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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS AND THE PATH TO VIRTUOUS CHARACTER

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SYNOPSIS

The soul- and relationship-destroying seven deadly sins are vices that undermine loving God and loving others. The virtuous life, by contrast, is one that resembles the image of the truest human—Jesus. Character cultivation begins not with moralistic endeavor but with a relationship with God in Christ, which in turn transforms our character. Character transformation further involves a conscious renewal of one’s thinking—envisioning a God-shaped reality rather than living by cultural or self-created lies. Virtuous character is cultivated through breaking vicious cycles of anger, lust, dishonesty, and pride through concrete, constructive, and demanding acts that lead to reconciled relationships, greater self-control, deeper faithfulness, and love for enemies. The continued practice of such specific, self-defying acts eventually results in obedience that becomes second nature to us.

In a study of one hundred American cities, five of them were deemed “most sinful.” How was this determined? By using the seven deadly sins as the criterion! For example,

the sin of envy was evident in crimes of burglary, larceny, and car theft. Gluttony was measured by each city's obesity rate. Greed was apparent in "the lower the percentage of disposable income donated, the higher the assumed greed." Lust was gauged by the number of strip clubs per capita. Pride was ranked according to the number of plastic surgeons per capita. Sloth was determined by a city's "inactivity rate" —the percentage of the city that is not physically active. You get the idea.¹

Historically, the church has focused on seven deadly sins as root vices, leading to a living death—rather than *shalom* and human flourishing—and ultimately to eternal death. These sins are divided into two groupings: *corporal* or bodily sins of lust, gluttony, sloth, and greed; and *spiritual* sins of pride, envy, and anger. To counteract these sins, the church has emphasized the pursuit of seven virtues, which can likewise be grouped into two. First are the *cardinal* or *pagan* virtues of wisdom (prudence), courage, self-control, and justice (fairness); Greeks and Romans highlighted them, and New Testament writers included them in their "virtue lists" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:22–23; Phil. 4:8; James 3:17–18; 2 Pet. 1:3–9). Also, Christians have recognized three *theological* virtues rooted in Christ's life, death, resurrection, and promised second coming: namely, *faith* (trust) in Christ's cross-work and salvation through Him alone; *love* inspired by the sacrificial death of Christ; and *hope* (confidence) in Christ's return to fully establish a new creation and His unshakable kingdom (Rom. 5:1–5; 1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 1:3). While the former virtues reflect God's "common grace" that could be evident among the pagans, the latter reflect God's "special grace" through the Spirit's working in those who are in Christ.

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Though there are many other sins that could be addressed in addition to these specific sins, we will briefly address the seven deadly sins here along with Scripture that addresses each sin.

Lust

Although the Greek word *epithymia* ("strong desire") can be positive—desiring, say, to be a church overseer (1 Tim. 3:1)—it is commonly negative; it is a strong desire or craving we are not justified in satisfying (James 1:14–15; 1 John 2:17). Most often, the church has associated this desire with sexual impurity, and even coarse joking about sexual matters can "defile" a person (2 Cor. 6:14–18; Eph. 5:3–4; 1 Thess. 4:3–7).

Gluttony

Gluttony and drunkenness are two vices of intemperance that go hand in hand during every meal—and in between. Overeating is identified as sin in both Testaments (Deut. 21:20; Prov. 23:21; Luke 21:34). Given Scripture's sparse mention of it, one wonders why the medieval church catalogued this with the seven deadly sins. Another vice of excessive intake is drunkenness, and Scripture has plenty to say about this. While not condemning alcohol—indeed Scripture in places even celebrates drinking (Deut. 14:26; 32:18; Isa. 25:6; John 2:6–11)—it condemns drunkenness and highlights its dangers (e.g., Prov. 20:1; 23:20, 29–35).

Sloth

While God made our bodies to require rest, even the blessing of sleep and rest can be abused. Proverbs strongly denounces sloth, urging the sluggard to learn lessons from the diligent, hard-working ant (6:6–11). One ought not to love sleep (Prov. 13:11; 20:13). What's more, work itself is a gift from God and is not the result of the fall. The "Proverbs 31 woman" is industrious, hard-working, and resourceful. Paul himself taught and modeled a strong work ethic: laboring with one's own hands so as not to be a burden to anyone; working if one is to eat; providing for oneself and others through hard work (Col. 3:23–24; 2 Thess. 3:10–12; 4:12; 2 Thess. 3:12; 1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 4:28). God, with His Son, is the model Worker (John 5:17).

