

The Seven Deadly Sins

*The beginning of man's pride is to depart from the Lord; his heart has forsaken his Maker.
For the beginning of pride is sin, and the man who clings to it pours out abominations.
~ Sirach 10:12-13*

WE KNOW from our own experience and that of all other human beings that we are preoccupied with our bodies. We try to make and keep our bodies healthy, for so much of our well-being, and our happiness, is dependent upon our good health. We do innumerable things, some of them not always pleasant, to gain physical well-being. We diet, exercise, go to dentists, get stuck with needles, give blood for tests, surrender our privacy to a physician, and take medications, all in pursuit of physical health.



*Jesus drives seven demons from Mary Magdalene,
by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962*

But, as strange as it may seem, this preoccupation with physical health has no counterpart in our spiritual nature. The soul, which is our immortal life-giving principle, is all too often a sadly-neglected part of our being. We are not preoccupied with our spiritual health and well-being. We too often neglect the most important and eternal element of our nature.

Sickness in its many forms is the sign of bodily unhealthiness. In the same way, sin is the sign of an immortal soul in trouble. Sin is spiritual illness, one that plagues us because the tendency to it is embed-

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ded in our nature as fallen human beings (see handouts on What is Sin? and Original Sin). Sin is the essential malady of our immortal soul; it can be deadly. If we are to be totally healthy, we must be aware of sin, know its causes and symptoms, and avoid it at all costs.

The roots of sin in our fallen nature are a group of tendencies, or inclinations, known as **capital** (those at the head of the line) or **deadly sins**. They are so called because they engender other sins or vices (habits of sin) in us. The seven deadly sins are: pride or arrogance, avarice or greed, envy or jealousy, anger or wrath, lust, gluttony, and acedia or sloth. These sins are perverse inclinations that cloud our consciences and distract our judgment of what is good and what is evil. Sin grows in us and, like a deadly cancer, eats away at the health of the soul.

Pride, or arrogance, is an inordinate sense of one's importance. The human race owes its troubles to the pride that prompted our first parents to want to be like God (see Gn 3:5); and “[w]hen pride comes, then comes disgrace” (Prv 11:2). They were seduced by Satan, whose own sin was pride. In our daily lives, we contend with pride whenever we deem ourselves more important than others, especially God. Catering to our self-importance leads us into the sin of pride.

Avarice, or greed, is an undue desire for, or attachment to, material possessions. The distinction between *needs* and *desires* is important. The fulfillment of needs is not an undue desire for things. But the satisfaction of desires can lead to accumulation and hoarding of things out of all proportion to need: “A greedy man's eye is not satisfied with a portion, and mean injustice withers the soul” (Sir 14:9). Avarice is a form of idolatry; material things become gods. Poverty exists partly because avarice promotes the inequitable distribution of God's abundance.

Envy, also called jealousy, is characterized by the begrudging of good that another possesses, and an immoderate desire to obtain them for oneself, even if this must be done unjustly: “But you should not have

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The Pharisees accusing Jesus, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

gloated over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune.... You should not have entered the gate of my people in the day of his calamity; you should not have gloated over his disaster in the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods in the day of his calamity” (Ob vv 12-13). This sin resents the accomplishments or good things of others, and leads to dislike or hatred of other persons and their attainments. Envy comes from pride but is the clear mark of a small and self-centered heart; it cannot rejoice in a success that is not its own. The envious person also rejoices over another’s misfortune; it was the envy of Satan that led him to tempt Adam and Eve.

Anger, or wrath, is the root of violence. It can manifest itself as silence or passive resistance to an action or person, or as overt violence. Sinful anger is not the same as righteous anger, such as when Jesus cleared his Father’s house of wrongdoers (see Jn 2:13-17), or that which prompts good people to act so that evil will not prevail. Nor is it the primitive emotion of anger, which is morally neutral until it becomes damaging thoughts, words, or deeds. The deadly sin of anger is disproportionate to its cause, and can overpower freedom. It has been said that Satan is pure hatred whereas, as Sacred Scripture teaches us, God is pure love (see 1 Jn 4:8) and he has commanded us to love (see Jn 13:34). Anger corrodes a person’s soul: *“Unrighteous anger cannot be justified, for a man’s anger tips the scale to his ruin”* (Sir 1:22). It is also the spur to much sinfulness on the part of others: *“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and a man given to anger causes much transgression”* (Prv 29:22).

