



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

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### ***FAITH BROUGHT TO LIFE SERIES***

#### **THE CANCER OF ENVY**

*February 8, 2004 – Rev. Steve Bringardner*

~ Scripture: James 3:13-16 ~

#### INTRODUCTION

The Epistle of James is a pesky little book. Martin Luther referred to it as an “epistle of straw”. He would like to have seen it removed from the canon because he thought it posed theological problems. But it is the letter’s practical wisdom and piercing insights into human nature that make it so annoying and troublesome.

This week we come to a little passage—found in chapter 3:13-16—sandwiched in between the longer passage having to do with dragon’s breath (last week) and coming passages having to do with quarreling / friendship with the world / pride. Let’s read. . .

*<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you harbor **bitter envy** and **selfish ambition** in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is **earthly, unspiritual, of the devil**. <sup>16</sup>For where you have envy and selfish*

*ambition, there you find **disorder** and **every evil practice**.*

James is deeply concerned about the disunity that seemed to invade so many of the churches he was familiar with. It would be easy for that sort of thing to crop up in the early [any] church. Especially a church that is growing and spreading and changing rapidly—as is ours. There is always the chance of people becoming envious of each other, of selfish ambition creeping in.

Let me say (candidly) at the outset that from my vantage point, I do not see that happening at Dexter UMC at this time. PRAISE GOD! So I am offering this sermon as “preventive maintenance”. We will look at what it [“bitter envy”] is and what we can do about it.

#### WHAT IT IS

The New Testament speaks strongly against the envious heart. Envy is probably the basest emotion we have. It’s a direct result of the Fall; it was Satan’s sin. The Bible says that he had a wish “*to be like the most high*”. He envied God. In turn, he tempted Adam & Eve with the same idea, telling them that they could be like God also. Satan and our parents, Adam & Eve, were not satisfied with who they were. They wanted what they did not have and could not have, and it destroyed them.

**Dr. Paul Brand**, a gifted doctor and noted medical missionary, likens envy to cancer. In his book “*Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*”, he describes what happens all too often in the human body: a mutiny occurs. Some tiny cells become traitorous (just like Satan did in the peaceable Kingdom of Heaven). They start to multiply and grow unchecked and spread rapidly throughout the body, choking out the normal cells.

The white cells, which are the “armed guards” against foreign invaders, don’t recognize them as such and therefore don’t fight them off. But these cells are disloyal, and are no longer acting in behalf of the health of the rest of the body.

Envy is like that. It is like a cancer growing on the inside. . . a “war within”. It can effect the human body and the Body of Christ (the Church). It can destroy relationships, families, churches, businesses, governments, whole nations.

Envy defines “good” as “*what I do not possess*”. . . and denigrates the good that it has. It is not a gentle emotion, but a strong feeling of resentment. Envy is not just wanting what someone else has—whatever that may be—envy is wanting the other person *not to have it*.

One writer says that “envy is a torturous, tormenting, even murderous emotion”. It causes you to promote your own agenda. It makes you argumentative. And when you handcuff the adjective “*bitter*” to envy, as James does in v. 14, all at once envy is kicked up a notch because the word “*bitter*” comes from the verb “*to cut*”.

That’s what envy fueled by bitterness tries to do—cut others down, inflict pain, draw blood.

Bitter envy can draw you into greed and fierce competitiveness.

Bitter envy causes people to be angry—angry at others, angry at life, angry at God, angry at themselves. It accounts for much of the sharpness and edginess in interpersonal relationships.

Here’s the hook—[no pun intended]—that grabs us and owns us like an addiction: people who are full of envy are perpetually dissatisfied → so they never really get what they want → which keeps them grasping for what they do not possess. It forever eludes them. It’s an endless cycle.

This is not to say that it is wrong to want things we do not have. God has said that He will give us the desires of our heart. But if we define “good” as “what I do not possess”, then I’m going to be forever a miserable person. Take for example. . . . .

- The lonely person who stays isolated and envious of the close relationships others have.
- The single woman who withdraws from social life, envying the marriages and families of her friends.
- The middle-aged man who feels stuck in his career and wants to pursue something he would enjoy. . . always has a “*yes, but...*” reason why he can’t. . . all the time resenting and envying those who have “gone for it”.
- The person who has chosen to live a righteous, godly life, but feels envy and resentment toward those who seem to be “having all the fun”.

What is it you don’t have this morning that you wish you did have?

- “Good” looks?
- More wealth or a certain lifestyle?
- Popularity. . . having others look up to you?
- Notoriety. . . a lot of personal recognition?

- Position or a title?
- Power?
- Intellectual or mechanical (or other) ability? OR area of Spiritual Giftedness?
- Maybe it's your "neighbor's wife" ala the 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment ["Coveting" is a 1<sup>st</sup> cousin to envy].

Of course, envy is all around us in the world we live in. We're set up for it when you consider how *the individualism of the 60's + the materialism of the 80's* have combined to produce a culture that is very self-centered, me-first, cut-throat. A generation or so ago, most people would not think of cheating on their wives & husbands, lying on their income tax, taking advantage of co-workers. Today these things are all too common.

