

## SEVEN DEADLY SINS – THE OPPONENTS TO ETHICAL VALUES

**Pride/Vanity:** Arrogance, haughtiness: these have been the stuff of tragedy. Vanity, fussiness, delicacy: the stuff of comedy. These are all forms of self-delusion, and paper-thin masks over rotting features. Pride and vanity refuse the truth about who we are and substitute illusions for reality. While vanity is mostly concerned with appearance, pride is based in a real desire to be God, at least in one's own circle.

A symptom of this deadly sin is that each challenge to it drives us harder to improve our illusion of productivity, sanctity or compassion. It has been said that the definition of a zealot is "one who has lost sight of his goal, and so redoubles his efforts." We might say the zealot works twice as hard to keep up appearances.

A strong indicator of pride is competitiveness. There is nothing wrong with playing to win, provided the joy is in the playing. If our happiness depends on defeating others or knowing our child is the star of the team, we are building a world of illusion.

ANSWER: Humility - Seeing ourselves as we are and not comparing ourselves to others is humility. Pride and vanity are competitive. If someone else's pride really bothers you, you have a lot of pride.

**Avarice/Greed:** There are at least three forms of greed:

- 1) an obsessive desire for ever more material goods and the attendant power.
- 2) a fearful need to store up surplus goods for a vaguely defined time of want.
- 3) a desire for more earthly goods for their own sake.

*The Greed of Power* - In this form, earthly goods are chiefly a means to an end, which is really not that far off from a healthy view. The money, real estate, cars are simply things used to achieve, wield and display personal power. These things can be used to intimidate or bribe others, reinforce one's own illusions about what is important or to build up a feeling of success. The real problem here is more the desire for power than the actual greed. A common thread for sin in general is that it is often borne out of fear. A fear of helplessness or loss of control can turn into a lust for power as a way of preventing an undesirable situation.

*The Greed of Fear* - Fear is a poor motivator for virtue, but an excellent one for greed. Sometimes, greed is simply a desire to have so much that we can't possibly run out. The stock market could crash, we could lose our jobs or health, we could be sued. If we acquire enough stock, real estate, or T-bills, we think we will be safe from want. This is an illusion. There is no perfect preventative for want.

Part of the cure may be to embrace poverty. We may not become homeless, but we can learn to do with less. Serious campers try to leave their campsite in the same state they found it. Ideally, there should be no trace left when they move on. In the same way, try to use less of the world's goods. "Live simply, that others may simply live." Once this kind of freedom is practiced, we realize that we don't need that much, anyway. This knowledge, in turn, reduces our fear and builds a kind of strength and confidence.

*The Greed of Acquisition and Enslavement* - This is slavery, plain and simple. We can reduce ourselves to a small and cold desire to accumulate more electronic gear, trading cards, antiques or other collectibles. It is far beneath the dignity of human beings to enslave themselves to objects of their own making. It is well said that our possessions in some ways may come to own us.

The obvious cure is to divest oneself of as much as possible, but another suggestion might be to consider the grave. When we die, we take nothing with us. If we are bound by "disordered attachments" to worldly goods, the separation forced upon us by death will be even more painful. If we are destined for eternal glory, the temporary enjoyment of trinkets in this life is simply absurd. Meditation on this begins to loosen the grip of objects on the heart.

ANSWER: Generosity - This is about more than money. Generosity means letting others get the credit or praise. It is giving without having expectations of the other person. Greed wants to get its "fair share" or a bit more.

**Envy:** Love of Other People's Stuff. In his writing, Dante groups Envy with Anger and Pride as the sins of "Perverved Love." The other two groups are "Insufficient Love" and "Excessive Love of Earthly Goods." Envy is perverted because it "loves" what other people possess, rather than what is Good, Beautiful and True. It is often portrayed as "eating away" the heart of the envious person. Dante shows the envious as among those farthest away from Paradise, with their eyes sewn shut, but weeping over their sins. Again, a common metaphor for Envy is "wearing out the eyes."

ANSWER: Love - Love actively seeks the good of others for their sake.