Lust includes all forms of sexual impurity, unchastity, and undue desire for sexual gratification, whether with others or with oneself. Lust treats others as objects for personal gratification, rather than as persons worthy of self-sacrificing love. Selfish satisfaction is all that matters. Because lust seeks some of the greatest physical pleasures the body can know,

it attracts the mind and body more than most other evils. Lust is not just a matter of deeds; it is also desires that are not acted upon, as Jesus says: *“[E]very one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Mt 5:28). Lust includes fornication, adultery, sodomy, incest, rape, prostitution and the use of prostitutes, masturbation, and the use of pornography.

Gluttony, like lust, is associated with a lack of self-control. It is an inordinate desire for bodily satisfaction in the use of food, drink, or sleep, for its own sake. The gluttonous person is one who fails to exercise restraint in the satisfaction of physical desires. Gluttony is self-indulgence that is so out of proportion to actual need as to be contrary to reason: *“Healthy sleep depends on moderate eating; he rises early, and feels fit. The distress of sleeplessness and of nausea and colic are with the glutton”* (Sir 31:20). (Gluttony should not be confused with addiction to a substance such as alcohol, nicotine, or cocaine, which has an element of physiological dependency. Addictions, however, must eventually be controlled by the willful avoidance of the addicting substance.)

Acedia, also called sloth, is a sickness of the soul. The slothful person knows the good, but does not desire it. The spiritual laziness whereby we refuse to seek what is needful for our soul’s salvation is a deadly sin. Sloth induces a torpor of the soul towards things divine; it rejects the efforts we must make to combat difficulties in the pursuit of holiness. Slothful people neither seek God nor find him; they are just not interested in God, and therefore refuse to make any effort toward him or to do the things that are necessary for salvation. They fail utterly to seek answers to the questions of life: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? They lead a life that has no real meaning and, ultimately, expose themselves to discouragement.



Mother of Sorrows, by Elizabeth Stefanick

ment and despair. For the person in despair, God is dead, and all that could have meaning is absent. The slothful, spiritual derelict is bored — bored so that he is dead, truly dead while he still breathes. In the book of Revelation, Jesus describes his reaction to the slothful: “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Rv 3:16). (The discouragement and despair of acedia is to be distinguished from clinical depression.)

For every deadly sin, one or more virtues oppose it. For the health of our soul, it is these virtues that must be sought after, prayed for, and practiced daily. Each of these virtues is a healthy prescription provided by a wise, loving, divine Physician to help us keep evil from our souls and to ready us for our immortal life in his Kingdom.

Humility is the antidote to pride. In simplest terms, humility is truth; it is seeing ourselves in proper perspective. It says that God is pre-eminent; his will, not ours, be done (see Lk 22:42). A humble soul knows that God is the creator and author of all and that it is but a creature; everything it is or has is from him. The attitude and behavior of humility is the basic ingredient of littleness that

our soul needs to enter into God’s Kingdom, and is one of the great virtues we must learn from Jesus: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). His entire life was a hymn of praise to humility, for “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

The virtues that oppose avarice are **detachment** and **charity**. While avarice inclines us to cling to what we have accumulated, and to desire even more despite the needs of others, the virtue of detachment spurs us to a right understanding of the importance of material creation as something to be used and enjoyed, but not hoarded. Charity concentrates upon the needs of others and prompts us to help others obtain the satisfaction of their needs, even if it means giving to others what we possess. The supporting virtue of **generosity** induces us to give to others out of our abundance. Avarice is counteracted by our efforts to be just and charitable stewards of the goods of this world for the well-being of those less fortunate than us.

Charity is also a virtue that opposes envy and jealousy. The law of love (see Mt 22:35-40) encourages us to be glad at the good fortune of a neighbor. To delight in the spiritual well-being of another is, especially, the duty of charity. True love means seeing things and persons for what they are, not for what they can do for us. Charity embraces God and all for whom God loves and cares. In addition, the virtue of **gratitude** teaches us to be thankful for the good things that God has given us, rather than feeling

that we are somehow “owed more.” This attitude of thankfulness does not question God’s generosity or measure it by what

he has given to others, for as Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard asks: “[D]o you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt 20:15).

