

“7—Are They Really That Deadly?”

Of all the things we like to talk about, and ponder and reflect on; of all things we like to sit down over a cup of coffee, or cold beverage and jaw with a buddy about, probably the last thing on our list is to talk about sin. There are some sins we like to take part in, but I think it's safe to say that we don't really like to talk much about sin, we don't like to think much about it, generally we don't like to go into detail when we've done something we think is a sin. We don't want to talk about it and you probably don't really want me to talk about it, maybe because sin is somehow equated with failure. When we think about sin we think about weakness, our weakness, our failings and failures, we think about consequences. And none of that sounds fun.

But let me ask you. What if talking about sins we're prone to doing, what if getting specific about temptations we face, what if knowing what we were up against in the real world helped us to avoid falling into traps of all kinds? What if talking about sin led to a better, healthier life, better healthier relationships, a deeper connection to God? If talking about sin led to that, wouldn't it be worth it? Here's the deal, facing sin in our lives isn't about making us feel worse that we already do, it's about making us feel better. Because we're stronger, better equipped to face temptations and sin, and better equipped to get back on our feet when we fail.

All that's to say that I'm hesitant about talking about sin because it's not very fun, or attractive, or glamorous; and it can be a little painful. But talking about it can also make us stronger, and more alive than ever.

So today we're going to start a series where we're going to look at the top 7 vices, or sins, that haunt us, and 7 virtues that crush the vices. This isn't about making you or me feel guilty, it's about us tapping into God's power and living lives of freedom.

Now you may have heard of the seven deadly sins. It's a list that was created in the 4th century by a monk. He wrote out this list of sins that he struggled with most in the monastery where he lived. As he shared that list he found that others struggled with these same things. Later they figured out that almost everybody struggled with the sins on this list. And they also found that the sins on this list were at the root of all other sin.

Throughout history the list took on various forms but eventually became the following seven deadly sins. **The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride.** This list was meant to go from the least deadly to the most deadly—all of them being deadly.

Before we go into the seven deadlies, let's just talk about sin in general. **What is sin?** The Bible doesn't give one single definition of sin. The word that's most often used for the word sin in the Bible is the word **Hamartia**. In Bible times the word hamartia had two meanings. It was a traveling word that meant to choose the wrong road. It makes for a good mental picture. Two people are traveling together. They are friends, they enjoy each other's company and they intend to travel together on a nice long journey. But something happens, one of them breaks away from the other and takes a different path, the wrong path, a path that won't get to the destination!

If you look at sin this way it means those times when we choose a path that separates us from God. Not because God walks away from us but that we gradually walk away from God's desire for our lives. If we do that we eventually find ourselves alone, lonely and realize that if we stay on that path we are never going to get to where we want to be. There are lots of reasons why we might choose another path. Temptations, weariness, forgetfulness, lack of discipline. Sometimes we choose the wrong path.

The word for sin, hamartia, has another meaning. It was used as an archery term. It meant to miss the mark and lose the prize. This makes for a good mental picture, too. An archer shooting for a target, shooting for the bull's-eye but missing.

As Christians our goal in living out faithful lives is to hit the bull's-eye every time. The Bible challenges us to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). We are called to be imitators of God, to be loving, merciful, compassionate, just, patient and on and on. But we fall short! We don't even hit the target, let alone the bull's-eye!

And what's important to understand is that God is the one who is defining the target. We don't choose the mark, or the target, God does. God has a will for us as human beings, a path he wanted us to take, and either we chose to stray from that path, or we accidentally strayed from that path, either way, we didn't hit the mark. To not hit the mark means to not be fully human, to miss the will of God. So a simple definition of sin would be to go counter to God's will, or miss God's will.

This makes me think of my role as a parent. Janet and I set up rules for our daughters, but we didn't set up those rules to spoil their fun or make them miss out on something. We give them the rules so they can have a full life. We aren't trying to rob them of great experiences. We're trying to make sure that they are safe, and protected, and able to experience life to the fullest.

When God says, "This is my will..." He's saying that to bring you peace and joy and hope and life—stuff we really want. When we stray from that path of God's will we end up missing out on the things we really want most. We end up finding that there's a brokenness in our relationship with God and with other people and even inside ourselves. There's a conflict that takes place.

Let talk about what our sin does to God, **God's reactions to sin**. Some people think that sin makes God angry and that's it. And there are some sins that I think make God angry, especially when we hurt other people. But most often the response of a father to his children when they stray from the path, it's not anger, it's disappointment. Disappointment because he doesn't want to see us hurt. Disappointment because he knows the path we're choosing is going to cause pain.