**Wrath/Anger:** As with many other passions, anger (or wrath) may be an emotion or an attitude. Some say we can't control our emotions, but we "choose" our emotions from our "emotional toolbox." If anger is in our heart already, events will bring it out. If we have let God give us peace, our reaction to events will reflect this: we may respond to offenses or accidents with humor, kindness and patience, because that is what is in our heart.

But if we still have anger in our heart, what do we do in the meantime? Once the anger wells up and starts to spill out, we have an ongoing decision: let it out or refuse to participate. This is not a matter of holding it in. It is a matter of starving it, refusing to feed it. Anger always dissipates eventually, so we can just let it happen sooner by not holding on to it and refusing to enjoy it. People enjoy their anger. Think about it; you will find it is true. Even though we may feel terrible later, we enjoy the power of anger while we are giving ourselves to it. We get an adrenaline rush and forget all the bad things about ourselves.

ANSWER: Kindness - taking the tender approach, with patience and compassion. Anger is often our first reaction to the problems of others. Impatience with the faults of others is related to this.

**Lust:** To be fair, there is one good thing about the sin of Lust: it cannot persist into eternity. In actuality, sins of the flesh tend to burn themselves out over time. After a while lust becomes a habit and what pleasure it brought diminishes until we wonder what the attraction is.

We can limit lust to sexuality, but we may want to consider the larger area of sensuality. Sensuality is the craving for physical pleasures of all kinds. An inordinate desire to avoid pain, for physical and even emotional comfort, the best food and wine, the best looking car, can all be forms of lust. Lust denies our spiritual nature and promotes the lie that "this is all there is." We try to make a heaven on earth, but instead we create a hell. Other people become ways of satisfying our needs. They are merely objects to service us, bring us food, run our business, give us pleasure. We want to reduce the population of the world so we won't have to share or we want more children so they can carry on the family business. Everyone else becomes a means to an end.

ANSWER: Self control - Self control and self mastery prevent pleasure from killing the soul by suffocation.

Legitimate pleasures are controlled in the same way an athlete's muscles are: for maximum efficiency without damage. Lust is the self-destructive drive for pleasure out of proportion to its worth. Sex, power, or image can be used well, but they tend to go out of control.

**Gluttony:** There are at least three forms of Gluttony:

1) Wanting more pleasure from something than it was made for - The world is full of good things, from the beauty of the stars to the ever-changing and never-changing oceans to the pleasure of human company. We are free to enjoy these things without becoming focused on any one of them to the exclusion of all else. It is possible to become so caught up in a pleasure, whether food or fun, that we can no longer enjoy other things, and would be willing to sacrifice other pleasures for the one. We enter into Gluttony when we demand more pleasure from something than it was made for. Normally, we can only eat so much food, but some people in Ancient Rome wanted more pleasure, so they threw up after the meal and then ate more. This allowed them to enjoy eating more at the cost of health (and dignity).

2) Wanting it exactly our way (delicacy) - There is a certain amount of discomfort to be expected in life, but the Glutton will have none of it. Instead of becoming strong by suffering the minor inconveniences of life, the Glutton insists on being pampered. No one dares to point out how petty or foolish they are. In fact, some celebrities are praised for their excessive perfectionism, as though it were a virtue.

3) Demanding too much from people (excessive desire for other people's time or presence) - There can be a healthy and natural enjoyment of time spent with friends and acquaintances, but some people just can't get enough. They make demands until the other person moves away or explodes in anger. The Glutton is wounded that someone would take offense at their "love" for them. At least some people can get away.

ANSWER: Temperance - Temperance accepts the natural limits of pleasures and preserves this natural balance. This does not pertain only to food, but to entertainment and other legitimate goods, and even the company of others.

**Sloth:** Most people think of sloth as laziness, not doing much of anything, but just sitting around doing nothing. Many people stay busy most of the time but don't do the things they should, putting them off for later. They may be staying busy so they have an excuse. Sloth (or acedia) is a kind of spiritual laziness (as opposed to mere physical fatigue or depression). It means not making it a priority to do what we should, or change what we should in ourselves. Some people might call it apathy, which means a lack of feeling.

ANSWER: Zeal - Zeal is the energetic response of the heart. The other sins work together to deaden the spiritual senses so we first become slow to respond to ourselves and desires, and then drift completely into the sleep of complacency.