

WHY ENVY THE WICKED?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 12

Extracts:

Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. *Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth but far from their mind. But You, O Lord, know me; You have seen me, and tested my heart toward You....* [And the Lord replied] *"If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?"* [Jer. 12: 1-2, 3a, 5]

In my home district in the southwestern part of Nigeria, there was a very rich wicked man who made life hell for our community in the 1960's. Nobody knew how he came to his wealth. He owned a fleet of transport vehicles and did business under the name, "Between God and Man," from which he got his popular name, BGM. You had to sell only to him and buy only from him at his price. He took other people's wives at will from far and near to please his fancy. Even the law enforcement agents were on his pay roll. Therefore, he was virtually above the law. Then, one day, he suddenly died. Within a few years thereafter, you could not find any trace that he ever existed. His vehicles, wives, land, buildings, etc., simply vanished!

While he lived, there were many people who envied BGM. Such people included some honest, law abiding and hard working members of the community. Yet, they could not command the attention and means that BGM monopolized. They might have seen him as a happy man because he had it all. His business name, "Between God and Man," suggested that God featured somewhere in his reckoning but in what way? Why did he prosper and get away with so much for some time while the righteous toiled with little or nothing to show for it?

Similar questions came to the mind of the prophet Jeremiah when he saw the prosperity of the wicked and yet no harm seemed to have come to them. Jeremiah envied the wicked! Should we envy the wicked at all? What is the significance of God's answer to Jeremiah's complaints against the wicked? Let us look for answers from today's lesson.

1. Would you envy your inferior?

We are said to envy others *when we resent their success or wish that their success were ours*. “Others” may be those who are superior or equal or inferior. to us on the social ladder. When success comes to those that we consider clearly in a higher league than ourselves, it may mean nothing to us or we may admire or simply ignore it. It may give us hope to work harder, that one day, it could be our turn. In like manner, if somebody way below us succeeds at something that has nothing to do with us, we may congratulate him or her heartily or choose to ignore the matter. *The problem comes when success goes to those that we use for our social comparison. That is when envy wakes up in us!*

Here are examples of people that we may envy:

a) *Those whose growing stature threatens ours*

There are some people that we have all along regarded as our closest colleagues on the job or associates in business. They may have been our mentors in the ministry. Then, one day, we get promoted or receive a special commendation. All of a sudden, the chemistry of the relationships changes. Some will admire us and show genuine appreciation and celebration. However, those with the spirit of envy will suddenly see our growing stature as a threat to theirs.

A good example can be seen in the relationship between king Saul and David. Following the series of his disobedient acts, the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul “and a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him” [1 Sam. 16: 14]. He asked his servants to look for “a skilful player on the harp” to play to comfort his worried spirit. That was how they sent for the shepherd boy, David. When David stood before the king, “he loved him greatly, and he became his armour bearer” [vv.15-22]. But see what happened soon after David had killed the Philistine giant Goliath and the women began to sing songs of praise, saying, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” [1 Sam. 18: 7]. The king’s countenance towards David changed and he said, “Now what more can he have but the kingdom.” In other words, he saw David as a threat to his own status and “so Saul eyed David *from that day forward*” [vv. 8,9].

This may in part explain parent-children tensions. Many parents hardly realize that their babies of some years back have now grown up and are capable of making their own decisions. Some parents see such developments as a threat to the status they had enjoyed over their children in the past, when they decided for them what schools to attend, what religion to practise or what TV programmes to watch! Some mothers with unhappy marriages envy their daughters who wind up in happy marriages.

Some retired ministers envy their successors who have become more successful than they were. It could happen to you!

b) *Those contemporaries who are beating us*

There are people who are of the same age with us, or are classmates in high school or college, or were employed on the same job grade some years back. Now, we hear that they are doing quite well or have achieved where we have failed. How do we react to their successes?

The envious person will try as much as possible to downplay such people's success. It was luck, or racial/ethnic/political connection, not hard work or merit. If the rival is a woman, she must have used her charm and "other assets!" Envious people will place themselves in a position to claim that they would have done a better job, given their rivals' opportunities!

For example, Zedekiah was the head of king Ahab of Israel's four hundred prophets who had assured the wicked king that he would win should he go to war with the Syrians to reclaim Ramoth in Gilead. Of course, their prophecy was false because God wanted Ahab killed in battle and He had allowed an evil spirit to hide the truth from those prophets. The true word was given to another prophet, Micaiah, and that aroused Zedekiah's envy. He struck Micaiah on the cheek and said, "Which way did the spirit of the Lord go from me to speak to you?" [**1 Kgs 22: 1-24**]. In other words, he refused to acknowledge that Micaiah was better and undermined his integrity by openly assaulting him. How many times has your pastor turned down a prophetic word from a lower member of the congregation with such a harsh rebuke as, "If the Lord has a word for me, He will speak to me directly!"?

c) *Those whose failures or setbacks we celebrate!*

Envious people also celebrate the failures or setbacks of their targets the same way they undermine their successes. They are the first to find the reason for the failure. "It must be God's judgment for their sins!" "We knew the bubble would burst!" And more! For example, the same chief priests and scribes who had delivered Jesus to the Roman authorities for crucifixion on account of envy [**Mk 15: 10**] were also by the cross to celebrate His suffering, saying, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe" [**vv. 27-32**].

d) *Those superiors we undermine their positions*

There are people that we know are clearly superior to us in intellect, respect, beauty or material blessings. We may have tried hard to rival them to no avail. What do we then do? We begin to undermine them in any way we can. At every opportunity where our opinion is required on such people, we say unflattering things about them. Where they occupy official positions that we covet, we starve them of necessary information that could have made them more effective. That is a form of envy! Take the case of Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry. His fame as prophet and miracle worker was well known and recognized throughout Israel. However, “when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind’” [Mk 3: 21]!

