

Are You Envious Or Content?

Mike Ford

Given 06-Oct-20; Sermon #FT20-04A

There have been times in my life when I thought I was jealous, but it turns out that it was really envy. Americans tend to use the words “envy” and “jealous” interchangeably but there are differences in the two.

Envy requires two parties, such as you and your neighbor. Let us say you see him driving down the street in a new sports car with the top down, and you wish it were you. That is envy. You want something someone else has.

Jealousy requires three parties. You see your neighbor drive by in his new red convertible, and your wife is riding with him. And you think, maybe she is riding off into the sunset without you. That is jealousy—when you are afraid someone is taking what you have.

You see jealousy a lot in lover’s triangles. It is typically generated when a person perceives a threat to a valued relationship from a third party. And it is not just a human trait. God is jealous at times. We will see that in a moment.

I have a great definition of envy from an article in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (I am sure we all read it [laughter]).

Envy is an emotion which occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession, and either desires it, or wishes that the other lacked it.

And, I might add, it can be completely one-sided. The person who has what you want may have absolutely no idea that you are envious, or even care. It is something the envious person must deal with.

On a spiritual plane, both envy and jealousy are sins to avoid, especially when viewed as synonyms. In English, the difference is clear. But in both Hebrew and Greek, the root words for these two emotions are a bit blurred.

Envy is never shown in the Bible as a positive, but there are times that jealousy is a positive. The apostle Paul writes:

II Corinthians 11:2 For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

“Jealous,” here, is Strong’s #2206, “*zeloo*” (zay-lo’ow). Used 12 times in the New Testament, this is the only time it is translated “jealous.” The other times it is envy, covet, desire, or zealous.

“Jealousy,” in II Corinthians 11:2, is Strong’s #2205, “*zelos*” (zay-los). Used 17 times, this is the only time it is translated “jealousy” in the King James. The other times it is envy, zeal, and indignation.

So context is important for understanding these two Greek words. More often they mean envy, desire, or coveting. But as we see, occasionally they mean jealous or jealousy.

However, Paul in this verse uses both Greek words to express this human emotion on a godly plane. He taught the church; he led them; he invested everything to bring them to the “marriage” ceremony. And he is “jealous” that they might be taken away.

In verse 3 he says:

II Corinthians 11:3 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

There is another time that Paul uses “*zelos*,” and the King James translates it as, “emulations.” When the King James was written, emulations meant, “Ambitious or envious rivalry.” That meaning is considered as obsolete now. Let us go there, to where we find the works of the flesh:

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery,

hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The Young's Literal Translation also translates “*zelos*,” as “emulations,” but all the other translations I looked at use “jealousy.”

Notice the first word in verse 21 is “envy.” That is the Greek word, “*phthonos*” (f’thonos), and is always translated “envy.” It is a work of the flesh; it is not of God. The same word is used in Matthew 27:18 where Pilate gives the mob the choice of releasing Barabbas or Christ. Pilate understood what was going on here. It says, “For he knew that they had handed Him [Christ] over because of envy.” Jesus had not taken anything from them; they were not jealous. But He had character they did not have, and since they could not have it, they would take His life! His way required changes in their lives that they would not make. Envy is *always* a negative; a sin.

Jealousy, as Paul used it in Galatians 5:20, is also a work of the flesh. Depending on the context, “*zelos*” can be a negative or a positive. Paul’s jealousy for the church in II Corinthians 11:2 is a positive. Jealousy, when it is, “ambitious or envious rivalry,” as the King James has it, is wrong; a work of the flesh; a sin. Envy, unrepented of, can keep you from God’s Kingdom!

So in the New Testament, envy is always a negative—always a sin. Jealousy is a positive only as it relates to God and His calling. It is used that way only a couple of times.

What about in the Old Testament?

Numbers 5:30 ‘ . . . or when the spirit of jealousy comes upon a man, and he becomes jealous of his wife; then he shall stand the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall execute all this law upon her.’

