

Summer of Psalms: Don't Envy the Evil

Psalm 37:1-11
August 23, 2015
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If you have been a Christ follower for any period of time you have probably struggled with why Jesus allows bad things happen to His followers. Why people who have pledged their lives to Him end up losing their jobs, or getting sick, or having trouble with their kids or perhaps their parents? Why do many faithful people struggle to save money and are never able to get ahead? Why do people who love Jesus suffer?

I know it is small in comparison, but on Thursday this week when I arrived at church to continue working on this sermon I found that somehow I had closed the program without saving my work, and it was all gone! – talk about frustrating! Why do bad things happen to God's people?

And if you've wondered thoughts like these then you have probably also wondered why Jesus allows great things to happen to people who hate Him; people who refuse to live their lives to His glory? Why do these people get promoted at work and live healthy and long lives. Why do they remember to save their work?

When we struggle with these things we are really asking "Why doesn't it make earthly sense – the kind of sense everyone should be able to see – when we align ourselves with our Creator?" After all it's His world isn't it?

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If you are just joining us today you have stepped in to the middle of our summer series through the Psalms. And today we are in Psalm 37 so please open your Bible or the one in the pew in front of you, and follow along. As you turn there would you pray with me?

[Pray]

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Today we are looking at a Psalm that deals with what we are to do when it feels like it doesn't pay to be good. The reality is that we all face these moments, and when we are in the middle of them the temptation is two fold: first we doubt God because of our misfortune, and second we envy the evil for their blessings. And we will look at both edges of this sword today, but we are going to focus on envy.

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Now envy happens when we combine desire and resentment. It isn't only to see something good and want it for ourselves – which in itself is not sin – but it is sin to see something good someone else has and resent that they have it instead of you – that's envy.

And O how common it is. We envy when our friend gets married and we don't; or when we have a child who is sick while families around us seem healthy all the time. Why do our kids always come down with something when we take them out, especially when the only place we take them is to church? Or classically isn't it always the people who don't deserve it who win the lottery? I mean wouldn't I be a much better steward of the money? Or perhaps you are a church leader and your church fluctuates between little or no growth while other churches you judge to be less committed to the truth seem to prosper. Envy happens when we watch others succeed and resent them for it.

Now David was a man who knew what it meant to watch the ungodly succeed. While he was anointed king as a teenager he spent the next decade serving under King Saul – a man who turned further from God at every opportunity. Saul became so depraved that he began hunting David even though he served him faithfully. Saul chased him all over the country and amazingly David had several opportunities to kill him but righteously didn't take them only to watch Saul return to his palace while he went back to his cave.

And in his younger years, years when he was passionately devoted to God, David struggled with why the wicked seemed to prosper.

But David isn't a young man any more as he writes Psalm 37. Verse 25 tips us off to this where it says "I was young and now I am old." And so what we get in these words is David passing on the wisdom he has learned in regards to encouraging faith in himself and battling envy. So look with me at verse 1.

[Read Psalm 37:1]

I wonder if you've had this experience. You can be having a great day and then learn that something good has happened to someone you deem evil, and drop immediately into a sense of fretful envy. You've gone from fine to fretful in a second. The fact is envy strikes quickly and steals joy. But in this Psalm David doesn't warn us against envy simply because it makes you miserable, but because at its root is a kind of disbelief which, if let run rampant, will eternally separate us from God. The Bible says envy is a desperately dangerous evil.

So, for example, in Galatians the Apostle Paul establishes what it looks like to have the Holy Spirit coursing through you. It results in an ever increasing abundance of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But in contrast to this Paul tells us:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and **envy....** I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

So envy ends up in a list with witchcraft, immorality and fits of rage and results in a person not inheriting the kingdom of God. And the reason envy makes this list is that at its seemingly innocent core is a blasphemous root. To envy the good things the evil have is to foster absolutely anti-Christ thought in our minds.

Really?! I mean all I have done is wish that the good things that some undeserving person is enjoying would come my way instead. How is that anti-Christ?

Here is where we come up against a foundational Christian belief that we all know but most of us don't really believe: The reality is none of us deserve anything good from God. Aside from grace, which is God's unmerited, totally undeserved gift, Mother Theresa and Hitler both deserved exactly the same thing from God for their actions.