We're taught you have to do whatever it takes to get ahead, to get what you want in life—no matter who gets hurt in the process. That's why James says "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition" lead to "*disorder and every kind of evil*" [v.16].

The contrast between **DAVID and SAUL in the O.T.** [see I Samuel] is a case in point. . . . .

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

David was an example of humility; Saul was an example of unbridled envy. Crowned the first king of the nation of Israel by the prophet SAMUEL, Saul was on the cusp of a brilliant career. He led off with several military victories against the war-like Philistines.

But then something happened that changed the whole picture. Saul lied to Samuel and "the Spirit of the Lord departed from him" [I Samuel 15]. The breach of integrity showed he could not be trusted as an instrument of God's will. Though he was allowed to remain king for the rest of his life, from that point on he was troubled by an evil spirit that brought on bouts of madness.

Meanwhile, DAVID was crowned as the new king by Samuel. From his defeat of Goliath, his popularity and name recognition had soared. He was a courageous young man who was walking with God. This made Saul insanely jealous.

[This is speculation on my part, but I think God put David "in Saul's face" to remind him of what he could have been—and still could be, because repentance and conversion are always possible with God. It didn't have to end the way it did!]

But when Saul heard all the jingles the people were singing in the streets (e.g.: "*Saul has slain his 1000's and David his 10,000's*"), he was furious. Twice he hurled a spear at David trying to pin him to the wall, but David eluded him both times.

Then Saul sent David out to battle, hoping that Israel's enemies might kill him. But that didn't happen. So he put out a contract on David's life. For the next few years, David was a man on the run, hunted and tracked like an animal by this madman. Meanwhile, David put together his own army of about 600 men and positioned them in a mountainous area filled with caves.

Saul came in hot pursuit. Twice David had a chance to take Saul's life, but refused. Finally, Saul was defeated in yet another battle with the Philistines. . . three of his sons were killed (including Jonathan, David's best friend). . .and he fell on his sword in total and utter self-defeat.

Saul had it all. . .but he wanted more! He had all the power and authority you could imagine plus a 1000 other blessings, but it wasn't enough. Saul envied David. He longed for the attention and the respect that David enjoyed; he wanted David's winsome personality and his character.

Saul was bedeviled by envy. It was a cancer waging war on the inside of him. It was the root cause behind the disorder and wickedness that marred his whole life. It's this same "war within", this same cancer that sneaks into our hearts and creates conflicts in our families and community and our inner selves. We want more—more attention, more respect, more power, more authority. It's not philosophical or doctrinal differences that split us. . .it's our drivenness, our chasing after personal desires.

Contrast that with another SAUL (in the New Testament)—Saul of Tarsus—who went on to become PAUL, the Apostle. He started out a man full of anger and animosity. . .persecuting the Christians. . .breathing murderous threats against them. He was a seeker after power, influence, and position. But God got hold of Saul's heart and changed him. All that energy that drove and motivated Paul was turned toward building the Kingdom of God, and God used him mightily to establish the early Church.

### WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

I mentioned "preventive maintenance". What steps can we take to guard ourselves against "bitter envy" in the church, in the home, in the marketplace?

1. **Maintain unity.** Ephesians 4:3 says: "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*" We already have unity; it's the gift we are given when we join together as a church or in marriage as husband-and-wife. Our job is to "maintain" it. [How do we do that? Paul gives some very practical and specific advice in verses 25-32.]
2. **Take inventory** [e.g.: Step Four of the Twelve Step Program]. Ask yourself some hard questions like. . .

Am I holding any resentments or bitterness?

How am I doing at communicating and listening?

Why can I not enjoy my life as it is (and myself as I am)?

Why am I so afraid of taking risks?

What do I need to change?

3. **Don't compare yourself to others.** Galatians 6:4 says: "*Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.*" If we are focusing on what others have or have accomplished, we are neglecting our responsibilities and will ultimately have an empty heart.
4. **Take responsibility.** Feel empty and unfulfilled? The people who are most successful in conquering this character defect are the ones who make a conscious decision to stop looking at another's so-called "fullness", and spending this same time & energy on taking responsibility for their lack and doing something about it. Develop the gifts God has given you! [see Romans 12:6]
5. **Balance that with acceptance.** Humility involves a certain amount of acceptance—that is, satisfaction with who we are, with what we have, with the way things are. The **Serenity Prayer** is not a bad prayer to pray everyday! May God help us know when to take action and when to hold back. King-elect David seemed to have that sense—maybe because he lived close to God?!?!]
6. **The chief antidote to "bitter envy" is "humility".** David certainly represented that trait! Humility is the mark of "the wisdom that is from above". It is the most quintessential Christlike quality a disciple can hope to acquire. James says that arrogance and envy are "**earthly**" (i.e.: how the rest of

the world acts & thinks), *unspiritual* (i.e.: not having the Holy Spirit at work in your life), *and of the devil* (i.e.: motivated by)” [v.15].

ILLUSTRATION: A grandfather was talking to his grandson. “Grandson”, he said, “there are two wolves living in my heart and they are at war with each other. One is vicious and cruel, the other is wise and kind.” “Grandfather”, said the alarmed grandson, “which one will win?” “The one I feed,” said the grandfather.

Which one are you feeding this morning—ENVY or HUMILITY?