

The Seven Deadly Sins

by Dr. Ross Porter



Pride, anger, envy, sloth, greed, lust and gluttony: there are no forces more destructive, degrading or deceptive. The prophets and authors of the Old Testament, Jesus and His Apostles, and theologians throughout the history of the Church have warned about the causes and effects of these seven deadly sins (also known as the seven capital sins because they are the sources of all other sins). Even now, these sins wait "crouching at the door" (Gen 4:7).

In order to confront effectively the seven deadly sins, we must be able to identify them and to implement a plan of action that includes "virtue therapy," where one practices the virtue directly opposing the given vice. Holiness is ultimately the goal for all Christians, but possible only as we cooperate with God's grace.

One needs to look no further than the First Commandment to understand the essence of why the seven deadly sins are so lethal: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex 20:3). We dethrone God with each of the deadly sins, and give ourselves to something much less than Him. God will never abandon us, but He does honor our freedom to choose evil. C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end there will only be two kinds of people, those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done.'"

Pride can be defined as inordinate esteem of oneself and is distinct from healthy self-esteem, which is based on the knowledge of being a child of God saved by grace. Pride destroys the virtue of humility, and crowns one's ego as a false god. In the process, one will "turn one's heart away from one's Maker" (Sir 10:12). Pride also distances us from others. Confront pride by practicing humility, as one cannot be prideful and humble simultaneously. Living in the Sacraments and addressing control issues in one's life are critical as well.

Anger becomes a deadly sin when vengeance is enthroned as a false god. Instead of being used constructively as demonstrated by Jesus in the cleansing of the temple (Jn 2:15-16), sinful anger is used to punish or injure another. Meekness is the virtue destroyed by sinful anger. A person controlled by anger is unpredictable and has given the Devil a foothold (Eph 4:27). Confront anger by practicing meekness, gentle strength, with self and others while giving yourself periods of reflection and rest.

Envy is defined as "sorrow at another's good;" one enthrones one's sense of deprivation as a false god. Envy destroys the virtue of charity with a deadly combination of pride (we're better than others) and inferiority (we're lacking in comparison to others). People who struggle with envy confuse equal and identical. We are all equal in dignity as children of God, but our lives are not identical. We are not all given the same gifts or burdens. Proverbs tells us that "envy rots the bones" (14:30). Root out envy by practicing charity, and by mourning the losses you have experienced in life (there is a connection between mourning and being free to love more).

Sloth is spiritual laziness. The slothful combine a lack of care for duties to God with a melancholy dissatisfaction, and enthrone their given escapist activity as their false god (e.g. sleep, television, work). Sloth destroys the virtue of zeal, and is arguably the sin that best defines the age we live in. Jesus had another name

for the slothful: lukewarm (Rev 3:16). Look for opportunities to serve God, and in doing so you will burn off sloth. Life-giving recreational activities will also aid you in avoiding sloth.

Greed is essentially about grabbing and holding, as one crowns "things" god. You can be poor and still be greedy, since this deadly sin is about much more than quantity. Greed destroys the virtue of generosity, and inevitably makes you stingy with your emotions as well as your possessions. "What good is it for one to gain the whole world yet lose one's soul" (Mk 8:36)? Greed can be defeated by practicing generosity (with your time, your emotions and your finances), as well as by considering your own mortality. How do you want to be remembered?

Lust is out of control sexual desire, as sex becomes one's false god. Lust destroys the virtue of chastity and short-circuits intimacy (both sexual and non-sexual). People become objects for use, mentally and physically. Lust is often confused with love, but lust is to love what saltwater is to a person dying of thirst. "Do not lust in your heart...for can one scoop burning coals into one's lap without being burned" (Prv 6:25-27)? Practice chastity, respect your body with enough rest, and invest in mutual, God-honoring relationships. In so doing, you will address lust constructively.

Gluttony is the abuse of substances, and can include food, alcohol, and/or drugs. Gluttons crown their given substances as a false god, and destroy the virtue of moderation. Gluttony encourages hiding behavior; avoiding authentic relating and communicating. Like all the deadly sins, gluttony takes something that is good, and abuses it. "Do not join those who drink too much wine, or gorge themselves on meat...for gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags" (Prv 23:20-21). Practice the virtue of moderation, avoid extremes especially with substances, and explore your spiritual hunger.

Remember, there is victory in Christ, if we persevere. Trust the love of God and strive for sanctity, for as St. John Chrysostom wrote, "If but ten among us lead a holy life, we shall kindle a fire which shall light up the entire city."

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