My parents sure experienced this with me. Some of my decisions just broke their hearts. Because I made a decision that they knew would have painful consequences. In those cases they weren't angry at me; they were disappointed because they wanted the best for me.

Yes, sometimes God is angry at human sin, but that's when we've really hurt somebody else. But most of the time when we sin God is disappointed, because he wants us to have the best possible life, and we chose a different path. Jesus said it outright, "**I came that they may have life, and have it to the full**" (John 10:10).

Now let's get back to the deadly sins. **The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride**. When you look at them closely you can see that all of them are distortions of something good. Like lust. God is the one who gave us sexual drives. God invented sexual urges. It's not like God is looking down at us saying, "What on earth are they doing down there?!" God invented sex and it's a good gift, but when that good thing gets distorted, when we start to misuse the good gift that God has given us, when we start to use a good gift in a way that hurts us or others, then it's a deadly sin.

Look at gluttony. We all have to eat, we all like to eat. That's how God designed us. Food is a good thing and so is our appetite for food. The problem is that that good drive can become distorted and we eat and eat and eat, and instead of enjoying the gift of food and nourishing ourselves, we hurt ourselves and shorten our lives. When the good gift of food becomes a central focus of our lives, it has become a sin.

The same thing is true of greed. We have to work to earn money to buy the things we need. But when the making of money, and the having of money becomes the primary objective in our lives, instead of finding joy, we find obsession, and pain and brokenness. We get consumed with having more and forget about the power of generosity. A good drive to work and earn, becomes our downfall.

The deadly sins are a distortion of the good gifts of God, but in the end, every one of them is ultimately the sin of idolatry. It's taking that object, pride, greed, lust, and it becomes the thing we worship; it becomes our God. Sex, or money, or food, or fame, becomes our god. With pride, we become our own god. The deadly sins all point to forms of idolatry. The first commandment of the big 10 is "You shall have no other gods before me."

So the ancients identified seven deadly sins that are the source of all the others. They also identified seven living virtues that when we live them out, when we put them into practice, we leave very little room for the vices to function. **The seven living virtues are: Faithfulness, Moderation, Generosity, Diligence,**

Kindness, Patience, Humility. The idea is that if a person cultivated these seven virtues then they would suffocate the seven deadly sins. That if you knew what these were and practiced them, and developed them, then there would be no room for the vices.

So, I don't want to make you feel bad today or any day. But I think it's important for us to see just how deadly these sins are. I want to paint a picture so that when you feel tempted by sin in the future, maybe you'll remember that picture. Maybe this will help. It's a glue trap. A mouse trap. I've put these out before.

I don't know if you've ever seen these before. There's a layer of really sticky glue in this tray. There's some kind of scent on here that attracts mice. And when they find it they start to walk across the glue and when they get a few steps across they find that their feet are stuck, and the more they struggle the more stuck they get. Tails, heads, bodies.

A few years ago a friend (Mike Riggs) talked about putting these in his house thinking it would be more humane. Far from it! He said you could hear the mice squealing. His wife would kick him out of bed to go take care of it. These things aren't humane. Because sometimes the mice die a slow painful death. Sometimes they are so desperate to get out, they'll chew off their own feet to try to get free.

Temptation is pretty powerful. We find this thing that's got an attraction to us. It looks good to us, it feels good. And then we find ourselves getting stuck in the glue trap, we pull and try to get away but we just can't quite break free. As your pastor I don't want that for you. I don't want that for me.

It's really important that we know what the problem is, but it's just as important that we know what the cure is. How do we deal with temptation? Even better, how do we avoid it? One of the first things to recognize is that any temptation starts in the thoughts. It doesn't start with an action, it starts with the thoughts.

The apostle James writes about this in the Bible, he says, **"Each of you is tempted when you are dragged away by your own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death"** (James 1:14-15).

So it all starts here, in our thoughts. There's an old story about a cowboy who became a Christian, and after he became a follower of Jesus his pastor came to him a few months later and asked him, "How are doing in your walk with Jesus?" The old cowboy says, "Pastor, I feel like my heart is being torn apart. I feel like I've got two teams of horses connected to my heart. One team's pulling one way, and the other team is pulling the other way." The pastor asked, "Well, which one is winning." The cowboy smiled and said, "Well, whichever one I say to that morning, 'Giddy up!'"

