

Pride and Envy
Matthew 23:34-24:2

Until quite recently, with the rise of the “cancel culture,” we Americans were pretty good at just tuning out people that we disagreed with. We’ve all heard it said that if you don’t like a man’s politics, don’t vote for him or go to hear him make a speech. If you don’t like his religion, don’t go worship with him. If you don’t like the TV or radio show, change the channel. That kind of tolerance served us Americans well for many years – and it’s a shame that more people don’t practice it today.

So, if they honestly thought Jesus was a phony, why didn’t the priests and scribes and Pharisees just ignore Him and His disciples? In fact, why had their ancestors gone so far as to kill so many of the prophets that had gone before Him? Why couldn’t they just live and let live?

Well, maybe we can answer that question by taking a look at the first person Jesus says was killed because of his righteousness: Abel. For why did his brother Cain commit the very first murder in human history? After all, Cain and Abel seem to have worshipped the same God in the same way. Both of them offered some of the fruits of their labor to God, and both of them expected God to accept their offerings. So why did Cain get mad enough to kill his brother? Because God accepted Abel’s animals but not Cain’s crops.

Now, we know why God had such a preference. We know that because all the Old Testament offerings had to point to Jesus’ sacrifice for sin, they had to involve the shedding of blood. But God didn’t tell Cain why his fruits and vegetables weren’t acceptable. All Cain knew was that, for some reason, God didn’t want his offering.

But if Cain really had been worshipping God, if Cain really wanted to please God, and if it turned out that God likes lamb chops more than collard greens and cornbread, why didn’t Cain just give God what He wanted?

Because making such a change would have required Cain to humble himself before God, to admit that God had the right to decide what kinds of offerings He would accept. Moreover, Cain would have had to humble himself before Abel. By offering Abel’s animals instead of his own produce, Cain would have been depending on Abel’s labor instead of standing on his own two feet and relying solely on his own abilities. But instead of listening to God’s words of warning, and instead of abandoning his pride, Cain chose to resolve the competition by killing his brother.

Doesn’t that sound a lot like the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees who plotted against Jesus? For they were certainly proud of the hard work they had been doing, trying to make themselves acceptable in the sight of God by following all the onerous rules and restrictions they had made up for themselves.

But along came Jesus, calling all their man-made rules into question. He dined with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-13). He rejected their elaborate rules about fasting (Matthew 9:14-17). He even challenged the overly legalistic way in which they observed the Sabbath (Matthew 12:14). And at every step, He quoted the Scriptures to prove that they had misunderstood the true meaning of God’s Word that they claimed to know so well.

Yes, the scribes and Pharisees had a lot in common with Cain, didn’t they? For if they admitted that Jesus was right, they would have had to humble themselves before Him, admitting that His understanding of God’s will and His interpretation of God’s Law was superior to theirs. They also would have had to turn away from their legalism, all their attempts to earn God’s favor through their own

efforts. And so instead of abandoning their pride, they sought to kill Jesus, for much the same reason that Cain killed Abel.

Well, what about us? No, I doubt any of us are ready to commit murder in order to advance our religious beliefs. Unlike the so-called social justice warriors rioting in the streets, we don't rely on force to silence people who disagree with our opinions. No, in good Southern fashion, we just say "Bless your heart," and feel sorry for them.

But isn't our pity actually an expression of the same sort of pride that the scribes and Pharisees felt, pride of how right we are? And aren't we also tempted to take pride in the way we live out our convictions – in our church attendance, in our works of charity or in our avoidance of socially-unacceptable sins?

So, would we really be any more willing than those scribes and Pharisees were to change our long-standing opinions and practices? Would we be willing, for example, to change the way we worship or the way we observe the Sabbath or the kinds of company we keep, if it turned out that the Word of God said we should? Would we be willing to adjust our budgets or our calendars in order to follow Christ more consistently? Or instead, do we ever cancel Jesus out, turning away from His Word and His will when it conflicts with what we want? Do we ever catch ourselves clinging to our pride instead of humbling ourselves before God's sovereign authority?

Of course, it may not only have been Cain's pride that led him to commit murder. For remember – Cain didn't know why God refused to accept his offering. So it would have been easy for him to take such a rejection personally, to think that God was pushing not just his offering but himself away. Yes, Cain's pride could easily have fused with envy – envy that God apparently preferred his little brother to himself. And as has been demonstrated so often throughout human history, pride and envy are a deadly combination.

Of course, the scribes and Pharisees were certainly envious of Jesus. In fact, even Pilate could recognize that such envy was one of the main reasons why they turned on Him (Matthew 27:18). After all, Jesus obviously possessed tremendous supernatural power over demons and sicknesses and even death itself – power many of the religious leaders had witnessed with their own eyes. But even as Jesus made the most audacious claims, calling Himself the Son of Man and saying that He had the authority to forgive people's sins (Matthew 9:1-8), he was gaining scores of followers – people who used to look to the priests and scribes and Pharisees with respect. Is it any wonder that the religious leaders envied Jesus?