The word “jealousy,” in the Hebrew, is Strong’s #7068, “*qinah*” (kin-ah), and it means, “Envy, jealousy, or passion.” “Jealous,” is Strong’s #7065, “

qana” (kah-nah), meaning, “To be jealous of; to be envious of.” Between the two, they are used 77 times; similar to “*zeloo*,” and “*zelos*.” It is important to look at the context to see how to take them—good or bad.

Proverbs 14:30 A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones.

“Envy,” here, is “*qinah*,” a negative. Envy will eat you up.

Next is a good example of how the Hebrew can be a bit fuzzy as well:

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

That is from the *King James Version*. “Envy” is the Hebrew “*qinah*.” All the other translations I looked at used “jealousy.” Both are accurate translations of this Hebrew word. This is confusing compared to English, where they are not synonyms. Although quite often, they are used that way.

Deuteronomy 4:24 “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”

Now “jealous,” here, is a close brother to the other two Hebrew words. It is Strong’s #7067 (remember the other two were #'s 7065 and 7068). It is “*qanna*” (kan-nah); it is an adjective, and means *only* “jealous.” It is used 6 times, each one as it relates to God.

Exodus 34:14 (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)

One of God’s names is Jealous! This is absolutely a positive! It is His name, and it is one of His character traits. But it is very clear that His jealousy is *on our behalf*. It is a good thing. I would say that most of the time, when a human experiences jealousy, it is a negative. It can lead to sin. But God has offered us a relationship with Him, through His Son, and He jealously guards it. He will not abide the intrusion of another “lover,” so to speak.

Envy is something God does not experience, and does not want us to, either. It is one of the seven deadly sins according to Catholic tradition.

Envy is not called by name in the Ten Commandments, but the idea is there. The very first one, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” tells us that God expects to be first in our lives. Envy of someone, or envying something, can separate us from God.

What about number 7—adultery? Is that not a desire for something you do not have? And should not have?

Or number 8—stealing. How much theft is simply because you saw something you did not have, and lusted for it? You were envious that someone else had it, and you took it.

Number 10—coveting—fits this as well. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, his wife, nor anything he has.

A professor of Journalism named Merrill Perlman had a good line about coveting. “When you covet your neighbor's wife, you are resentful that your neighbor has her, and you do not. If she was yours first, then you can be jealous”.

Hebrews 13:5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

We have heard many times about the last part of this verse, and rightly so. But do not ignore the first part. Do not covet, lust for, or envy what others have. Be happy with what God has given you. Many translations render the first part of this verse, “Keep your lives free from the love of money,” and that is absolutely accurate. But the next part, “Be content with what you have,” covers a lot of ground.

The Amplified Bible, and others say, “Be satisfied with your present circumstances.” That is a hard thing to do. Be happy with what God has given you.

Should not we have more? Do not we deserve better? What happens when envy creeps in? We lust for something; we covet what we do not have; we let bitterness leak out into our conversations. If we are envious of someone—of who they are, or what they have—we might try to turn others against them.

This goes back to what I began with—I used to think this was jealousy. But I see, now, it is envy.

“I want what you have. I don’t necessarily want to work for it, or earn it. I just want it. And if I can’t have it, then you shouldn’t have it either! That’s not fair. Be content? No way! I can’t be happy until I have what you have. And, if I can’t have what you have, then I’m going to make your life miserable out of envy.”

Let us look at a case history of this.

I Samuel 1:1-7 Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim, of the mountains of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. This man went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. Also the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. And whenever the time came for Elkanah to make an offering, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb. And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat.

This is all we get from God as to Peninnah. She had children—sons and daughters—and Hannah did not.

During feast days, Elkanah gave gifts to Peninnah and her kids. (It is interesting that it is written “her” sons and daughters, rather than “theirs.”)

After all Elkanah is their father.) And then we get “her rival provoked her severely, to make her miserable.” And that is the last we read of Peninnah. She does not come off all that well, either.

Why does Elkanah have two wives in the first place? According to the Midrash, Hannah was Elkanah’s first wife. After they had been married for ten years, he married Peninnah. I want to quote some more from the Midrash, so it might be well if I defined what that is.