So Mother Theresa's good actions among the orphans of Calcutta do not make her worthy of any better treatment from God than Hitler's genocide against the Jews. Do you believe that? It's true! Aside from receiving the free gift of grace both Mother Theresa and Hitler's actions leave them condemned to an eternal separation from God. That's Isaiah's point when he writes:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
(Isaiah 64:6)

Isaiah says the most righteous things the best of us do, things like Mother Theresa gave her life to, are like filthy rags as far as earning God's pleasure goes. And the word "filthy rags" is a disgusting word in the Hebrew, it refers to used menstruation clothes. That's what the best things we do look like to God aside from grace.

So there is no such thing as a person who deserves good from God – not me, not Mother Theresa, not you. Now here is how this fits with our text today.

To envy is to combine desire with resentment; it is to say "I deserve what that person is getting more than they do." And when we do this we take the only thing that separates us from the worst sinner – God's free gift of grace – and exchange it for a theology of works. We forget that the only thing that makes us different is that we have been forgiven; and we believe in that moment that really we are better people than those others.

Now of course we don't put this language on it, but that is what we are doing. And that is why envy is a similar sin to witchcraft, immorality or fits of rage – it is an act inspired by our God-hating flesh rather than the Holy Spirit.

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Alright, now that we have established the wickedness of this seemingly innocent sin let's focus back on Psalm 37.

What David gives us here are the tools he has used to defeat envy and encouraging his faith. And these tools are important for us because the reality is just because you have given your life to Christ doesn't mean you are delivered from the temptation to envy. And so when you feel yourself slipping into envy David gives us five tools to implement as we discipline ourselves to resist.

1.) So first look at verse 2 and verse 10.

[Read Psalm 37:2;10]

The first tool David urges us to discipline ourselves with is an eternal perspective – David says life is short. And so even if we watch the wicked flourish for decades they are just growing like grass; it will soon wither; it will be cut short in just a little while.

Of course the older you get the easier it is to see that even 90 years goes by in a flash. And so David says “can you imagine envying the grass on your lawn? Sure it grows quickly, but it gets mowed down just as quickly”... or perhaps not as quickly if it is on my lawn.

So train yourself in an eternal perspective in order to see that the wicked aren't worth your envy because as long and prosperous as their life is really it is incredibly short and pathetic.

Charles Spurgeon writes “The shortness of life makes us see that the glitter of the wicked... is not true gold.”¹ Not only will everything be left behind, but even their memory, David says, will evaporate into nothingness under the sands of eternity. So don't envy the evil, their prosperity will be short lived.

2.) The second tool David urges us to discipline ourselves to pursue is a deeper faith in God. Look at verse 3.

[Read Psalm 37:3]

Here we see that the opposite of envy is trust in the Lord; faith is the opposite of envy. Now how is that true?

Well, to envy is to wish that you had what someone else had. And to envy the evil is to say I wish I was in your place – which David has already established is a really terrible and foolish thing to wish for. And so instead David says while the wicked seem to enjoy prosperity believe that God actually has better things in store for you.

¹ Spurgeon C.H. “The Treasury of David” Vol 1 (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott LTD), 1963. pg 173

We live in a world that yells in our ears and flaunts before our eyes what it esteems to be wealth. And so the bumper sticker reads “He who dies with the most toys wins.” But the righteous are called to catch something the eyes of the world miss.

You see when you have an eternal perspective then you realize that living your life in a way that honours Christ is the path to ultimate joy. It is true that God wants you to be happy. But the lie is that a new boat or a big house or a fast car is the ticket to being happy. In fact getting God is the ticket to happiness.

And so David says live out an active trust in the Lord. Don’t just believe in the Lord but actually do good with your belief. And the result will be enjoying safe pasture in the land.

Now the “land” for Israel was the Promised Land. This is the place where God lived. And so the ultimate blessing is to find yourself being led to safe pasture and quiet water by The Good Shepherd Himself.

So David says defeat envy by learning to put your trust in the Lord to work.

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3.) Third we get one of the greatest promises in Scripture. Look at verse 4.

[Read Psalm 37:4]

Now in the context of envy, which happens when someone else is enjoying the desires of your heart, David says God will give you everything your heart desires, when you delight yourself in Him.

