we ought to expect that God will use this envy of other people to fulfill his own purposes in our lives and theirs. Yes there is vanity in pursuing these excellent works; these right works from a purely human standpoint. We prove nothing to men who do not believe in God, except that they will hate us for doing a better job than the job that they are doing. But we will glorify God. He will be well pleased. But we need to understand that there will be many vain people who would like to see us stop doing the most excellent job that we can do.

What is the lesson in closing? It is found in James 3: 1 – “Who is wise and understanding among you?” “Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.” “But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.” “This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, and demonic.” “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” “Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” The person trusting in Jesus Christ does not have to engage in envy. He knows that God will give him every good thing that he will need in Christ; at the right time and in the right way. Remember, O Christian, that God does have a wonderful plan for your life; a plan which is just for you. Don’t waste your life trying to obtain someone else’s blessings. Look to God in prayer and faith that God will give you your own blessings. He knows what He has created you to do and to be. Be content to seek Him and to wait His time; but while you are doing that, be diligent with everything that He sets before you.