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That Enemy Called Envy

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That Enemy Called Envy

It is, indeed, difficult to explain. It is, as well, almost impossible to define. It is like a cancer, infecting and affecting every part of life, yet it is often so effectively disguised that even the one who is dying of it doesn't know he has it.

It is worse than anger. The Bible says so. And not many things are. Anger is murder in the making. Yet this is even potentially more devastating. Like so many sins, often it seems to begin somewhat harmlessly. It is, in fact, sometimes mistaken for healthy ambition. But however it starts, its goal is the destruction of one's value system, and the end result is usually the destruction of relationships and finally of the soul itself.

It is Public Enemy Number One. God calls it envy. It sometimes evaporates and reappears as a more palatable cousin named jealousy, but both are equally defiling and destructive. Fortunately, both are equally curable at the hands of the Great Physician.

It is that cure we are seeking as we continue our treasure hunt through the pages of Proverbs seeking the solutions to self-control. We want more than knowledge. We want understanding turned into wisdom. By God's grace, may we be transformed in the process.

Now before we venture into the ever-unfolding truth of Scripture where envy is concerned, we ought to do two things. We ought to define the words "jealousy" and "envy". We ought also to ask ourselves two questions: (1) Is there a difference between jealousy and envy, or is one but a part of the other? (2) Is jealousy ever godly? The answers (as I trust you will see) are "yes", "no", and "sometimes".

By consulting our dynamic diary of definitions known as the dictionary, we find that the word "jealousy" has at least four meanings. In other words, when you say, "I'm jealous", you can mean at least four different things. So if we can uncover the depth of those definitions, we are on our way!

In the first definition, jealousy is a protective guardianship. For

That Enemy Called Envy

example, you keep a jealous watch over little Johnny so he will not play in the street, or get lost in the supermarket, or play too close to the cliff, or become mesmerized by the beeps and blips of the likes of Nintendo. You watch over him jealously. So to be jealous in this sense involves two things: love, and ownership or responsibility. God is our example. He watches over us with a jealous love. Nahum 1:2 tells us that God is jealous over those He loves, so He takes vengeance on their enemies. He protects us from harm, guarding us jealously.

Paul describes it in II Corinthians 11:1-2, where he says (my paraphrase), "I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, for you are engaged to Christ and I desire to present you to Him as a chaste virgin." God is a jealous God. He is a protective Guardian over those He loves. However, along with the guardianship and protection comes the expectation of loyalty, and so the second meaning of the word further expands its horizons.

In the second definition, jealousy is a justified intolerance of infidelity. It is an expectation of faithfulness. Again, God is our example. He is a "jealous God" in this sense, too. Therefore, He is justifiably intolerant of our spiritual infidelity.

Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God...

For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.

(Deuteronomy 4:23,24 KJV)

Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them (idols), nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God...

(Deuteronomy 5:9 KJV)

He expects you to be faithful to Him. Also, in Joshua 24:19 it says that you cannot serve the Lord and other gods because He is a jealous God; He expects fidelity from His people. He will not share your affections with the gods of this world. He is a jealous God, and He has the right to be jealous. He owns you. Moreover, He has the responsibility to be jealous, because He loves you.

So the first two kinds of jealousy are godly jealousy because they are reflections of the very attributes of God Himself. Godly jealousy reflects itself, then, in protective guardianship, as well as in a justified intolerance of disloyalty or infidelity.

Now the third kind of jealousy listed in the dictionary takes a different turn. It might best be summarized as an unhealthy fear

That Enemy Called Envy

of stolen affections. It is the result of jealousy gone wild, carried to extremes. It is, for instance, the protective instinct of a mother carried to the extreme of overprotection; a smothering kind of love that is not really love at all. It is a jealous husband whose fear of his wife's being disloyal causes him to distrust her every move, which allows her no freedom to prove her faithfulness. As he questions her every motive, often he drives her to do the very things he has imagined her to be doing in his mind all along. It is a jealousy born of distrust, fueled by self-centeredness and a desire to control another's life.

