

# CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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## CHAPTER NINE

### ENVY

Genesis 4:1-16; Galatians 5:14-26

**Who is able to stand before envy?** (Proverbs 27:4)

Sin as the principle and practice of rebellion against God was fully recognized in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 31:24-27), but it was more deeply understood in the New. It is in the New Testament, and in the Early Church, that specific sins were classified as deadly, or as the most perilous to a Christian walk. Jesus spoke of an unforgivable sin, John of “**a sin unto death,**” and Paul said that the persistent practice of certain sins would exclude men from the ultimate Christian inheritance, or great loss of reward (Galatians 5:21). Great Christian scholars in the early centuries, such as Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, and writers like Dante, continued to classify and portray deadly sins and living virtues.

The apostles were especially concerned that the vices, which once marked the lives of those who were saved, be replaced with the fruits of the Spirit. They warned against all practices related to idol worship and fornication which had been common among them (Acts 15:27-29; 21:25).

The Early Church was alerted to many other sins which were incompatible in a Christian. Paul said, for instance, “**Be not deceived: neither . . . thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God . . . If we live in the spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit**” (I Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:25). Paul made it clear to them again and again (“**as I have also told you in time past,**” Galatians 5:21) what it meant “**to walk in the Spirit.**”

Sin, in its many varieties, is pictured and named throughout the Bible, but it is in Galatians 5:19-23 that we find the most complete list of “**the works of the flesh.**” Here nineteen vices are named, followed by nine virtues, or Christian graces. The vices which begin with sins against chastity (v. 19) are followed by sins of idolatry and superstition which might especially trouble new converts from heathenism (v. 20), nine vices which violate brotherly love, and sins of intemperance which are common to all mankind (vvs. 20, 21).

Whether we fulfill the “**lusts of the flesh**” or “**walk in the spirit**” is a matter of life or death, according to the Scriptures (Romans 1:32). We learn that the way to inherit the Kingdom is to crucify “**the flesh with the affections and lusts**” and to “**walk worthy**” (Galatians 5:24; Colossians 1:10-13; I Thessalonians 2:11, 12), even though it may be hard to do, for evil is always present with us (Romans 7:14ff.; Galatians 5:17, 24).

In the various lists of vices sent to the New Testament church, envy occupies a distinct place (Mark 7:21, 22; Romans 1:29-32; 13:13; I Corinthians 3:3; II Corinthians 12:20, 21; Galatians 5:19-21). Paul places envy with pride, which is the fundamental or root vice, in Galatians 5:26; and elsewhere, with the vices which relate to envy.

Our Lord does not give envy a name among those things which defile a man, but calls it “**an evil eye,**” expressing picturesquely that perverting tendency in man by which he looks with discontent, disfavor, or bitterness upon another’s goodness, prosperity, honor and the like.

A malicious envy was seen when “**Saul eyed David from that day forward**”—from that day when David was honored by the dancing women who were chanting his praises (I Samuel 18:9). In Latin envy is *invidia*, the spirit which looks closely and suspiciously on another’s good fortune. It is a withering, hateful spirit which may for a time remain undetected, and even be unsuspected by the one who envies. It is a vice which is invariably, and often vehemently, denied: “Envious—jealous—who, me? What does he (or she) have that I don’t have?”

Envy and jealousy, though often used interchangeably, are not the same. A jealous spirit may be either good or bad, depending on its object or tendency. A person may be jealous of intrusion upon that which is his own, or to which he maintains a right or claim. In Biblical usage it is intolerance of unfaithfulness or rivalry.

It is used to describe legitimate feelings toward that to which one has a right—for instance, the faithfulness of a wife to her husband. In the Old Testament we read of a “**jealousy offering**” which was made for a wife who was unfaithful, or was suspected of unfaithfulness (Numbers 5:11-31).