From Wikipedia:

With the growing canonization of the contents of the Hebrew Bible, both in terms of the books that it contained, and the version of the text in them, and an acceptance that new texts could not be added, there came a need to produce material that would clearly differentiate between that text, and rabbinic interpretations of it. By collecting and compiling these thoughts, they could be presented in a manner which helped to refute claims that they were only human interpretations. The argument being that by presenting the various collections of different schools of thought, each of which relied upon close study of the text, the growing difference between early biblical law, and its later rabbinic interpretation could be reconciled.

When you read, “according to Jewish tradition,” in articles, a lot of the time it is referring to the writings in the Midrash. These ‘writings,’ are, indeed, nothing more than the thoughts of Rabbis through the years that have been preserved in book form. They are not necessarily inspired, nor accurate, and should be understood in that context.

So now, according to the Midrash, Elkanah had to marry Peninnah because Hannah was barren. Hannah is the first and preferred wife, and Peninnah lives her life in second place. I do not think Hannah treated Peninnah badly, if in fact, some writers think it was her suggestion and prodding of Elkanah that brought Peninnah into the family. Israelite law (remember this is not God’s law), prescribed that a marriage had to produce children (be fruitful and multiply), and if there were not any children after 10 years, something was to be done.

The basis of this is found in Genesis 16, which tells the story of Sarai, Abram's wife, bringing Hagar into the picture after they dwelt 10 years in Canaan. From what I have been able to research, it seems the first course of action for a childless couple was for them to divorce, and the man sends the wife back to her family. I found one article that records instances of wives successfully petitioning rabbinic courts to compel their unwilling husbands to divorce them after 10 years of infertile marriage!

This did not happen often, I think, and sometimes the man, (or the couple), decide to bring a second wife into the family. Also, not that common, I think. This is apparently what happened with Elkanah and Hannah.

Based on what little information we have here in the first chapter of I Samuel, and the writings of others, we can form a mental image of what went on. Elkanah loves Hannah and is somewhat content with this childless marriage. When the family makes the trip to Shiloh, Peninnah provokes Hannah, making her cry:

I Samuel 1:8 Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

Elkanah is like most men, unable to function when confronted by a woman's tears. The law at that time allowed a second wife, if the man had a sufficient income to support her. Obviously Elkanah did; so it seems Hannah arranged this. And with Peninnah, Elkanah had ten sons based on what he asks her when she is crying. "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" She also had "daughters," so at least 2. In order to have 12 children, let us allow some time. Peninnah had to have some time to rest and wean the children, so let us say 18 or 20 years. So Peninnah has been married to Elkanah for a good while. For almost 2 decades she has been provoking Hannah and making her miserable.

In the beginning, since this was most likely Hannah's idea, it was probably peaceful—if such an arrangement can be. But as Peninnah began to have children, which is what Hannah wanted, she saw that Elkanah's love was still first for Hannah.

What Peninnah had was not jealousy. Hannah was not taking something from her. She did not have Elkanah's love to begin with. Peninnah was envious. She wanted what Hannah had. And instead of being "content" with what she had, or striving to become a better person—a better mate, a better mother—she began to throw barbs at Hannah. She thought, "If I can't be happy, then I'm going to make sure you're not happy."

This has all the makings of a lover's triangle—but not quite. We see no indication that Hannah is jealous or envious of Peninnah, and Elkanah seems a bit oblivious to the tension, as men can be. Some would argue from verse 8, that when Elkanah says to Hannah, "Am I not better to you than ten sons," it was because Hannah was jealous of Peninnah and her kids. Meaning Hannah feared losing Elkanah's affections. She had something—Elkanah's love—and was afraid it would be taken.

I do not agree with this viewpoint. In verse 5, the way it is worded leads you to believe that at every holy day Hannah got a double portion. Elkanah was always showing Hannah where she stood. And, if Hannah was the driving force for bringing Peninnah into the marriage, Elkanah went along, but only to please her.