But that wasn't the worst of it. For when the chief priests and Pharisees had challenged Jesus' authority back in chapter 21, He plainly told them, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Matthew 21:43). How could they not take that personally? God rejecting them and embracing the Gentiles would have been just as big a blow to their pride, and just as big a spur to their envy as Cain imagining that God had made a favorite of his little brother Abel.

And that same combination of pride and envy prompted the religious leaders' continued opposition to the Church after the resurrection of Christ. Yes, they and their followers kept on killing and crucifying the followers of Christ, persecuting them from city to city, just as Jesus predicted in verse 34 and just as the Book of Acts records.

And why? In Pisidian Antioch, when the unbelieving Jews "saw the crowds" – crowds that included both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles – "they were filled with jealousy" (Acts 13:45). In Thessalonica, the unbelieving Jews "becoming jealous ... formed a mob and set the city in an uproar"

(Acts 17:5). And in Jerusalem, when Paul told the crowd how the resurrected Christ appeared to him from heaven, they didn't shout him down until he said the same thing Jesus also told the religious leaders in Matthew 21: that He would send His disciples "far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). In fact, Paul hoped that his teaching would move some of his fellow countrymen "to jealousy" and thus to salvation (Romans 11:14).

Now, we Evangelical Presbyterians certainly don't have a problem with the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth – after all, we are supporting church planters in Texas, seminary students in Brazil and missionaries in the Middle East. But do we ever become envious of the success of other congregations or denominations? I mean we've only got a little over 600 congregations all over the country – the Southern Baptists have more than that just in Mississippi. And wouldn't it be nice to have the kinds of programs for ministry and outreach that the big churches in the big towns have?

But what if we let our envy prevent us from partnering with other congregations, keeping us from reaching across racial or denominational lines to do the work of the Lord? What if we let our envy lead us into despair, thus preventing us from accomplishing what God wants us to do in this place at this time? Could our pride and envy end up being just as harmful to the Kingdom of God as was the persecution of the first-century church?

But what if we don't turn away from our pride and envy? What if we don't repent, and humble ourselves before the Lord, submitting ourselves completely to His will and His Word? Well, let's look at the other prophet Jesus mentions in verse 35: Zechariah the son of Berechiah. He's the one who wrote the next-to-the-last book of the Old Testament, a book that predicts, for example, Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey (9:9), Judas' valuing of Jesus at thirty pieces of silver (11:12-13), and Jesus' disciples abandoning Him in the Garden of Gethsemane (13:7).

But the beginning of Zechariah's book sums up the reason that he and so many of the other Old Testament prophets were rejected by God's people throughout the centuries. For when the prophets said, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds,'" the people "did not listen or give heed" to the Lord (Zechariah 1:4).

No, the people of Israel didn't listen to Isaiah or Micah. They did not repent of their pride and their idolatry, so their Temple was destroyed and they were carried off into Babylon. Years later, the descendants of those same people didn't listen to Zechariah's calls to the same kind of repentance, instead going so far as to kill Him within the sacred ground of the Temple itself. And because the priests and scribes and Pharisees did not repent of their pride and envy, because they did not accept Jesus as their Messiah, their house would also become desolate, just as Jesus predicted.

So what do you think will happen to any modern congregation or denomination that rejects the clear Word of God, clinging instead to its pride in its buildings or institutions or traditions, or that allows its envy to stifle its outreach? What do you think will happen to any individual who insists that he somehow deserves salvation because of his own efforts, or that refuses to associate with other believers who seem to be more blessed in various ways? Should we expect any better treatment than those ancient priests and scribes and Pharisees received?

Oh yes, they were so proud of their magnificent Temple, and all the elaborate rituals and ceremonies that went on there. And they were so sure that they were so much better than those unbelieving Gentiles they loved to despise. But some forty years after they crucified Jesus, the unbelieving Romans would tear down every part of that Temple. Because the priests and scribes and Pharisees rejected the One Who fulfilled the meaning of the Temple, it would be so completely destroyed that not one stone would be left standing upon another.

But it didn't have to happen that way. They didn't have to cling to their pride and their envy. They didn't have to keep on rejecting their Messiah, even after He rose from the dead. In fact, in verse 37, Jesus insists that He desperately wanted the people of Jerusalem to repent, to come to Him for protection the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings – but they would not.

And the good news is that Jesus continues to call all kinds of people to Himself today. He calls us to admit our pride and our envy and to turn away from them. He calls us to repent of all our sins and turn to Him alone, not only for safety but for forgiveness and cleansing. So today, will we hear His call? Will we come to Him?