Jealousy is the common description of the sensitive regard of the Lord for the loyalty and love of His Church (Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Isaiah 42:1-8; 48:1-11; II Corinthians 11: 2). It is sometimes used to describe intense interest, even leading to anger, in the welfare of another (Psalm 79:5; Zechariah 1:12-17; 8:2; I Corinthians 10:20-22). Jealousy has been spoken of as a virtue where it is translated as zeal (John 2:13-17; Romans 10:2; II Corinthians 7:11; Philipians 3:6). Yet that which was originally a noble and praiseworthy earnestness of spirit may easily become perverted; and that which describes the emotions of the Holy God toward that which is rightfully His may be nothing more than a boiling resentment and sin in man.

It appears that jealousy may sometimes be legitimate, but envy is always bad because a person who envies looks with ill will, malice and spite upon that which is another’s and to which he himself has no right or claim.

Selfishness, hatred, variance, emulations, seditions, wraths, strifes, backbiting, whisperings, swellings, tumults, a reprobate mind, covetousness, maliciousness, deceit, malignity and murder, all stand related to envy (Romans 1:29, 30; II Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20, 21). James says (3:14-16) that “**where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.**”

Envy must not be confused with covetousness, although it often leads to it. It is not the desire to take something away from another, but is that evil spirit which cannot stand to see another possess what we do not, and a malignant willingness to see others brought down to our level, or better, below it. The main sphere of this vice is amongst rivals on the same work or social level.

A doctor does not normally envy a businessman, nor a mother a professional woman. Envy is usually found between those in the same circle—between colleagues, associates and relatives, in the family and in the church. In every sphere, the greater the rivalry, the greater is the temptation to envy. It plays no small part in schools, in politics and in national and international affairs. The rivalry between Israel and Judah was all the more bitter because they were of the same racial blood (Isaiah 11:13). For the same reason, the family, with its closeness and intensity of feeling, is often invaded by the hydra-headed monster called envy.

Serious trouble in the first family of earth was occasioned by envy and climaxed in murder.

Cain and Abel, the world’s first brothers, lived in Eden, though not in the first fair garden. Theirs was a pious home, and it should have been a happy home, for it had the foundation of true religion, divine favor, and parents who intimately knew the Lord. They had a mother who had known holiness, then sin, despair, pardon and the promise of redemption. God was real in her life, she knew that her sons were God’s gifts to her (Genesis 4:1, 25), and we can be sure that they were brought up to obey and serve the Lord.

The boys were taught to work and to worship. Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer, and at the appointed time each brought an offering to the Lord. God had Himself prescribed the way of worship, and He was present to receive their offerings (Genesis 4:3-7; Exodus 20:24).

Each one’s offering was of the profit of his daily calling, which was appropriate and beautiful and right. The Lord still asks that of Christians today (Proverbs 3:9; Luke 18:22-24; I Corinthians 16:2; II Corinthians 9:6, 7). However, we learn from this very first account of a sacrifice, that every offering does not please God. Cain gave of the fruit of the earth, carelessly, penuriously, as many do today; Abel gave of the “firstlings,” of the best of his flock. Not only was Abel’s sacrifice “**more excellent,**” but it was offered in a better way, in shed blood: in obedience, sincerity and faith (Hebrews 11:4). It was revealed, and distinctly understood by the brothers, that God accepted Abel’s offering but rejected that of Cain, which was of the fruit of the cursed ground.

Livid with envy of his brother and anger against God, Cain turned away when God told him why his offering was not accepted (Genesis 4:5-7). Instead of doing well himself, and ruling over sin in his own heart and life, Cain continued to be envious of his brother’s goodness and favor with the Lord.

Cain could not forget; resentment burned into flaming hatred, and one day his envy, malice, hatred and variance spun their threads into violent murder, and Abel lay dead on the fields of Eden. “Who can stand before envy?” **“Jealousy is as cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are as coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame”** (Song of Solomon 8:6).

Long centuries later, the promised Redeemer walked the blood-drenched plain of Judah and said, in the telling of a parable, **“Is thine eye evil, because I am good?”** (Matthew 20:15) It was known of Him, who brought the perfect sacrifice, **“that the chief priests had delivered him for envy”** to be crucified (Matthew 27:17, 18; Mark 15:10).

It was Stephen, one of those who was envied for the sake of the Cross, who reminds us in his sermon that another Old Testament family was broken and brought to grief because of the sin of envy.