That points to a reality about sin and our struggle with it. You **can** resist sin. Resistance is NOT futile. The Bible says, **"Resist the devil and he will flee from you"** (James 4:7). It is possible to resist but you have to decide. "Who am I going to say Giddy up to every morning?"

And part of what we do is we say something like, "Lord God, take my life and help me to honor you. I want to follow you Jesus. I want to live in a way that honors you. Holy Spirit come and take up residence in me and give me the strength to walk the path, and when I face temptation, Lord, take over once more." It begins with a decision we make.

On your study guide is something I want you to take a look at. It's the Five R's of resisting temptation. Adam Hamilton created this as a process that if you work it, it's pretty hard for you to give in to temptation. First, **Remember who you are.** You are a child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ. You've made a commitment to him. Remember that. And remember your other relationships. Maybe you are a spouse. Remember that. But as you face temptation you say, "I belong to Jesus. Is this activity consistent with my identity as a follower of Jesus?" Remember who you are.

Second, **Realize the consequences of your actions.** So many times when we're tempted by sin we get blinders on an all we can see is the gratification that's right there in front of us. We fail to ask what's going to happen after that. How will I feel after this act? After I've done this thing will I feel ashamed or proud? Will I try to hide it, or will I be ready to tell anyone? Will it hurt other people or will it bless other people? Realize the consequences.

Third, **Remove yourself from the situation.** This one's particularly important when it comes to lust. One man struggled with going to strip clubs. They were on his way home from work and the temptation was too much. Finally he made the decision to take the long way home. It took him 5 more minutes to get home but it saved his marriage, his family, his soul.

If your temptation is gluttony, then remove yourself from the temptation, or remove the temptation from you. Is pride the temptation? Remove yourself.

Fourth, **Rededicate yourself to God in prayer.** Pray in the moment. This is where you pray those simple short prayers in the face of a situation. "Lord, you know I'm struggling with this right now. You know the feelings I'm having; the thoughts that are going through my mind. Lord, please help me because I don't want to walk down this path." It's kind of interesting that when you pray in the middle of temptation, it's hard to have those same feelings—the temptations are almost always lessened or eliminated. Stop and rededicate yourself in prayer.

Last, **Reveal your struggle to a trusted friend.** It might be your small group, if you have that level of trust. That could be a recovery group, or a 12 step group. That's one reason we want you to connect somehow with others who can hold you accountable. Where you develop trust to the place where somebody can say, "How are you doing with that thing you've struggled with?" Something happens when you actually tell somebody that you're struggling with something. When you confess it, the power seems to dissipate. Because part of the power of sin comes from its secrecy. James puts it this way in the Bible: **"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).**

As we wrap up today, I want to make sure we're all clear on a couple of things. Being tempted is not a sin. If you face temptations regularly (lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, anger, envy, pride), all that means is that you are alive. When it comes to lust, you're going to have moments in life when you find yourself attracted to somebody else, somebody who makes you feel special and makes your heart flutter. That's just life. It doesn't mean that you're supposed to go and have an affair with that person. I hear it all the time, "But how can something that feels so right be so wrong?" Just ask the mouse that crawled onto the glue trap. Just because something smells good and feels right, doesn't mean it really is right. Temptation is a common experience. We're tempted by lust, greed, gluttony, laziness, anger, envy, pride. It's what you do with the temptation that matters.

Are you going to make mistakes sometimes? Of course, in all areas of sin. But the hope is you don't make deadly mistakes. Mistakes that tear other people's lives apart. Our goal, our target, is that we're prepared to face those temptations.

But listen, even after you've made mistakes, maybe terrible ones in the past. There is grace for you. Jesus' name means "God saves." Jesus came because we need saving. Jesus came because we take the bait of sin. We turn to him and ask for his mercy and forgiveness and he gives it to us. Jesus was called a friend of sinners. He hung around with people who had made terrible mistakes. But he still loved them, he forgave them, and he wanted them to strive to get back on the path, to hit the target he set for them. And if they missed it, he'd still love them. Remember, Jesus forgave his disciples who abandoned him! He's ready to forgive you and me when we give in to temptation. He's ready to give his strength and his characteristic virtues so the deadly sins don't have room to take hold. So that we can live the life he wants us to live and live it to the full. That's why we're going to look at these 7 deadly sins, so we can learn to avoid them, so we know how get free if we don't avoid them, and how we can live life to the fullest. And for today, that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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