

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Week 2: Envy

1. LEADER PREPARATION

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson we will look at the first of the seven deadly sins, the vice of envy. We will look at how envy is essentially “feeling bitter when others have it better.” We will look at envy in its classical sense, which is different from the way it is commonly perceived today. Ultimately, we will see how envy is rooted in pride.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. WHAT: An understanding of envy in the classical sense is much more dangerous than we commonly see it today.
2. WHY: Understanding envy helps us to see how we are affected by this vice and how we can overcome it.
3. HOW: Students will be encouraged to identify areas of envy in their lives and honor God by developing new habits.

PRIMARY SCRIPTURE

James 4:1-3

SECONDARY SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 43:1-4

TEACHING PREP

The short overview below is designed to help you prepare for your lesson. While you may not want to convey this information word-for-word with your teenagers, you'll definitely want to refer to it as you lead your small group lesson.

The vice of Envy in its classical sense is different than we commonly use it today. When I say “oh, I’m so envious of the vacation you just took,” or, “That new car you have makes me envious,” we are using the word much differently than it really means. The common way of using “envy” really denotes greed. Greed is simply desiring what someone else has; “I want that too.” Covetousness is desiring the specific thing that someone else has; “I want that one, the one that he has.” Envy, on the other hand, stems from a desire to be better than another person; it says “I want that one, the one that he has, and for him to not have it, but I’ll be happy even if I don’t get it, as long as he doesn’t have it, too.”

Envy is concerned with who we are, measured by the things we have and the accomplishments we can claim. Getting the right thing is simply a means to an end of being the right person. Not to have the thing is to be less of a person. It’s all about a comparison game – the bottom line for the envious is how they stack up against others,

because they measure their self-worth comparatively. All of us need to be loved and found worthy, but the envier makes attaining love and worth a comparative game.

Envy is rooted in the primary vice of pride, because the envier takes it to be his prerogative and responsibility to make his own place in the ranking and manufacture his own worth by excelling the relevant rivals. Envy leaves no room for God's sovereignty in one's stature, and is directly opposed to love.

Envy is a loser's game, because even if you win, you lose. Only by avoiding establishing your self-worth comparatively with others can one overcome the vice of envy. The only escape is to find a completely different basis for our self love. Self-worth based on God's love is free to affirm others' gifts without feeling threatened or inferior.

THE BEFORE & AFTER [optional]

Text Message Questions

Here are a couple of different text message questions to send out to the students prior to the meeting.

"How do you measure up? Tonight at small group we'll talk about how we measure ourselves against each other."

"Envy – the little green monster that says, 'I'm not good enough.' We're talking about it tonight!"

Parent Email

This is an email below to send to parents following the lesson. The hope is to encourage parents to continue the conversation at home.

Dear parents,

This week we studied the vice of "envy," which is the first of the seven deadly sins. Envy, as we normally use it, is different from the classical definition of envy. We typically use envy in the jealous or greedy sense – "I'm so envious of your new car!" But envy really means measuring one's own self-worth by comparison to others.

Greed says "I want that, too," and covetousness says "I want that one, the one he has," but envy says, "I want that one, the one he has, and for him not to have it, but I'll be happy even if I don't get it, as long as he doesn't have it too." Envy is directly opposed to love and is rooted in pride, since we take it to be our own responsibility to make our place in the rankings.

Only by avoiding a comparative mindset can be overcome envy. Do you remember the recent Pixar movie "The Incredibles?" The antagonist of the movie is Syndrome, a human who isn't born with any special powers. So he uses technology to try to give everyone special powers, because, as he says, "when everyone's super, then no one

is.” If the envious can’t be first, then he wants everyone else to be brought down to his level.

During the week, as the opportunity arises, discuss with your teenager about envy. Here are some questions that could help launch your discussion:

- What’s envy? How do you see it playing out in your life and in mine?
- How do we overcome the desire to compare ourselves to others?
- Do you feel like you have to defend yourself against others and make your own way in the rankings?
- How do you rank at school, at church, or at your job?

Remember, talking with your student is one of the best ways to be part of the discipleship process. Have a great week, and we’re praying for you as you talk with your kid!

2. LESSON GUIDE

GETTING THINGS STARTED [optional]

Bring a copy of “The Incredibles” to the small group. Make sure to get a projector and a screen, as well as a DVD player or laptop and some speakers. Play the part of the movie where Syndrome gives soliloquy to Mr. Incredible. He states, “when everyone’s super, then no one is.”

ASK:

- *Why does Syndrome want to bring down Mr. Incredible? What happened in his past to cause the envy he has?*
- *Why does envy attack other people, instead of working to elevate the one who envies?*
- *What virtue do you think envy is the opposite of? In other words, if Syndrome possessed the virtue of _____, he wouldn’t attack Mr. Incredible.*

TEACHING POINTS

The goal of the Teaching Points is to help students capture the essence of each lesson with more discussion and less lecture-style teaching.

The main points here are (1) Envy Wants to be First, (2) Envy Wants Everyone Else to be Last, and (3) The Remedy for Envy is Love.

