

The Dangerous Trap of Envy of Worldly Blessing

Genesis 36:1-37:1

Intro: The Dangerous Trap of Comparison

One of the most spiritually harmful traps we can fall into is the trap of comparison to others. “Their life is better. Their marriage/spouse is better. They’re married and I’m not! They’re better looking. They’re so much smarter. They have more money. They’re more outgoing. They have a better life.” Comparison is a dangerous trap because it always leaves us wanting and never leaves us satisfied.

But what’s worse is when Christians compare themselves to non-Christians...unbelievers who appear to have it all together, life looks easy, they seem so happy with all their stuff and their successes, and we think, “I’m out here working my tail off to please the Lord and live for him and do what he says, and it can be really hard, and I don’t get rewarded for it! But those who live a life of ease, without a second thought pursue sinful self-pleasure, and they seem to experience ZERO consequences!”

Comparison is a dangerous trap *because* you're believing the lie that having what they have now is better than waiting for what you'll get later—eternal blessing. That's what Gen. 36 is about. Moses, the author of Genesis, records the temporal worldly blessings of Esau and his people in contrast to the eternal spiritual blessings of Jacob and his people. There's a repeated phrase that reminds us that Esau's blessings are not what GOD'S people should long for. **[v1, v8, v19, v43]**

That's how this account is structured—according to this repeated phrase, “Esau is Edom.” It's an emphasis of this passage *because* after each elaboration of the different categories of worldly blessings that describe Esau's life, Moses reminds the readers who Esau really is. Esau is Edom!

A name that not only points to Esau's flippant disregard for his birthright when he sold it for a bowl of red stew (because “Edom” means red), but a name familiar to Israel who knew Edom as an enemy and a people outside the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And therefore, implicit in this genealogy is the simple point, “Don’t envy Edom! Don’t fall into the trap of comparison and get sucked in by envy and sit in discontentment because your heart is ruled by the desire for the temporal. Rather long for the eternal blessings of God found in his covenant promises.”

Notice how this account closes. **[37:1]** After Moses gives this long list of all the worldly blessings of Esau, he says, **[37:1]**. That means, Jacob stayed in the land of promise, the land of true blessing, the land in which God would grant his people the fullness of his presence. The land of his father Isaac. But Esau, his brother, chases the world.

Though Esau (and the people of Edom) gain all sorts of worldly blessing, Jacob (and his people of Israel) will gain (by grace through faith in God’s promises) an eternal blessing. Therefore, *don’t envy the temporal worldly blessings of those OUTSIDE God’s people, rather long for the eternal spiritual blessings promised TO God’s people.* Let’s break that point down into two parts.

First, don't envy the temporal worldly blessings of those outside God's people.

There are three "worldly blessings" that Esau gains: possessions, lineage, and heritage.

Blessing #1: Possessions [vv1-3] It's already starting off bad. Esau intermarries with the pagan people of the land. He assimilates into the Canaanites, revealing he doesn't value the things of God. And then he has kids with them. **[vv4-5]** This is not telling us anything new. We heard Esau had done this back in ch28. So this is a recap of something that already happened, reminding us, that though Esau prospers in biological offspring, he does so in a way that does not honor God.

And that becomes even clearer when we read where he takes his family to live. **[v6]** All the stuff he got IN Canaan (the land promised for God's people), he takes OUT OF the land and goes away from Jacob. We're given the practical reason why in **[v7]**. Practically, they couldn't live in the same place. But Moses is making a deeper point about the spiritual state of Esau's heart.

Think about this: What does v7 remind you of? “They couldn’t live in the same place because they both had too much stuff.” Sounds a lot like Abraham and Lot from ch13. What did Lot do? He chose a dwelling place based on the eyes of his flesh, a land that look beautiful, BUT it was EAST of the promised land...away from the place of God’s blessing.

Esau is doing the same thing. He’s not only going away from the place of God’s spiritual blessing, but he’s also separating himself from the one through whom God will bless all peoples—Jacob. Notice where he settles. **[v8]** Seir is southeast of Canaan. (Remember, the direction “east” has come to signify in Gen. the place away from God’s blessing.)

He goes the way of those outside God’s covenant and he “settles” there. That word carries the idea of permanent residence. Ironically, in settling there, he’s settling. He’s settling for material, temporal, worldly possession; and he’s giving up spiritual, eternal, heavenly blessing.

Therefore, the message for the readers of Genesis and the message for us is simple: Don't envying the blessings of those outside of God's true salvation blessing. "Look at all the stuff they have! Why can't I have that? Look at the beautiful family they've got! Why am I still single?"

That wasn't Paul's mindset. In 1 Cor. 7, he said, "My singleness allows me to have a greater single-minded devotion to the Lord." He was able to travel across the known world, spreading the gospel. It's a lot harder to do that with a wife and kids.