Anger is controlled by the virtue of **meekness**, the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1). Meekness is not by any means a matter of weakness; the essence of Jesus’ meekness was not to cause harm. The same Jesus who humbly submitted to his Father’s will was dynamic. He spoke and acted with authority, and did not hesitate to confront and condemn evil. If our God, with his infinite power, can be meek, then we, too, instead of giving way to an-

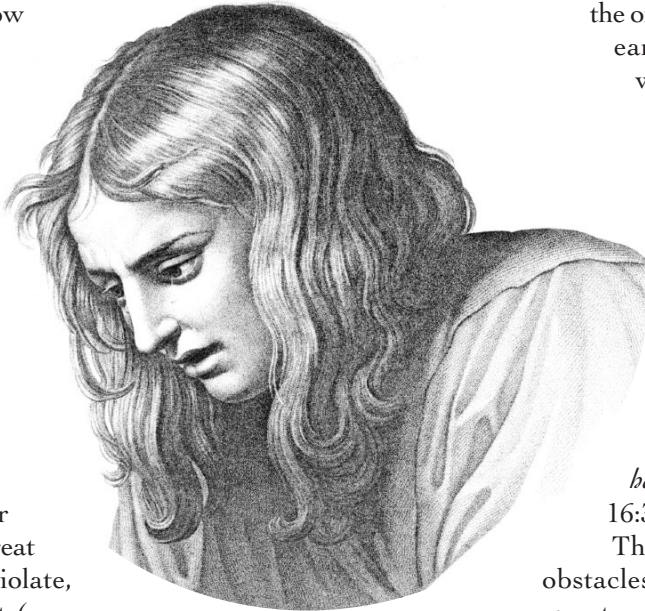
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ger, can imitate him in gentleness and yet be fruitfully firm in all our dealings with our fellow mortals. Supporting virtues that help us control our anger are **gentleness** and **patience**.

Purity or chastity is the virtue that overcomes lust in our lives. We are to love and respect others as we love and respect ourselves (see Mt 22:39). Chastity centers our attention and use of our bodies upon God as the source and object of our love and, in this light, we treat our bodies as holy and inviolate, temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 6:19). Chastity is a virtue that must be practiced by everyone, including those who are married, for marriage is not a license for lust but an image of God's own inner life. Only the pure in heart shall see God (see Mt 5:8), the goal of all our efforts here on earth. Resisting the lures of lust allows us to offer to God a holy and undefiled heart, fit for eternity. Essential in achieving chastity is the virtue of **self-mastery** by which we control the passion of sexual desire.

Temperance counteracts the tendency to gluttony by tempering our attraction to physical pleasures other than sex. It establishes priorities and balance in the use of material goods. It inclines us to restrain our appetites so as "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (Ti 2:12), and enables us to exercise a healthy discretion in what we seek. By temperance, the human will gains control over sense appetites and instincts, and directs our efforts toward more worthy and spiritual purposes. The supporting virtue of **self-control** is similar to self-mastery, but it addresses the appetites rather than the passions.

Zeal for the good and **perseverance** are the virtues that we must cultivate to counteract our tendency to sloth. We must "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6), which resides only in God, toward whom we ought always to strive. We must build resolve upon



A Sorrowful Man, by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

the knowledge that seeking perfection and eternal life is ultimately the only good to come from our earthly existence. Armed with this knowledge and strength of purpose, we must daily take up our cross (see Lk 9:23) and continue to make efforts to avoid evil and pursue good. We must persevere, always mindful that our Lord has told us that "[i]n the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

The seven deadly sins are obstacles that impede our progress toward a wholesome, healthy spiritual life. Our divine Physician has provided virtues that we

can cultivate to achieve the holiness to which, as children of God, we must aspire. Virtue is health of soul, and it is this health that we must want to possess — it is the source of joy. Each of us has an immortal soul, and each of us is important to God. We want to be among those who say to God, "[T]hy will be done" (Mt 26:42) rather than in the company of those to whom God must say, "Your will be done" as they willfully separate themselves from God for all eternity.

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Part of developing virtue is "spiritual dieting and exercise" in the form of prayer, fasting and other forms of self-denial,

and almsgiving. Just as vice is rarely the matter of a single instance of wrongdoing, with each sin contributing to the formation of a habit of vice that makes doing evil ever easier, doing good on a daily basis develops the habit of virtue, and virtue makes doing good ever easier (see handout on Virtuous Living). Eventually the entire moral character of a person is formed in the character of holiness. This is not possible by our own efforts, but is a result of our cooperation with God's abundant grace, for "[w]ith men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (Mk 10:27).

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