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But wait a minute. Aren’t we delighting in God and yet experiencing bad things and missing out on all sorts of good things the evil get? Doesn’t this promise contradict the reality we live in every day?

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In a word, “No, it doesn’t,” but there are two things we need to understand in order for this to be true. First, this text says God will give us the desires of our heart when we take delight in the Lord. But people mistake this for a promise that we can go to God to get something else.

You see God will not be a means to an end. God will not allow you to step on Him to worship something else. This is why the health and wealth gospel is no gospel at all. You can not serve God to get money. God will be the reward at the end of the God journey or He will have nothing to do with us at all.

And so first what this verse means is when we take delight in God it changes the things we desire. When we see God for who He is and take delight in Him we don’t immediately turn around hungry for chocolate cake or the latest cell phone.

Instead when our eyes truly feast on who God is then what we desire is more of God – and that’s what He gives us. So when we delight in the Lord He gives us the desires of our heart.

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Now friends the difficult thing for us to believe here is that this is true whether you were born into the wealth and freedom of Canada, or the starvation of Ghana, or the decapitating oppression of Libya. If your delight is in the Lord He will give you the desires of your heart. And that’s because the wealth of Canada isn’t the blessing of God, the blessing of God is God Himself. In fact the wealth of Canada may actually be more of a curse than we think as it causes many not to hunger for God and thus miss out on the best blessing in the universe.

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And this leads us to the second thing we need to understand about the promise in verse 4. Like we just saw in verse 3 the good that God wants for us is a good that lasts for eternity. So God does not promise you a piece of chocolate cake and a new T-shirt every day; God promises you something good that will last forever. And God is willing to trade the temporal good to give you the eternal good any day. So like Paul says:

In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

This doesn’t mean God makes all things good now, but rather in **all** things, in **every** different kind of circumstance God works to bring His children to their ultimate good.

So when we delight ourselves in Him He makes sure we gain the desires of our heart, whether we are in the midst of wealth or poverty or persecution. So don’t envy the evil because God has something ultimately good to give you – Himself.

4.) Fourth, verses 5 and following continue in this vein as David encourages us to discipline ourselves in the face of envy.

[Read Psalm 37:5-8]

David says commit your entire way to God. Roll the whole burden of life to the foot of the cross, not just your current fretfulness, but all anxiety and cares, all desires. Even where your name is being maligned by the wicked turn that over to God. And the promise is that God will work for you.

God will bring vindication to those who trust and wait patiently for Him. God will cause the righteous reward of those who do not fret and turn from anger to shine like the dawn.

While the wicked may triumph for a time God will vindicate His children. So don’t envy the evil because ultimately we will come out on top.

5.) Fifth and finally, look at verses 9 and 11.

[Read Psalm 37:9;11]

David says don't envy the evil because they will meet destruction, but those who hope in God will prosper in everything – they will get the land.

The word translated “prosperity” in verse 11 is the Hebrew word “Shalom”. And the picture here is total wellbeing in every aspect of life right now. And this is the fifth thing we should consider when faced with the temptation to envy the evil. God says ultimate prosperity both for eternity but also for now rests with those who hope in Him. David says if you follow God you will find that you actually haven't given anything up. Because following God is the path to the most fulfilling life right now.

And this promise should sound familiar because we get the same words from the lips of Jesus. He says:

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

Yes this is for the future, but it is also for right now.

Brothers and sisters it turns out the world calls us to spend our life pursuing the desires of our heart, and God actually calls us to the same thing – to pursue the desires of our heart. But that is where the similarities end.

David says yes it is true that the evil go through life gathering stuff by force and often obtaining the good things our world values. And in contrast many times the righteous seem to come up short. But what is actually happening in these moments is that the righteous are trading the pathetic, temporal desires the world values for something of infinite and eternal value – God Himself. And God promises that it's not about the toys, but rather he or she who lives, and she or he who dies, with God, wins.

So friends, don't envy the evil. While they may be getting their hearts desires, their hearts desire the wrong things. They desire things that won't satisfy – their rewards will wither like grass, leave them hungry and ultimately destroyed.

Instead put your faith in Christ believing that when you do He will become the desire of your heart – do you want that? And He will reward you with fulfilling joy that will start now and bubble over into eternity. And He can promise this because He is the reward.