The dictionary also reveals a fourth kind of jealousy which forms the basis for today's study. It is this: jealousy = a lust to envy. Envy can be defined as a desire to have or to be, based on a spirit of discontentment. It is the result of comparing one's life with another. In other words, you are not satisfied with what you have and the result is an ungodly desire or lust for what someone else has. In its milder forms, it is not at the other person's expense. You'd just like to be pretty like she is. It's okay with you if she stays pretty; you are just envious. You would like to be that pretty, too.

As the cancer of envy spreads into the spiritual bloodstream though, its final stages evidence envy at another's expense. You want what they have, even if it means you have it instead of them. In this context, envy and jealousy are used almost interchangeably in most of Scripture.

Well, how serious is this problem of envy? I trust that most of us, at least, after five lessons of trying to tame the temper have concluded that anger is a serious problem that cripples and stymies the progress of the Christian. However, as dangerous as anger is, envy is **EVEN MORE POTENTIALLY DEVASTATING**.

You ask, "How can you make a statement like that?" Well I did not make it up. God did:

Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous: but who is able to stand before envy? (Proverbs 27:4 KJV)

The Living Bible captures the impact of it this way:

Jealousy is more dangerous and cruel than anger.

You say, "Well, it's not as big a problem to me!" Good. That means one of two things is true. Either (a) you have recognized envy in your own life and dealt with it (more than you have with anger), or (b) you do not yet have understanding where envy is

That Enemy Called Envy

concerned. You do not fully grasp what it is! Envy is the result of discontentment based on comparing your lot in life with that of another.

Our goal then is, having defined envy, to describe and to picture envy, using as our video monitor the Word of God.

What is envy? For some it is a glazed look when a sports car goes by. It is an unfavorable comparison of your wife with someone else's. It is a deep-rooted bitterness at how you look that makes you despise the "pretty" people you see on TV.

What is envy? It is a disgruntled dissatisfaction with your house just after visiting one that is twice as big.

What is envy? It is the absence of happiness for a friend who just passed you on the ladder of success.

What is envy? It is finding stones to throw at the church up the street that is growing faster than yours.

What is envy? It is hating your brother or sister because they seem to be your parents' favorite.

What is envy? It is a lingering resentment that you cannot sing like SHE can, or

play racquetball like HE can, or
paint like THEY can, or
teach like HE does, or
write like SHE does.

The eyes say, "Color me green."

Well, if that is what envy is, how do we discover Satan's subtle schemes? Where does our enemy initiate his attack? We are going to look at two categories of people who evoke envy in us and simply let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

Category 1: The Scripture says we envy the world's kind of success, and it is wrong. We are inundated with it through the media and through well-meaning parents and friends. Subtly, we begin to wonder if it would not be neat to have all that success, even at the expense of spiritual growth.

We glance into the magazine section of the Sunday newspaper, and as we outwardly proclaim, "How sinful!", there is a satanic curiosity inside us about what it would be like to be one of life's "pretty people." What would it be like to have the possessions, the

That Enemy Called Envy

fame, and the power this world counts so dear? Satan deceives us into thinking, “What a life!” They LOOK happy; they LOOK prosperous; they LOOK successful, and they do not even know the Lord! Here I am, a Christian, committed to walking by faith, and I can barely pay the electric bill. My car is a wreck, and my job is a struggle. Day in and day out the trials go on and on and on, and I am tired of Romans 8:28!

Just then, Satan whispers, “Is it worth it to serve the Lord?” Or perhaps you look at friends who have rebelled against the Lord, violated His Word, yet still they seem to prosper. Satan whispers, “Are you wasting your time being faithful?” My friend, God has already answered your question. Just read it to Satan and watch him flee. In Psalm 73 He tells us why it does not make sense to envy the world’s success. Let’s read it paraphrased in the Living Bible.

How good God is to Israel his children— to those whose hearts are pure. But as for me. I came so close to the edge of the cliff!
My feet were slipping and I was almost gone!

(Psalm 73:1 TLB)

(That verse shows the reality—now here’s the reason:)

For I was envious of the prosperity of the proud and wicked.

(Psalm 79:3 TLB)

(Here is my reasoning:)

Yes, all through life their road is smooth! They grow sleek and fat. They aren’t always in trouble and plagued with problems like everyone else.

