

22 September 2024

Thoughts on Envy

James 3:13-4:4

We continue our month in the Book of James, reading from James chapter 3, verse 13 through chapter 4, verse 4:

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Instead of working through this scripture verse by verse today, let's do something different. Let's go backwards. Let's start with that typically Jamesian black-and-white final verse: *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.* That feels like it needs unpacking. What is the "world" here? Is it the natural world? If we like Nature, are we estranged from God? Probably not. After all, in Genesis we read that God liked Nature, too. *God looked at all he had made and said, "That's very good."* So maybe in this case, the "world" we're not to be friends with is the world of humanity, like in John 3:16 – *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.* But, again, that says that God *loved* the world of humanity, so why would it be wrong for us to be friends with it? Is there another way to understand "world"? Well, maybe one way to look at it – always a good way – is to look at the example of Jesus. There's no sign that Jesus disliked the natural world, and he clearly loved human beings, mostly. But there was one group of humans who absolutely disliked him, and whom Jesus also doesn't seem to have cared for: the people in power. Specifically, the religious leaders of the temple, the ones who ran society and benefitted from it. So here's my guess as to what James means by "friendship with the world": I think it means accepting the way society is run. I think it means fitting too well into the patterns of society, becoming comfortable with the dominant values of human culture, shaping your own actions and opinions around those of society's leaders and role models. We are to love the world that God made, which includes human beings, but we are not to grow too fond of what human beings have made of that world. We are to be different from our society.

Okay, but what does *that* mean? In what way, specifically, should we be different from the culture around us? Chapter 3, verse 14: *But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.* Verse 16: *For where there is envy and*

selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. We are supposed to reject envy.

Now we need to unpack that. Envy means seeing something that someone else has and wishing that we had it instead. The thing we envy may be a possession – a beautiful home, a car, the latest iPhone. It might be an attribute – beauty or some talent, for instance. It might be a position: CEO or president or movie star. We envy lots of things. Yeah, but someone might say, what’s wrong with that? Seeing someone else’s nice home might be an incentive for us to work hard and save to buy one ourselves, and working hard and saving aren’t wrong, are they? Admiring a novelist’s talent might inspire someone to begin writing. Surely there’s nothing wrong with having goals, and where do we get goals if we don’t see them in others? So let’s clarify that a little more. There is nothing wrong with admiring someone and using that person as a role model. Envy is when you see that someone has something you don’t, and you hate them for it. Envy is when we are inspired not by admiration, but by competition: the longing to outdo that person, to put him in his place, to take her position away from her. James is clear here. He specifically says *bitter* envy and *selfish* ambition. Envy isn’t about self-improvement; it’s about making sure no one else is better than us – which usually means bringing the other down rather than rising to meet them. Chapter 4, verses 1-2. *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.*

Understood in that way, envy is not a minor thing. Envy fosters hatred, bitterness, restlessness, discontent, and sometimes even violence. There’s a reason that envy made it into the Top Ten list of sins that we call the Ten Commandments – remember *Thou shalt not covet?* – as well as the Top Seven list that we call the Seven Deadly Sins. There are few things that can sour our soul and separate us from God more effectively than envy.

And it’s one of the founding principles of our economy, right up there with greed. Our economy is consumer-based, which means it thrives only as long as people buy things. But what happens when someone doesn’t buy much? Say they decide they have all they need: a place to live, adequate food, access to health care, and so on. Their needs are met, and so they don’t have to buy much now, do they? No, that would be a disaster! If everyone bought only what they needed, our economy would collapse! And that’s not a hypothetical; we’ve seen it. Remember what happened in 2020, when everyone was sheltering at home and buying only what was absolutely necessary. Stores closed, people got laid off, and the stock market bottomed out. Another thing that happened was that people actually began paying off their credit cards. For the first time in decades personal indebtedness in America actually went down. But that’s not the point. What matters is what’s good for our consumer economy, and from that perspective we don’t *want* people to be satisfied with having their needs met. That’s why we have an advertising industry training us to be ... envious. We’re supposed to want all the things that the happy, beautiful people in the commercials have. Our economy is based on our buying things that we don’t need in order to “keep up with the Joneses.” The ideal participant in this culture is someone who is never quite satisfied, never has quite enough, is always acutely aware of those who have more than he has. As far as our culture and our economy goes, the perfect American is someone who is wracked by envy, perpetually desperately dissatisfied, and who believes that if she could just buy that next thing, then at last she would be happy.

Now we can look back at the verse we started with: *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?* To a large extent, our culture is all about envy, and to the extent that we conform our lives to that element of our culture, we are separating ourselves from God. We live in a society predicated on wanting what we don't have, and for the sake of our very souls, we need to get off that bus.

But how? Just saying, "Stop being envious" isn't enough. That's like telling an addict, "Well, why don't you just stop using?" It's not that easy. So one more time, let's look back at James, because he didn't just tell people to stop being envious. Woven in between the verses against envy, are descriptions of what the opposite of envy looks like. Chapter 3, verse 13: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* And what is this wisdom? Chapter 3, verse 17: *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.* The repeated ideas in these verses, the ones that James keeps pounding on, are *wisdom* and *gentleness*.

I think there's something profound here. Envy is a way of looking at people. It is seeing others as symbols of our own inadequacy, as obstacles to our own happiness. They are, as we say, *objects* of envy: not people, objects. The opposite of envy, then, is to look at others not as objects, but as people. This means looking at them with gentleness, with mercy, as fellow travelers in a strange and treacherous land, companions wading through a deceptive and unhealthy culture. The opposite of envy is to regard other people with compassion and understanding. It'll take some work, I know, because our whole society has embraced envy as a way of life. Recalibrating the way we experience others will not come easily. But we have to renounce our friendship with that green-eyed world. We aren't going to find God by becoming better consumers or by continuing to compare ourselves bitterly to other people. But if we can learn to look at those people with gentleness and wisdom, we might just see God there too.