Greed

Scripture clearly prohibits greed/coveting (cf. Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; Micah 2:2; Rom. 13:9). In the New Testament, *covetousness* or *greed* (*pleonexia*) gets significant mention (Luke 12:15; Rom. 1:29; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 2:5; 2 Pet. 2:3, 14). Paul calls it "idolatry" (Col. 3:5; cf. Eph. 5:5) because material things become a substitute for God and thus warrant divine judgment (Col. 3:5–6). No wonder a person cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:24). To covet can involve both desiring and seeking for something, someone, some position, some recognition, or some pleasure not in the will of God.

Pride

Humility involves a realistic assessment of both weaknesses *and* strengths—strengths that are themselves to be acknowledged as God's gifts—whereas pride involves a kind of self-advertising campaign that distorts the truth about oneself. It is the result of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Rom. 12:3).

Envy

Envy and its cousin jealousy desire what they do not have. As one writer put it, we envy those who aren't a threat to us—perhaps a celebrity's looks or talents—nor do they cause us pain; they just happen to have what we want. Jealousy, by contrast, is an idolatrous (over)protectiveness of someone because we are threatened by a third party or some thing (work, sports, studies) that threatens us or disrupts what we desire in a relationship, and this can move us toward resentment and anger.

Anger

Anger itself is not wrong (Eph. 4:26); indeed, never being angry reflects a defect—a moral passivity and an indifference toward injustice. God Himself is slow to anger (Exod. 34:6), as is the wise person (James 1:19). The viciously angry or hot-tempered person “stirs up strife” and “abounds in transgression” (Prov. 29:22; cf. 37:8). The angry person causes dissension and finds it difficult to maintain genuine friendships.

CULTIVATING VIRTUE

Oscar Wilde wrote about his tragic life. In his pursuit of pleasure, he became indifferent to others and destroyed his inner moral fiber: “I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.”²

Wilde's life reminds us to guard our hearts diligently (Prov. 4:23). This is precisely where character transformation begins. Although we can't go into detail here on cultivating virtue,³ we'll briefly discuss the path away from vice and toward virtue.

1. The properly oriented virtuous life begins with a relationship with God in Christ.

This first point is critical, lest we slip into a graceless moralism or a life-sapping legalism. John wrote, “We love, because He [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Personally knowing God's love in Christ has the capacity to inspire in us love and forgiveness (Eph. 4:32; 1 John 3:16). And just as being a good spouse is not a matter of checking off a to-do list, neither is being a follower of Christ. The Christian faith is a religion of gratitude, and our pursuit of virtue flows from our knowing God's reconciling grace; this grace instructs us to repudiate what is displeasing to God and to

live godly lives (Titus 2:11–13). If we have personally known God’s love, won’t we make sacrifices and choices that reflect our love for Him? These in turn will shape our character.

2. Distinguish between being accepted by God and being pleasing to Him. This point is connected to the first. As we engage in character-shaping practices, we must always keep in mind the distinction between being *accepted* by God and being *pleasing* to Him. In any deep personal relationship, we are always looking for ways to please, say, a loving spouse or a parent. We don’t try to earn acceptance—as though the relationship is in jeopardy if we don’t “perform.” Likewise, as children of God, we have already been accepted by God through Christ (Rom. 14:3; 15:7), but in the pursuit of Christlikeness, we seek to *please* God: we “have as our ambition...to be pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9). Recognizing God’s acceptance of us in Christ removes a performance mentality and frees us up to live lives pleasing in His sight without fear of condemnation (1 John 4:18).