(Psalm 73:4 TLB)

(We think!)

So their pride sparkles like a jeweled necklace, and their clothing is woven of cruelty!

These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for!

“They scoff at God and threaten his people. How proudly they speak!

They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut through the earth.

(Psalm 73:6-9 TLB)

(Now here’s the result:)

And so God’s people are dismayed and confused and drink it all in.

(Psalm 73:10 TLB)

(Here is the response; we wonder if God has fallen asleep.)

“Does God realize what is going on?” they ask.

That Enemy Called Envy

Look at these men of arrogance: they never have to lift a finger—theirs is a life of ease, and all the time their riches multiply.

Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? All I get out of it is trouble and woe—every day and all day. (Psalm 73:11-13 TLB)

(Do you see Satan’s logic?)

If I had really said that, I would have been a traitor to your people. (Psalm 73:15 TLB)

(Here’s the summary.)

Yet it is so hard to explain it—this prosperity of those who hate the Lord (Psalm 73:16 TLB)

(Now here’s the solution.)

Then one day I went into God’s sanctuary to meditate, and thought about the future of these evil men. (Psalm 73:17 TLB)

(In other words, he got alone with God.)

What a slippery path they are on - suddenly God will send them sliding over the edge of the cliff and down to their destruction: An instant end to all their happiness, an eternity of terror. Their present life is only a dream! They will awaken to the truth as one awakens from a dream of things that never really were! (Psalm 73:18 TLB)

(They are the ones who have been deceived!)

When I saw this, what turmoil filled my heart! I saw myself so stupid and so ignorant: I must seem like an animal to you, O God.

But even so, you love me! You are holding my right hand!

You will keep on guiding me all my life with your wisdom and counsel; and afterwards receive me into the glories of heaven!

Whom have I in heaven but you? And I desire no one on earth as much as you!” (Psalm 73:21-25 TLB)

(Here is a verse to memorize.)

My health fails; my spirits droop, yet God remains! He is the strength of my heart: he is mine forever! (Psalm 73:26 TLB)

Do you see the flow in the psalmist’s perspective from the beginning of the Psalm? He is bitter because those who seem to flaunt their unrighteousness are those who by the world’s standards have succeeded. Then, suddenly, he wakes up and redefines

That Enemy Called Envy

“success” by God’s standards. He realizes these colossal superstars are skating suddenly into an endless abyss of hopelessness and destruction, neither to be seen nor remembered again.

God tells us not to envy the ungodly. They are living in a dream, they will awaken into an eternal nightmare.

Don’t envy godless men; don’t even enjoy their company.

(Proverbs 24:1 TLB)

Don’t envy the wicked. Don’t covet his riches. For the evil man has no future; his light will be snuffed out.

(Proverbs 24:19,20 TLB)

Proverbs 23:17 sums it up (paraphrase is mine):

Don’t let your heart envy sinners. Instead, live always in the fear of the Lord.

There you have a future! And a hope that will not be a disappointment.

Psalms 37 reiterates God’s perspective and gives believers an alternative to envy. Allow me to paraphrase it:

Don’t fret yourself (or get bent out of shape) because of “successful” sinners. Don’t envy their “success.”

Soon the lawn mowers of eternal reality will pass over them, and there will be nothing left of them at all. They will be like dead grass.

Instead, focus on resting the whole weight of your life on God and on the doing of His will. Then you will experience HIS kind of success. and all your needs will be met.

Let God be your delight, the focus of all your attention. Then your objectives will be His objectives, and they will all be met.

Make a commitment that His ways will become your ways, and trust Him—He knows what is best.

He will honor your obedience and make your life to shine like the sun.

Relax, GIVE GOD TIME. BE PATIENT. (Instead of being fretful and envious because those who flout God’s way seem to be succeeding.)

Stop being angry—it will lead to more envy.

Those “successful sinners” will vanish, but those who rest in the Lord will one day inherit it all.

In just a season, those who are not His, will be gone. You’ll look everywhere for signs of them, these “success stories” who

That Enemy Called Envy

have been the object of your envy, but they will be nowhere to be found. (Psalm 37:1-10)

The steps of God's man are God's to direct, and God delights in HIS success.