Clearly, envy depends on how we see what we are looking at. We can see things in a healthy way and that will be regarded as admiration. We can see things the true way and never let them affect us otherwise. Or we can merely see things on their face value and go bananas over them!

2. So, should we also envy the wicked?

A wicked person is the one who *desires evil* [Prov. 21: 10] whose heart is far from God [Prov. 15: 29]. In today’s text, we hear the prophet Jeremiah complaining to God about the advantages that wicked people have over the righteous, that is, believers. In other words, Jeremiah was envious of the wicked. From our analysis above, where do you classify the wicked? Do you consider them your superiors or equals or inferiors? Certainly, you would not envy your inferiors unless their rising stature threatens yours. You would not envy your superiors unless you coveted their possessions. Do you then consider the wicked your rivals or contemporaries and, therefore, the main target of your envy?

When Jeremiah looked at the wicked, he saw:

- Their material blessings- they were prosperous, with deep roots and they bore fruits [Jer. 12: 1, 2]. The Psalmist adds that they had more than the heart could wish [Ps. 73: 3, 7]
- Their happiness- they were happy [Jer. 12: 1] and not in trouble like others [Ps. 73: 5]
- How they got away- in spite of the fact that they wore pride like a necklace and violence covered them like a garment [Jer. 12: 6], were boastful [Ps. 73: 3] and spoke perverse things [Prov. 2: 13, 14], the wicked seemed to get away with their loot! They had God on their lips but not in their hearts [Jer. 12: 2].

Jeremiah compared that profile with that of the righteous person like himself, saying, “You, O Lord, *know* me; You have *seen* me, and You have *tested* my

heart toward You” [v. 3]. Examine those three words- know, seen, tested. God sees our hearts, not the outward [1 Sam. 16: 7]. He knew us before we were conceived [Ps. 139: 14-15; Jer. 1:5]. He tests us so as to build or strengthen our spiritual muscles [Rom. 5: 3-5; 2 Pet. 1: 5-9]. Therefore, the wicked is not worth envying! That is why God threw the question back at Jeremiah, saying, “If you have run with footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?” [Jer. 12: 5]. In other words, if you see the issue only in terms of flesh and blood, how can you deal with the bigger and more dangerous satanic forces behind wicked people- principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places [Eph. 6: 12]? Therefore, *to envy the wicked is to act foolishly and ignorantly* [Ps. 73: 21].

3. But look at the end of the wicked!

When you look at the matter from God’s perspective, you discover that the wicked are not worth your envy for the following reasons, among others:

a) *They are on slippery slope!*

A person on a slippery slope is falling fast, possibly facing a crash that could lead to death. Meanwhile, the hands and feet are trying to hold on to something but there is nothing to grip! Wicked persons are in a similar situation. God will cast them into destruction and utterly consume them “with terrors” [Ps. 73: 18, 19]. The wicked may sow wheat and reap thorns; put themselves to pain but profit nothing [Jer. 12: 13]. In deed, there is no peace for the wicked [Is. 48: 22]!

b) *The wicked labour for the righteous!*

The word of God says, “God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is *good in His sight*; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God [Eccl. 2: 26]. The loot of the wicked is constantly under the scrutiny of law enforcement agencies. Consequently, they are ever so busy trying to launder their wealth, that is, bring dirty money into the legal monetary system without raising suspicions. That may take the form of using surrogates and dummies. Since wicked people’s lives tend to be cut short, they end up losing their wealth to others or to the state.

Imagine how much of the wealth of developing countries, stolen by dead corrupt politicians, is now the property of Switzerland and other safe havens. In Nigeria, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has reportedly recovered the equivalent of US\$4 billion (in houses, land, luxury cars, air planes and oil tankers) from those found guilty of financial

crimes.¹ Hopefully, such monies could be used for programmes to benefit the needy and the poor.

4. Conclusion: stop pursuing a mirage!

It is natural to feel bad when you see prosperity and success in people using illegal or immoral means while you are following God-fearing ways with little or no visible success. You are tempted to join them if you cannot beat them. However, most of us may not go that way for fear of God. Nevertheless, we could do worse! We may envy their apparent *material prosperity*. In today's lesson, we see why we should not envy the wicked. They are living dangerously and they will never enjoy their loot. In the end, the righteous will triumph over the wicked [Ps. 58: 10]. Therefore, stop pursuing a mirage!

Envy *in general* can put you on the road to self-destruction because if you cannot see good in others, why do you expect them to see any good in you? To envy the wicked is worse because you are telling God how to run His estate! When you are tempted to envy others, quickly ask God to redirect your steps to His face and His promises. Ask for the fruits of the Holy Spirit to manifest in your life, so that when you look at the wicked, you will see their evil and sad hearts, not their loot. That way, you will not be tempted to imitate them.

The day that you can feel sad when your enemy is hurting is the day you will know that you have been cured of envy!

¹ Mohammed Abubakar and Emeka Anuforo, "EFCC recovers N520 billion assets," www.guardiannewsngr.com/news/article03