3. Concrete choices and everyday actions can make—or unmake—us. Have you tried to learn to play an instrument or to speak a second language? It’s all so clumsy and awkward at first. Likewise, obedience to God can be stilted and perfunctory at first. But we find that virtue is *cultivated* through our choices and character-shaping actions—it is called the *fruit* of the Spirit, after all. And when we take these specific and practical steps of obedience, we will purify our souls (1 Pet. 1:22). As we daily submit to the Spirit’s rule and empowerment—being “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18)—He will continue to transform our character so that obedience increasingly becomes second nature to us. Writing from prison, Paul said he had *learned* the secret of being content—a process learned through intentionally focusing on how Christ was sufficient in any and every circumstance, whether positive or negative (Phil. 4:10–13).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus gives concrete *transforming initiatives* to break *vicious cycles* of attitudes and behavior patterns. Instead of being angry and bitter when problems arise in relationships, we should take specific steps to be reconciled to others: “*Leave your offering at the altar and go; first be reconciled*” (5:23–24). Instead of the vicious cycle of lust, Jesus commands His followers to counteract the sources of temptation and to take constructive—and ruthless—action to combat this: “*If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you*”; the same goes with your hand: “*cut it off and throw it from you*” (5:29–30). And if you just love those who love you, you’ll only perpetuate relational barriers and never turn enemies into friends; as Jesus’ disciples, we are to break the negative patterns of relating (or not

relating at all) by engaging in a transforming initiative to *love* and *pray* for our enemies; in doing so, we will have a perfect love just as our enemy-loving God does, who sends rain and sunshine on His enemies, not just His friends (5:44–48).

Likewise, if we want to break our pride and become more humble, we should remember that we have been saved by God’s grace—not our own merits (Eph. 2:8–9); we should engage in acts of service to others; we should express gratitude to God, the giver of any good thing we’ve received (1 Cor. 4:7; James 1:17); we should put away what draws attention to ourselves—for instance, taking “selfies” and uploading them to Facebook for all to see and approve and then measuring our worth by the “likes” we receive. If we want to address the problem of *greed*, we should renounce a clutching attitude toward our possessions and hold them lightly, since they are gifts from God (1 Tim. 6:17–19); we should be generous with those in need; we should be content in all our circumstances because Christ enables us to face them all—whether we have much or little (Phil. 4:9–13). To break the hold of *gluttony*, the spiritual discipline of fasting can remind us just how attached we are to food in the pursuit of contentment and well-being; in fasting, we focus on God—illustrating that a human being “does not live by bread alone” (Mt. 4:4)—and that our bodies should be our slaves rather than our masters (1 Cor. 6:13; 9:27).

4. We mustn’t simply avoid what is evil, but constructively replace it with what is good. As God’s people, we participate in a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and a new covenant community. Christ died to make us a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; cf. Exod. 19:6)—true worshipers of God as priests and co-rulers with God over His creation. So we are a renewed humanity in Christ, the second Adam; we are part of the new exodus, having been led out of slavery to sin, death, and the law (Rom. 5–8) through the obedient Son that ancient Israel failed to be. So we are not only a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15) but also the new Israel—the true people of God (Rom. 2:26–27; Phil. 3:3). Now that we are “in Christ,” we are given the resources to reflect increasingly the character qualities of the new Adam—the archetypal human.

Notice that we are commanded not only to *put off*, like we would a garment, that life associated with fallen humanity and the lifestyle of the seven deadly sins. We are also to *put on* the virtues of Christ Himself—love, humility, righteousness, kindness, faithfulness, and so on (Rom. 13:12–14; Eph. 4:22–24; 6:11–16; Col. 3:9–14; 1 Thess. 5:8). We cannot simply avoid vice (putting off) but must constructively engage in transformational habits (putting on). We should not only abhor what is evil but also cling to what is good (Rom. 12:9). We are not only to *flee* but also to *pursue* (1 Tim. 6:11).

No wonder the late author Dallas Willard referred to the life-shaping importance of the spiritual disciplines in terms of *engagement* and *abstinence*. Disciplines of *engagement* include study, prayer, meditation, celebration, service, submission, worship, confession, and fellowship; disciplines of *abstinence* include fasting, silence, solitude, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice.⁴ This is part of “working out” our salvation. But remember this salvation has already been “worked in” to us, and this process requires relying on God’s grace and power, because “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).

How would this apply to battling lust? “Putting off” at a very basic level has to do with rejecting a *false* way of looking at the world and adopting a different—and correct—mindset and then acting in accordance with that new vision. One obvious way to “put off” lust is to flee in the face of sexual temptation (2 Tim. 2:22). But we can also think about how God is our ultimate hope and satisfaction beyond all earthly pleasures (Ps. 73:25–26). Even beyond this, rather than looking at a person as a sexual object, the believer can view this person as someone who bears the image of God, as the son or daughter of a mother and father, as someone with a story filled with hurts and damage, as someone loved by God, and as a person for whom Christ died. The believer should *personalize* rather than *objectify* another, including praying for that person. Another part of seeing God’s reality more clearly involves reflecting on the negative *consequences* that sexual impurity brings—damaged relationships with God and humans, guilt and shame, corrupted character, dishonor when facing an all-knowing Judge one day—which can help deter such actions.