He may appear to slip and fall but he's not finished. He cannot stay down long; God is holding HIS hand.

I have been young; now I am old. But I have never seen God forsake His own. I have never seen His children starve. (Psalm 37:23-25)

I have seen the wicked appear to be in control, their power covering even the saints like a mighty tree. But the tree always dies; the wicked always vanish, and then their power and their success are nowhere to be found. (Psalm 37:35)

The Psalmist is saying that envy is the antithesis of trust; that jealousy, envy and ambition bring futility and frustration. Instead we are told to rest, trust, commit, and wait. One day, the scales will balance and God will measure real success by real standards. So don't sit in front of your television set secretly wondering what it would be like to live life the world's way or being envious of their life-style or their acceptance or their acclaim. It is all a jaded lie, a mirage. The Psalmist says that they will one day vanish and their "success" will have vanished, too. So, to sum up Category #1, don't envy sinners.

Category #2: The second category of those we are not to envy are our peers, those called alongside in the struggles of life as co-laborers or equals, those we come to view as competitors. We ought to marvel at their successes, rejoice in their victories, and support them in their struggles. Instead, the better they do, often the more envious we become. We are actually disappointed that THEIR children did not rebel, too, or that their careers seemed to blossom just when ours collapsed. In this regard, I think the Scripture seems to surface the dangers of envy in two distinct areas more than any other where believers are concerned.

The first is in the family. Satan has an inroad here to superimpose on the home the grid of partiality and comparisons. So brother hates brother for succeeding, for making the team when he did not. Sister gets bitter over sister's popularity or looks or talent, instead of building up one another in love. We search for signs of partial parents and seethe with bitterness and envy that we are not accepted as our brothers and sisters are.

That Enemy Called Envy

It is hardly a new problem. The world's first murder was an inter-family affair where one brother's offering was accepted by God; the other's was refused. It was not because God was partial but because only one son came to God on God's terms. The result was envy. Instead of examining his own heart, Cain decided to exterminate Abel and eliminate the competition. Abel became the second victim of the enemy called envy. (I say the second, because an angel named Satan was the first.)

In Genesis 37:11 we read that Joseph's brothers envied him. "He is Dad's favorite," they concluded. The result was lying, conniving, and a conspiracy to cover up a crime that makes Watergate look like a Walt Disney story. Only the grace of a sovereign God gave the story a happy ending. Joseph was an innocent victim of the enemy called envy.

In Numbers 12, we see Aaron and Miriam become envious of Moses. The result was a near disaster. The Scripture overflows with illustrations of families splintered by envy: Jacob and Esau, Abraham and Lot, Rachel and Leah.

Perhaps the best known example of envy in the family is found in Luke 15. Here the younger of two sons rebels, squanders his inheritance, and loses all semblance of self-respect, only to venture finally back to his father's house. Much to his surprise, there awaits him a father's open arms, a father's forgiveness, a fatted calf, a celebration... and an older brother filled with envy.

"It's not fair," thinks the older brother. (That is Satan's line.) "I've been good; I've been faithful. Now here comes my rebellious whippersnapper of a brother, and HE gets the fatted calf." Rejoice over his brother's return? Rejoice over his father's joy? Not on your life! He chose instead to fall prey to the enemy known as envy.

Envy—it is a natural disaster on the order of volcanoes and earthquakes, and its effects on the family are just as devastating.

The other area in which envy so surfaces is in the ministry and in the marketplace where we are called outside the home environment to live life in a world of competition and comparisons.

Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.
(Ecclesiastes 4:4 KJV)

The NIV says:

And I saw all that all labor and all achievement spring from

That Enemy Called Envy

man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

The Good News Bible says it more clearly:

I have also learned why people work so hard to succeed: it is because they envy the things their neighbors have. But it is useless. It is like chasing the wind.

You have just got to have a better car—your best friend has one. So you buy one, and he gets a motorcycle, too. You have just got to get a new TV. (Isn't that chasing the wind?) Your neighbor got one. So you get one, but HE has one that shows two channels at once—in stereo, no less! Or you've just got to get a cellular phone. That family on TV seemed so happy, and they had one. We are driven to buy, to sell, to rent, to go, to be and to see, not based on what we know we need, but the pressure of envy that whets our appetites for places and things and positions God never intended for us to have.