Elkanah took his family to Shiloh "yearly," (verse 3) or as some translations have it, "Year to year," or "Once a year." The Hebrew is not very clear on this. Most commentaries feel that this was either Passover/Unleavened Bread, or the Feast of Tabernacles. Some feel, and I tend to agree, that they went at all 3 festival 'seasons.' It appears that Elkanah and Hannah were devout for their day. Peninnah's relationship to God is less clear. It is doubtful that a woman like Hannah would suggest to her husband a second wife that had dissimilar views of God. So while Peninnah may have started out happy to be part of this family, she did not stay that way. She lived in the shadow of Hannah and, over time, envy became "rottenness to her bones" as we read in Proverbs 14:30.

It says very clearly in verse 5 (I Samuel 1) that "the Lord had closed her [Hannah's] womb." These were good people who believed in God. They were chosen to bring forth the prophet Samuel. They had gone 10 years without children from Hannah so I think they realized this was from God. And Peninnah would know this also.

Yet Peninnah, in verse 6, “provoked her severely, to make her miserable.” One translation has it that Peninnah would “taunt” Hannah. The *Good News Bible* says she would “torment and humiliate” her. Again, from the Midrash (and remember this is more of a tradition passed down through generations than it is ‘inspired’), Peninnah would vex Hannah with questions like, “Did you buy a sweater for your oldest son?” “Did you buy a shirt for your second son?”

Jewish writers say that Peninnah would get up early to start in on Hannah. “Aren’t you going to wash your children’s faces before they go to school?” According to this Midrashim account, Peninnah would grieve Hannah by means of ordinary everyday activities, taking pains to remind her, at all hours of the day, of the difference between them.

In verse 6, Peninnah is also called Hannah’s rival. Some translations use “adversary.” The Hebrew word literally means, “A female rival; a vexer; a rival wife.” A rival competes with another for the same objective, or for superiority in some area. An adversary is an enemy; someone who opposes you. I think both work, but adversary is better. Peninnah was a rival, yes, but Hannah does not seem to be competing with her.

To be fair to Peninnah, there is also a tradition that says her intentions were honorable. She treated Hannah this way to drive her to more intense prayer, to push her to seek God for relief from her barrenness.

But I find this hard to accept. It is obvious that Hannah is a God-fearing woman, especially as we read further into the story. It does not seem that she needs prodding to pray.

No, it is obvious, at least to me, that Peninnah is a huge thorn in her side that makes every day a misery. Not someone we would want to emulate!

Let us go a bit further in the story. On one particular visit to Shiloh for a holy day, Hannah goes to the Tabernacle by herself to pray. Verse 10 said, “She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish.” “Bitterness” is accurate but perhaps portrays a mean spirit of mind. Other translations say she was, “brokenhearted,” or in “distress.” I think this

conveys better what she was feeling. She makes a vow to God in verse 11, that if He would “heal” her, so to speak, and give her a boy, she would give the child to the Lord, and he would be a Nazirite.

You know the story here, how the priest, Eli, sees her in this posture of turmoil, her lips are moving but no sound comes out, and he thinks she is drunk. Hannah convinces him otherwise and explains that she has “poured out [her] soul before the Lord.” Eli tells her in verse 17, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.” Hannah’s heart is lifted up, she goes home “no longer sad” (verse 18). I think that Hannah was “content with what she had,” understanding that God was in charge, yet at the same time she prayed for “healing” and relief from this trial.

We have all been in that situation, waiting for God’s decision in a matter. Being “content with what you have,” does not mean never seeking to improve yourself. Do we not pray and study in order to grow spiritually?

In the coming year she conceives and Samuel is born. So the following year the family goes to Shiloh but Hannah and the child stay home. Once Samuel is weaned (somewhere between 3 and 5 years old) she took him to the Temple, along with a sacrifice, and presented him to Eli.

How hard that must have been, to finally have the child you yearned for and then give him up! Of course it was to God, and she still saw him at the holy days, and brought him clothing she made for him, but it was still a hard thing to do.