Beyond this, “putting off” involves taking serious action (“gouge it out/cut it off/throw it from you”): be honest with yourself, with God, and with others; keep a guard on your thoughts and redirect them to appropriate, God-honoring pathways; make yourself accountable to another for TV- and movie-watching habits; install a filter on the computer to avoid junk on the Internet; check a place like Pluggedin.com to review movies and TV shows ahead of time for any sexual content, among other things; avoid going to places of inevitable temptation; maintain high standards concerning physical contact while dating and engaged. “Putting on” will involve praying, reading and memorizing Scripture, and even channeling your energies into reading, athletics, creative pursuits, or Christian fellowship.

5. Corporate body life and worship enhance our growth in Christian virtue. We need not only God’s Spirit to cultivate virtue but also *deep relationships within the body of Christ*, by which we can grow in virtue and diminish the hold of sin in our lives. Did you know that, except for self-control, every virtue in the “fruit of the Spirit” list (Gal. 5:22–23) is *corporate*, not individual? Thus we ought to attend to those reciprocal (“one

another”) commands, since deep body life helps us grow in virtue. Furthermore, by truly *worshiping together*, we become spiritually and emotionally mature; we move beyond our own self-defined interests to concern for the larger common good in Christ. Our emotions are shaped by what we care about, and a deepened commitment to one another will help develop a deepened character.⁵

6. Our emotions do not define us, but they must be directed by other, more important factors: our status in Christ, right choices, commitments, and promises. Our culture celebrates “authenticity.” We’re told that it’s hypocritical to “go through the motions” of prayer and worship or showing kindness and expressing gratitude even though we don’t *feel* like doing these things. But emotions are very unstable and are only *part* of who we are. And what about our *will* and our *choices* and the *commitments* we have made? What about *character* formation? I may not presently *feel* the love God has for me—or maybe I don’t feel it to the same degree all the time—but that doesn’t change the objective love God has for me and how He has displayed this in the cross of Christ and adopted me as His child (John 3:16; 1 John 3:1, 16). I must trust God’s promise to me. And emotions often follow when we “step into” making the right choices, keeping our commitments, reminding ourselves of God’s love. In fact, we are called to cultivate a frame of mind that is shaped by God’s Word and the cross of Christ so that we will *choose to give thanks* (1 Thess. 5:18) even when we may not *feel* thankful; that we *will choose to rejoice* in Christ despite negative circumstances (Phil. 4:4, 9–13; cf. Hab. 3:17–19); that we will *set our hope* on God and take courage in the Lord and His enduring kingdom when the world seems to be crumbling all around us and evil prevailing (Ps. 27:4; 42:5, 11; 43:5; 6:1–2; cf. 71:14; John 16:33). You see, these are not only *commanded* for us but also are to be *enacted* by us.⁶ We *have a duty to be hopeful, joyful, thankful, and courageous*, and we must intentionally cultivate a frame of mind that doesn’t despair or give way to grumbling: “Prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). We must take control of our thinking and acknowledge (“reckon”) the reality of certain things even when we can’t feel them (Rom. 6:11).

Although some Christians think they shouldn’t act until they feel a sense of *delight* about doing it, *duty* has its place. It is much like teaching manners and politeness to children; while it may be perfunctory and mechanical at the outset, children can grow to take pleasure in being polite and bringing blessing to others because it has become habitual—second nature—in their lives. Likewise, godly character is not automatic; we are collaborators with God, who is at work within us (1 Cor. 3:7–8; Phil. 2:12). Paul commands Timothy to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

If you want to overcome the seven deadly sins in your life, this guidance from Scripture can steer us toward the path toward Christ-likeness so that Christ might be formed in us (Gal. 4:19).

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NOTES

- 1 Jerry Kronenberg, "Five Most Sinful Cities in America," *The Street*, July 17, 2013. Available at <http://www.thestreet.com/story/11980303/1/5-most-sinful-cities-in-america.html>. Thanks to Preben Vang for pointing this out.
- 2 Cited in W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 100.
- 3 See Robertson McQuilkin and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
- 4 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).
- 5 Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 9.