Of course, the desire for a family is good! What's not good is envying those who have it when you don't. Rather, you must see whatever state you're in—single or married—as a stewardship from the Lord. And never envy the temporal blessing of either.

Blessing #2: Lineage. In vv9-19, it seems the author is doing something different than vv1-5. He mentions Esau's sons again in vv9-14, but he lumps them with these "chiefs." **[v19]**.

I think his point is: Esau's sons produced chiefs—heads of various clans in Edom. [vv9-14] The “sons” (really grandsons) of Esau amount to 12, except for Amalek, who was born of a concubine of one of Esau's sons—which is why he is mentioned in that a parenthesis in v12. He's not really lumped in with the 12 grandsons of Esau. But Moses still mentions him. Why?

What people would come from Amalek? The Amalekites....the same people who attacked Israel on their journey from Egypt to the promised land, and the same people who would become Israel's enemy. The first king of Israel, Saul, was supposed to wipe them out in 1 Sam.15 because of how wicked they became, but he didn't do it.

So this mention of Amalek in v12 as a grandson of Esau further demonstrates that Esau's line is not the line of promise. And therefore, any “blessing” he gets should not be envied! But Amalek is mentioned in a parenthesis mainly so the focus would be on the 12 grandsons of Esau *from his wives*.

Why does Moses intentionally highlight these 12 grandsons of Esau? Clearly, he's comparing them to the 12 sons of Jacob! Esau's "sons" serve as the anti-people of God. Like Moses is saying, "Esau had 12 sons too! And chiefs came from these sons!" **[vv15-18]**

Like Moses is saying, "Impressive, huh? Esau's sons produced chiefs, heads over the people. BUT...don't forget who his sons become. Don't forget what nation he turns into!" **[v19]** "You don't want that! Edom is not who you want to be. Don't envy them!" This a blessing of lineage that is worldly/temporal.

Blessing #3: Heritage. Look how Esau's sons inherit the land of Seir. **[vv20-30]** So Moses switches his attention from Esau's lineage to the lineage of the native inhabitants of Seir, the place where Esau's family settles. It seems Esau son's intermarrying Seir and then take it over. Here's how Deut. 2:22 puts it, "...the people of Esau, who live in Seir,... destroyed the Horites before them and they dispossessed them and settled in their place even to this day."

This is why Moses goes on to list the kings of Edom who became kings because of Esau's descendants conquering the sons and chiefs of Seir. **[v31]** Now, that's an interesting qualification. Why mention that? He's saying, "Esau's descendants got worldly blessings before Israel. They had kings before Israel."

BUT, from such kings would never come the true King of the world, the Messiah, the Savior. That king would only come through the line of Jacob's son Judah. But God's people would have to wait a long time for him to come, a lot longer than Esau's people had to wait for their temporary kings. Notice that emphasis on their temporary reign. **[vv32-39]**

What passage does that remind you of in the book of Gen.? It sounds like Gen. 5, which describes what happened to the descendants of Adam after sin came into the world? Gen. 5 repeats the phrase, "and he died...and he died...and he died...and he died." And here, in ch36, the refrain is repeated of Edom's kings: "he died...he died... he died...he died."

The message is clear: though Esau produces kings much quicker than Jacob, he couldn't produce a King who would reverse the curse of sin...who would crush the head of the serpent who led humanity into sin...a King who would rise from the dead, never to die again...a King who's reign will last forever.

THAT'S the kind of King who comes through the line of Jacob. And that's the kind of King God's people should long for. Don't envy quick, temporal, worldly blessings that are here one moment and gone the next. Long for the fulfillment of God's eternal blessings, like the reign of an eternal King.

Esau's genealogy closes with a list of more chiefs. **[vv40-43]** These are probably heads of various administrative districts under the rule of the kings. So the children of Esau produce chiefs and kings. It's an impressive list: 73 names mentioned. But, as one person said, "...this is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. It's Esau's last appearance, the postcredits of his life. And how [is he] describe[d]? He's rich...[He's] more or less

reconciled to his brother. He's settled down in a faraway place, [but it's] east of Eden. He's the patriarch of princes and kings...[BUT] The saddest imaginable outcome of someone's life is that they experience peace and prosperity with everyone except the God who made them." (Duke, 170-71)

Do you remember what Esau cried out to his father just after he found out Jacob stole his blessing in ch27? In desperate anguish, he said to his father Isaac, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father?" He wanted his father's blessing, which, in his mind, meant his father's stuff. He didn't want the spiritual blessing of being in relationship with the God of his father.

Well, guess what? Esau got what he so desperately wanted! He got all the stuff/ possessions. He got the lineage. He got a heritage. BUT he got NONE of the blessings that really mattered: knowing God, receiving righteousness through faith, experiencing the covenant fellowship with God. He got none of that. And what is so sad about Gen. 35, is that

he didn't seem to care. He found fulfillment in the temporary blessings of this world—a fulfillment that, of course, by definition, cannot last. Don't envy that! Rather...