Read James 4:1-3 together as a group. Consider allowing one or more of the teenagers to read the text.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: *In this passage James says we have passions battling inside us, that we desire but can’t have, that we murder and envy but cannot obtain. What are these passions that battle inside us, the passions that lead to the capital vice of envy?*

Have you ever noticed how much we compare ourselves to others? Everyone needs to be loved and found worthy, but when we make that love and self-worth a comparative game, then we always lose.

ENVY WANTS TO BE FIRST

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Envy doesn't mean what we typically think it means – it's not about wanting the objects that someone else has (cars, toys, etc.). It's about being better than another person. However, we tend to measure our stature in the terms of possessions or accomplishments.

ASK:

- Do you every spot someone at school, at church, or at the mall, and instantly think (before you can stop yourself), "I'm better than them"?*
- What do you think is the difference between greed, covetousness, and envy?*
- Why do we always measure ourselves against others?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: We all want to be first. It's okay to want to be loved and to want to be found worthy. Remember, a vice is when we love the wrong thing, or love the right thing in the wrong way. Envy is a perversion of the natural human need for love and worth found in right relationships. But when we find worth and love in being better than others, we haven't found real love or real worth – we've settled for a poor imitation of it.

ENVY WANTS EVERYONE ELSE TO BE LAST

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Have you ever noticed how when someone is envious of someone else, it doesn't often motivate them to greater effort, but instead just motivates them to attack the other person?

ASK:

- Why do the envious want to be first?*
- Why don't we settle for being as good as we can be? Not everyone can be first, so why aren't we happy with being good, but not great?*
- Where do we find self-worth? From God, or from our accomplishments and possessions?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: The envious often feel like the deck has been stacked against them, that no matter how hard they try, they can never be better than someone else near them. So instead of working to be better and being content with our abilities, we attack the other person. When it becomes obvious that the other person will always be better than us, we get angry at the One who (supposedly) stacked the deck against us – God himself.

Envy is rooted in pride. The envier takes it to be his prerogative and responsibility to make his own place in the ranking and manufacture his own worth by excelling the rivals around him.

THE REMEDY FOR ENVY IS LOVE

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Envy is directly opposed to the virtue of love. When we envy others, then we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves. The envier can't love others, and can't love himself. The only way to overcome envy is to find our self-worth in God's view of us, not our own or the world's.

ASK:

- *How is envy opposed to love?*
- *How does someone who loves others unconditionally get out of the comparison trap?*
- *What's your self-worth measured by? Where do you find love and worth?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: The difference between envy and love is pretty analogous to the difference between dating and marriage. When a couple is dating, they're trying to outdo the competition to win the other's affection and secure the relationship. Marriage, on the other hand, is built on the premise that one is working from an already secure relationship into greater and greater love.

We have an already secure relationship with God – he accepts us unconditionally, and loves us. We are precious and honored in his sight. He loves us so much that he sent his son to die for us. God's love for us allows us to affirm other's gifts without feeling threatened or inferior. It doesn't matter if God blessed someone else with more gifts than me – he loves me the same as he loves the other person. We can be happy for them even as we are content with ourselves.

So what can we do to unlearn envy? Try investing in activities that attribute to the common good – that is, activities in which lots of people can partake without any one of them getting any less good out of it just because lots of people are doing it. For instance, enjoy art or music. Try to learn to appreciate good outside of a competitive frame of mind. Refuse to think less of the losing team simply because they lost. Participate in hidden acts of love – acts for which you will never receive thanks or be acknowledged.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION [optional]

ASK:

- *Read Isaiah 43:1-4. What words does Isaiah use to describe God's love for us in this passage?*
- *How can you base your self-worth off of God's view of you?*
- *Who is God talking to in this passage? What is he trying to communicate?*
- *What does God really want his people to know?*

- *What are some of the offspring vices from envy? What sins does envy lead to?*

APPLICATION

ASK:

- *What are some unique ways in which a teenager might face the vice of envy that an adult wouldn't experience?*
- *What are some areas in your life where you feel enslaved to envy?*
- *How do you compare yourself to others?*

Pair up with another person in the group for these questions.

ASK:

- *How can you work to overcome envy?*
- *How can you demonstrate love in your job, at church, or at school?*
- *Share with each other ways you could unlearn envy.*

Bring the group back together for this final question.

ASK:

- *If envy is rooted and pride and directly opposed to love, then how can we overcome it? Pray now and confess your struggles with envy to God.*

SUMMARY

End your small group lesson here. Provide your teenagers with a quick summary or take-home challenge based on (1) the content of this lesson, (2) the dialogue that took place during the lesson, (3) your understanding of the issues and struggles your teenagers are facing, and (4) the big picture of your youth ministry and what your leadership team wants accomplished with the teaching and discussion time.

FOR KEEPS [MEMORY VERSE]

Encourage and/or challenge the teenagers to memorize the verse below.

"I call you by name, you are mine; you are precious and special in my sight, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:1, 4)