I Samuel 2:18-21 But Samuel ministered before the LORD, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod. Moreover his mother used to make him a little robe, and bring it to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "The LORD give you descendants from this woman for the loan that was given to the LORD." Then they would go to their own home. And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the LORD.

God “closed” Hannah’s womb, and then blessed her with Samuel and 5 additional children. Hannah has come down through time as a faithful and trusting servant of God. Peninnah faded from view.

The contrast could not be greater between these two. They both knew of God, they both attended services, but they chose different paths. Hannah took the path of trusting in God and being content with such as she had. But of course she also did her part. If she was the driving force behind bringing Peninnah into the marriage, it was because this was the law and tradition at the time, not because she was faithless.

Peninnah chose the way of self. Rather than being thankful for all those children, she was petty, vindictive, and envious. “Yes I have all this, but I want what you have!”—definitely not “content” with what she had. So she sets out to make Hannah’s life miserable.

There is one other “tradition,” we will call it, from the Midrash. The story goes that when Hannah bore her children, Peninnah was punished. Hannah would give birth to one child and Peninnah would bury two. Hannah would have 4 and Peninnah would bury 8. When Hannah was pregnant with her fifth child, Peninnah feared that now she would lose her last two children. So she went to Hannah and told her, “I know that I have sinned against you. I beg you, pray for me, so that my two remaining sons will live.” Hannah did so and God responded that He would allow them to live, but that they would be called by her name. Thus, giving her two additional children.

Hebrews 10:30-31 For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

God is not vindictive. He does not act from spite. But He does promise to punish sins not repented of. Did Peninnah continue her envy after Hannah began to have children? We do not know. As I said earlier, her mention in the pages of the Bible comes and goes quickly. I certainly hope that God, in His mercy, did not require the lives of any of Peninnah’s children.

Now, let us look at Hannah’s prayer.

As you read through this, keep in mind where Hannah started from, and what she endured. Was she content with what she had? I think so—yes. She loved Elkanah, and probably enjoyed Peninnah’s children, at least when they were young. You know that kids pick up their parent’s bad traits as they grow up, and they repeat and think what they have heard.

Her faith was strong; she knew exactly Who is in charge. Some might say she was not content with her lot, because she never stopped wanting to have children. But as long as your desire does not become an idol, or turn to coveting, then laying your requests out to God is fine. If you can keep envy at bay, then you can still be content with such as you have.

I Samuel 2:1-10 (GNB) Hannah prayed: "The LORD has filled my heart with joy; how happy I am because of what he has done! I laugh at my enemies; how joyful I am because God has helped me! [How long did Hannah endure the “slings and arrows” from Peninnah? 20 years?] No one is holy like the LORD; there is none like him; no protector like our God. [He will never leave you, nor forsake you.] Stop your loud boasting; silence your proud words. For the LORD is a God who knows, and he judges all that people do. [God answers prayers, but on His timetable!] The bows of strong soldiers are broken, but the weak grow strong. The people who once were well fed now hire themselves out to get food, but the hungry are hungry no more. The childless wife has borne seven children, but the mother of many is left with none. [Did God require the lives of all but two of Peninnah’s children? And she would not be counting Samuel in this.] The LORD kills and restores to life; he sends people to the world of the dead and brings them back again. He makes some people poor and others rich; he humbles some and makes others great. He lifts the poor from the dust and raises the needy from their misery. He makes them companions of princes and puts them in places of honor. The foundations of the earth belong to the LORD; on them he has built the world. He protects the lives of his faithful people, but the wicked disappear in darkness; a man does not triumph by his own strength. The LORD'S enemies will be destroyed; he will thunder against them from heaven. The LORD will judge the whole world; he will give

power to his king, he will make his chosen king victorious."
[Hannah's prayer is also a prophecy as she looks to the coming of Christ.]

This is the prayer of a woman who trusted in God, who was content with what she had, and did not return envy for envy. God told her to wait, and so she did—for maybe 30 years, or more. [Ten years childless, 20 for Peninnah.] That is a very long time to endure the envious attitude of someone in your own house. Yet she did it without returning the hate and envy. An example we would do well to take note of.

Be content with what you have.