Have you ever asked yourself how many things you think you have to buy that have become necessities, not because they are necessary, but because we are driven to conform?

Envy. Solomon summed it up this way. He said the underlying drive that motivates us in much of what we do is the enemy called envy.

But I believe the most dangerous and cruel ploy that Satan has yet devised is his trick of taking the enemy of envy and injecting it into the bloodstream of the church. He divides to conquer. So one denomination will have nothing to do with another. A pastor is secretly jealous of the new buildings or the big budget of his friend's church up the way. So in the energy of the flesh he sets out to make his mark, to make his church the biggest (as though the biggest meant the best). Congregations, instead of rejoicing in the victories of other fellowships, are jealous and seek ways to discredit their sister churches by comparing "their" weaknesses with "our" strengths. So the family of God suffers from the same disease that so often infects the home—the enemy of envy.

In Numbers 16:3, it was envy that caused Korah and his troops to rise up against Moses and question his authority to be their pastor. "Who gave you the right to lead us?" they argued. Moses fell on his face and prayed. Psalm 106:16 describes their motives: "They envied Moses also in the camp, and Aaron the saint of the Lord." Then the Psalmist goes on to describe what happened to

That Enemy Called Envy

those who had fallen prey to this enemy called envy.

We see envy at the root of Saul's bitterness over David:

And Saul said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands,
and to me they have ascribed but thousands...

And Saul eyed (envied) David from that day and forward.
(I Samuel 18:8,9 KJV)

What was Saul's problem? He could not stand seeing HIS popularity measured against David's. As a result, he became another casualty of the enemy called envy.

Remember when Paul fell victim to a jealous band of Jewish leaders in Acts 13?

And the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. (The whole town gathered to hear Paul preach.)

But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against (opposed) those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming.

(Acts 13:44,45 KJV)

In other words, when they saw how big Paul's crowd was, they were threatened. It happened again in Acts 17. Paul was in Thessalonica preaching in the synagogue, reasoning with the people out of the Scriptures. Some of them believed and joined with Paul and Silas, including a great multitude of Gentiles. Then in verse 5 we see that the Jews which did not believe were "moved with envy" and started an uproar. Verse 6 finds them proclaiming, "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also." So Paul and Silas, victims of the enemy called envy, had to leave the city. The religious leaders were appalled at their following and threatened by their success. Out of envy they retaliated.

However, the greatest act of injustice ever carved out of human history by the cruel hand of envy is recorded in Matthew 27. In this passage, Pontius Pilate has just encountered the Living God, who was on trial for crimes He did not commit. Pilate knew that at the feast that night he could release one prisoner of the people's choice. Let's look at the passage, beginning with verse 17:

Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?
(Matthew 27:17)

Now listen carefully to verse 18:

That Enemy Called Envy

For he knew that for (because of) envy they had delivered him.
(Matthew 27:18)

Mark 15:10 confirms this:

For he (Pilate) knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy.

In other words, the motivation behind the crucifixion was that unspeakable enemy called ENVY.

I began to examine my own heart and to ask myself some questions and thought you might like to do the same of yourself.

- How do I feel when others receive more acclaim than I do?
- Do I really root for the success of those I feel are competing with me?
- Do I pray for my competitors? Or do I secretly rejoice when one of them has a problem?
- Am I as excited over the successes of other churches as I am over ours?
- Do I take it personally when I think someone does not appreciate what I do?
- What motivates me to want nicer things? Newer things? Better things?
- Am I jealous of someone who seems to have better behaved children? A better-disciplined life? A more consistent ministry?

I won't tell you how I answered those questions. I will tell you, though, that I can trace an unbelievable amount of discouragement and defeat in my own life to that subtle but fatal enemy called envy. And I concluded that its deadliness lies partly in the vagueness and the variety of its symptoms. Envy is difficult to trace, so it is difficult to erase.