Second, long for eternal spiritual blessings.

That's the point of **[37:1]**. That's where you wanna be! Moses is saying to Israel, "That's where you should wanna be! You wanna be in the land of promise, ***the place***... of true blessing, where God is, where you know him and his goodness and kindness and covenant love. That's where you should wanna be! Don't envy Esau/Edom! Don't fall into the that comparison TRAP."

Do know why I'm calling it a trap? Think about what is snagging onto you that keeps you from growing in the Lord when you live your life by comparison. What's the ditch you fall into when you start comparing yourself to others? It's one of two things: when you're walking on the road of comparison, there's a ditch on either side, and you'll fall into one of them and get trapped there.

On one side is the ***ditch of discontentment*** and what pulls you into it is ***envy***. Comparison leads you into envy, and envy leads you to sit in discontentment. “Why are they so much happier/ prettier/ more outgoing? Why does life seem so much easier for them? Why could they get married, have kids, and enjoy those blessings, when they’re not even doing it right! I would! Why are they so much more likeable? Why are they better at this or that?” And it goes on and on, and we remain miserable!

Tilly Dillehay, the author of *Seeing Green: Don't Let Envy Color Your Joy*, she makes this observation, “Envy is the only sin I can think of that is really no fun at all. [Most sins have some kind of pleasurable pull. But envy] begins in negative feelings of inferiority, progresses into nasty feelings of resentment, and then stagnates in a stewing, frothy mess of petty or belligerent offspring sins.” (pg.155)

And yet, we get lured when we start the comparison game. Don't start it! Stop it! Get off the path that slants into the ditch of discontentment. And that slant is envy.

OR, the ditch on the other side you might fall into is ***the ditch of disparagement***. And the slant into that ditch is ***self-righteousness***. Think about it: when you walk that path of comparison, you might start to think, “I’m actually better than them. I am prettier, smarter, more successful. I’ve got more going for me.” And inevitably we’ll ***disparage*** those we compare ourselves to. It’s a ditch!

Here's an example that pastors struggle with. If I sinfully compare this church to another church, I will either be envious (like, “Why can’t we be that big? Why can’t we have more staff, a bigger budget, do more stuff?”)... And that leads to discontentment. “My church isn’t good enough. My ministry isn’t important enough.” When I should say, “That church is bigger and better in these ways. Praise God for the work being done through that people.” As Dillehay says, “The battle against envy is about growing the kind of heart that rejoices over somebody’s else’s party hat.” (pg 68)

OR I could fall into the other ditch and think, “Our church is so much better. We have

this...we have that...we're this way and they're not!" And my church self-righteous leads to disparagement. "Look how much better we are!" When I should be thinking, "Ok, maybe that church doesn't have what we have in this or that thing, but praise God for what they are doing and what they do have." Or "Lord give them what they need!"

Comparison pulls us either into the ditch of disparagement lured by self-righteousness OR the ditch of discontentment lured by envy. And I'm telling you, you can avoid both simply by getting off the path of comparison!

Instead, look at what you already have in Christ! Stop looking to what you don't have that won't last anyway. Look to what you have! In Christ...

- The forgiveness of God wipes clean every sin you've ever committed or will commit.
- The grace of God brings you into warm fellowship with him and keeps you in there through all eternity.
- The love of God secures you in covenant promises never to let you go to hell.

- The righteousness of God credits to you spotlessness and purity before him.
- The Spirit of God seals as you for the day when Christ returns for you.
- The face of God awaits you, as you will behold him forever and ever and ever.

All the spiritual blessings are ours! What else do we need? Do you see how silly it is to envy those whose closest experience of heaven is this temporal worldly life?

Practical Implications

Fight envy by getting off the path of comparison. How? A few closing thoughts...

1. Repent rapidly and regularly. When envy is ignored, it only grows. But bringing it before the Lord in honest confession, I show it dies. *Like fungi that grows in the dark but dies in the light*, bring the ugliness of your envy before the Lord in honest confession, and let it die.

2. Avoid unnecessary opportunities for comparison. Get off social media where you'll always find someone prettier, more successful, seemingly happier! Stop watching

HGTV where your discontentment with the house you have is fueled. Ask yourself: “Is this thing I’m doing stirring contentment or fueling discontentment caused by envy?” BUT...

3. *Don’t put your hope in changed circumstances.* The main problem is not social media or HGTV or that your single or poor or unpopular or not smart. The problem is a heart that idolizes marriage or money or popularity or intellect! Therefore, the way to kill envy is to worship God! Get off the path of comparison by getting on the path of worship.

Conclusion

Oh Christian! We have all we need in Christ. We really do! He is where true blessing is found. When you believe that, that’s when envy dies and that’s when you’re content. Trust in him and let your soul be satisfied.