In Acts 7:9 we read, **“And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him . . .”** Envy was no stranger in Jacob’s family. Many years before the envy of the brothers turned to hate and treachery, **“when Rachel saw she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister.”** Leah had six sons and a daughter before Rachel had her first child (Genesis 30:1, 19-23). Envy, with its evil attendants, destroyed the peace, and perhaps the health, of Rachel; it brought tension and conflict into the home to poison the atmosphere in which the children grew up.

Many attempts have been made to picture envy in its essential hideousness and terrible effects on the person and in human relations.

We are told about a fresco in a chapel in Padua, Italy, which was done by Giotto, a familiar friend of Dante. On this fresco, the artist has done an allegorical representation of the deadly vices and their opposite virtues. Envy is painted as a female figure with long, wide ears to catch every breath of rumor that may hurt a neighbor’s reputation. Out of her mouth comes the tongue of a poisonous snake, which coils back to pierce her own evil eyes. The flames in which she stands represent the fierce fire that consumes the heart which is made glad in another’s misfortune, and bitter by their prosperity.

It may be that the temptation to envy is the greatest of all for women. It can surely be said that in women it can be most picayune. It is somewhat common to feel ill will toward the material possessions of another woman:

- Her home furnishings, perhaps (“Beautiful, yes, but she must have had an interior decorator—she has absolutely no taste herself.”);
- Her new carpeting (“It’s lush, but I wouldn’t choose it myself,” etc.);
- Her beauty (“It’s all make-up.”);
- Her wit (“She always has her mouth open.”);
- Her capabilities (“She thinks she has to do everything,” or, “I could do something like that, too, if I had the time, but I don’t want to neglect my children.”);
- Her husband (“What does she see in him?”);
- Her vacation (“Where do they get the money?”),

And so on and on through the years.

What a source of worry and envy the children of others can sometimes be—their talents, their friendships, the beauty and sweetness of girls, the abilities, strength and tall handsomeness of another woman's son. How small we become when the good gifts and blessings of others provoke feelings of resentment, ill will and malice. What a pity, for no quality of heart and mind distorts the features and sours life more than envy.

The modern pressures under which we live, the tensions under which we work, the anxiety and strain which steal our peace of mind, tend already to set our nerves on edge. Resentments grow rapidly in such an emotional climate and tend to lower our resistance against evil, and even wreck our health. We might diagnose envy as a distemper of the eye or as a disease of the heart.

From Proverbs we learn that **“a sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy is the rottenness of the bones.”** The heart, the arteries, the secretions of the body and the digestive juices which are so essential to health actually take the brunt of envious thoughts and passions. Could this inward deterioration have been in the mind of the Lord when He said, **“But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness”** (Matthew 6:23)?

Envy is a foolish thing, for the Lord simply does not give the same kind of talent, possessions or children to each of us. Why envy another's position, as Miriam and, later, certain men did of Moses? (Numbers 12; 16:1-35; Psalm 106:16-18) **“If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?”** (I Corinthians 12:17ff.).

Miriam suffered without the camp with a loathsome disease because of her envy, and because of it Cain knew the poignant loneliness of sin (Genesis 4:14, 16). Material possessions—we all know how fluctuating they can be (Psalm 73; Proverbs 23:5-7; 27:24); and how responsibilities increase with wealth! The Lord knows what is best for us, for our precious children, and for His eternal Kingdom, which He is pleased to build with our families.

One of the most trying things in a mother's life is rivalry, envy and jealousy among her children. Brother and sister rivalry is practically universal. It may begin with the arrival of a new baby; show itself in possessiveness; in hitting and fighting in preschoolers; in excessive demands for fairness (“Make it exactly even . . . if she has one, I want one, too”), which require the wisdom of Solomon; in the teasing which ends in ruining the dispositions of the entire family; or in the social conflicts—verbal spats and acid replies, which require the patience of Job, for no amount of scolding, it seems, will stop it.

The danger that continual bickering and envy may color the disposition and affect the character of a child and the knowledge that it often carries into future family relations can be a source of worry to a mother. How much is occasioned by her own envious attitude or mismanagement of her children she may never know. Surely, more unselfishness, thoughtfulness, understanding and love on the part of parents is always requisite, for children do have their reasons and parents do have their failures.