Even so, the Scripture is clear:

- It is deadlier than anger.
- It sent Paul scurrying out of town.
- It sent Abel to the grave.
- It sent Joseph to a far country.
- It caused the elder brother to act like a fool.
- It sent Moses to his knees.
- It sent Jesus to the Cross, this enemy called envy.

That Enemy Called Envy

Scripture is also just as clear as to what it does to the Church as a group or a body:

- I Timothy 6:4 says it leads to dissension.
- I Corinthians 3:1,3 says it leads to division.
- James 3:14 says it leads to hypocrisy.
- James 3:16 says it leads to confusion.
- Proverbs 14:30 says it leads to tension. (It will rot the life away.)
- I Peter 2:1,2 says envy will keep you from growing.

So how do we approach the subject of envy with an eye to gaining wisdom? I would like to suggest five things in closing.

1- Ask God for one full week to surface the motives behind what you do and how you feel. Write them down (whether you feel like it or not.)

Let me explain a bit. You see, the reason envy is more deadly than anger is that it is motivational in nature. It does not always express itself the same way. In fact, it does not always express itself at all. For example, I found that others may have a hard time knowing of whom I am envious, because I am enough of a hypocrite to praise outwardly those whom I inwardly resent (to pretend not to want what my heart longs for). But when I start writing down my real motives, I'm shocked.

2- Exercise the Sundown Principle where envy is concerned. Every night, refuse to lay your head on that pillow until you have emptied your tea kettle not only of anger, but also of envy. List every attitude of jealousy, every envious thought for that day, and confess them as sin.

3- Begin to pray for those you envy. (This really works!) Pray for their success, even at your expense. Praise God for their promotions, for their prosperity, for their successes. Pray for those Christians or those churches whose successes you so resent. INTERCESSION ENDS ENVY.

4- Begin to demonstrate love actively, graciously, quietly to those you envy. It is impossible to love and envy at the same time. You say, "How do you know that?" I know I Corinthians 13:4 says, "Love envieth not." Love and envy are incompatible.

5- Learn to develop a grateful list. Learn to thank God every

That Enemy Called Envy

day as a family for the things you take for granted. You cannot be green with envy over your neighbor's new car while you are on your knees thanking God for that antique Edsel in your driveway. What is more eternally significant, a new car or a life free from the bondage of debt? A new sofa or the new life of a convert your gift to a missionary made possible?

6- Learn to analyze why you buy what you buy and only make major purchases after praise sessions—they put an end to envy.

We must leave the result to Him, asking Him to take these passages and sensitize us in the days and weeks to come to the issue of envy.

Envy. Look for it. It will surface in your prayer life, both in whom you pray for and whom you don't. It will surface in your thought life—the people you compare yourself with, and the things you compare. It will surface in your relationships—how you relate to your parents, your mate, your friends. It will surface in how you spend your money.

When you see it surface, remember, it is a gift from Satan, planted in the garden of your heart. Like deadly weeds in a field of flowers, it will choke out the Word and your love for others. It will distort and destroy your confidence in the sovereignty of God.

So make a list of your motives; confess as sin those that are fueled by jealousy. Begin to pray, begin to praise, and begin to love the very ones Satan tempts you to envy. Resist him, and he will flee from you. And once again you will have exercised godly self-control over another of God's enemies, the enemy called Envy.

(See poem next page.)

That Enemy Called Envy

THE ENEMY CALLED ENVY

Oh, the enemy called envy
Is so subtle to detect.
It hides itself in ways that you
Would never e're expect.

It clothes itself self-righteously,
Yet still it gnaws and grows.
It flows throughout the bloodstream,
But seldom ever shows.

And yet it causes us to vie
And even hate our brothers,
Demanding what we think we need
At the expense of others.

We're jealous of another's power;
We're jealous of their fame.
We're jealous if they find success
That yet eludes our name.

We want whatever they have
In spite of what is best,
Instead of praising God and letting
Him decide the rest.

Oh, the enemy called envy!
It deceives, distorts, destroys.
It steals into our motives,
One of Satan's cruelest ploys.

But the enemy of envy
You can—in Christ—resist.
For remember, love and envy
Cannot coexist!

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