Children are apt to be envious of what the other is or has, but it is more often jealousy of parental love and approval that leads to conflicts.

This was likely so of the patriarchs who sold Joseph for envy. Joseph was idolized and protected by his mother, openly cherished and favored by his father. Joseph was intelligent, obedient, handsome perhaps, much like his fair mother who was the favorite wife. It is easy to find reasons for favoritism, but does that make it right?

If Joseph had been dressed in the coarse clothing of the shepherd, and shared exposure and danger in the open fields with his brothers, could it have made a difference in family relations? All children want to come first with their parents and each has a right to a parent's love, attention and appreciation. Parents are sure to deny a feeling of preference, but children have a way of knowing who comes first. It is most often to the favorite child that jealousy and antagonism is shown. It can, and does, happen in the best of homes and in Christian families.

Rivalries must be met both at the emotional and practical level. Parents must first check to see whether they are themselves adding fuel to the fire of envy, and how they may be doing it. It is often done unintentionally. The jealous child who is sure that no one loves him must be reassured and loved, appreciated and helped to find more satisfactions.

Much quarreling can be curbed by more parental supervision of work and play, and by providing more constructive things for restless little hands to do. Sometimes frequent and timely separations of little irritants is the best solution; only time, it seems, will cure others. Frankness, honesty, humility, unselfish interest, talking together about God's pattern for His children, prayer with and for children with these burdens and problems, are indispensable.

A mother's effectiveness will be minimized even though she pleads with tears, unless she first masters envy in her own heart and mind. Resentment, envy and hatred are burdens which we cannot afford to carry in this modern, streamlined age. They add dead weight to the human spirit, make us tense or ill, and will surely present a double and confusing standard of morality or Christian living to our children. To put our muscles to work helps to discharge the emotion of resentment; a brisk walk around the block may do a world of good; an objective look at one's self may do still more to relieve tensions.

About nineteen hundred years ago, the Apostle Paul said that it is best to lay aside envy altogether, and replace it with something else. He wrote to the little church at Ephesus (Ephesians 4:31, 32), "**Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice** [what an evil brood to keep locked in the heart!]: **And be ye kind one to another . . .**"

When we subtract envy we add much to life—if we replace it with love, the virtue that undermines envy. It is nice to know that in the fresco by Giotto in the chapel at Padua, charity, or love, which stands opposite the female figure of envy, also finds artistic expression in the form of a woman.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth (I Corinthians 13:4-8) about this virtue that undermines envy, he said:

**“Charity [Love] suffereth long [is patient] and kind; Charity [love] envieth not [is not jealous or boastful]; Charity [Love] vaunteth not itself [it is not arrogant or rude], is not puffed up [does not insist on its own way]; Doth not behave itself unseemly [it is not irritable or resentful]; Rejoiceth not in iniquity [it does not rejoice at wrong], but rejoiceth in the truth [right]. Charity [Love] beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity [Love] never faileth [ends].”**

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is envy? Jealousy? Covetousness?
2. Can one be jealous and not sin? Explain.
3. Can envy ever be justified in children? Jealousy? If so, under what conditions and circumstances?
4. Why is envy often found in the family?
5. Why was not Cain’s offering accepted? Do you think that he sinned in ignorance? Trace the course of his envy.
6. Was the envy of Rachel sinful? If so, why? Suggest how her envious spirit may have infected Jacob’s family.
7. What sins are likely to accompany envy? Refer to the Scriptures.
8. What was the occasion of the trouble between Cain and Abel? To whom did the Apostle Paul write about envy? Do you think that we are troubled by the same sin in the churches today? If so, can you give any practical illustrations?
9. What virtue undermines envy? Why, and how?
10. Why do you think that people are reluctant to admit envy? Why do you think that parents persistently deny having any feelings of preference for certain of their children?
11. Suggest how parents may contribute to envy and jealousy in the family.
12. How can envy be detected in the family? Suggest all possible ways to deal with envy as it is seen in our children; in ourselves.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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