

## Seven Deadly Sin.

### Series: **Sinning Like A Christian: Introduction**

November 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

We are beginning a new series entitled, Sinning Like A Christian. The title came from William Willimon from his fairly recent book, Sinning Like a Christian

As far as historians can tell, this list of these vices was first put in writings by Evagrius of Pontus (346-399 AD), one of the desert fathers in the early centuries of the Christian church. He was one of the rising stars in the late fourth century church. He was well-known as a keen thinker, a polished speaker, and a gifted writer. Throughout his ministry, he was a trusted friend to several influential contemporary church leaders.

He struggled a lot with temptations. He became infatuated with a married woman. He struggled with vainglory and pride. His struggle became so deep, he became seriously ill and decided to separate himself from the wiles of the world and to be closer to God. Ironically, out in the desert, in this communal, pure, ascetic community that was designed to promote a better vision of God, Evagrius came up with these seven deadly sins which has been handed down to the Church.

In 2008, the **Vatican City** in an attempt to give moral and ethical behavior more significance to current times, the Vatican announced seven new deadly sins. The move was made to help push people into deeper self-examination. The sins of today have a social resonance as well as an individual one," says the Vatican. The new mortal sins are:

(1) genetic modification; (2) human experimentations,  
(3) polluting the environment; (4) social injustice; (5) causing poverty;  
(6) financial gluttony; and (7) taking drugs.

In the last few decades there has been a revival in the spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Dallas Willard. **Spiritual Formation**, encouraging Christians to take spiritual discipline seriously again, **Dallas Willard** argues:

*We are saved by grace, of course, and by it alone, and not because we deserve it...But grace does not mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically "infused" into our being in the moment of need. A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to ace in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.*

Willard's point is when we receive saving grace, this should be only the beginning, not the finale, of our Christian story. Living as a Christian takes discipline and practice. When you read over these 7 deadly sins the first impression is that there are **so few sins** on the list. You would think that there should be more.

The other thing that strikes us about the Seven is that **they don't seem so deadly**. Why worry about gluttony when murder is so prevalent among us. Surely there are more serious sins than sloth, greed, gluttony, anger, just, envy, and pride.

The Seven are the stock and trade of daytime soap opera on television. They are hardly the most terrible thing of which human beings are capable of doing. The more spectacular sins-

political tyranny, ethnic hatred, religious persecution, and racial violence - fail to make the list.

We have all seen folks suffer more terribly from alcoholism than from overeating; why not list drunkenness as one of the Seven, rather than gluttony?

In his Book, Morals on the Book of Job, Pope **Gregory the Great**, who was well known for his scholarly writings, listed the seven principle vices or as capital sins. He says, what makes the Seven so deadly is their **generative quality**.

He goes on to say, *From envy there springs hatred, whispering, detraction, exaltation at the misfortunes of a neighbor, and affliction at his prosperity. From anger are produced strife, swelling of mind, insults, clamor, indignation, blasphemes.*

That is why he refers to them as Capital sins, that is, the HEAD, the source, the necessary first step toward other sins. Their seriousness is not so much within themselves but in their ability to **generate** even more serious offspring. Gregory the Great spoke of the Seven as “*leaders of wicked armies.*”

The fact is, when we look at these deadly Seven, we don't think of them as deadly. The lust of a couple of schoolboys, sneaking a look at a Playboy magazine doesn't seem that serious. And yet, those same boys, surfing the web at forty, in the depths of pornography, straying marriage vows in order to fulfill their lust is all together different.

Nearly all of the Seven look fairly harmless as they appear among adolescents but repulsive and ugly when exercised in middle age.

**William Willimon**, *Sinning like a Christian*, says that the Seven Deadly, “...Reminds us that sin is not so much the popular “doing what you know you are not supposed to do” but rather a perverted being who we are.”

It's easy to by pass them and not take them seriously.

**Alexander Solzhenitsyn** said, *The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*”

The justification for calling the Seven “Deadly” is that they are difficult to hate. Murder would be the last thing I would do, but sins of gluttony, anger and lust are all too common in my life which I'm embarrassed to say brings a degree of satisfaction in my life.

Some sins do appear to weaken their hold over our imaginations with the passage of years. Lust seems to require more conscious effort after sixty than at sixteen. How quickly sexual lust is transferred to material lust or for a lust of power or lust for recognition.

What makes these sins powerful is often times they do no act alone but they partner up with each other. Show me a person who has given in to greed, and I would not be surprised to find him an enthusiastic practitioner of lust and gluttony as well. I don't think I have ever known envy to not also be strolling hand-in-hand, with anger. Working together, in various combinations, the Seven are a potent force. Gregory says that the capital sins are so closely connected that one comes from another.

**William Willimon** writes, *What makes these Seven so deadly is often in their combined, cumulative effect upon the soul rather than in their individual badness.*

One of the things that I believe the Church needs to come back to is to have a **clear theology of what sin is**. For those of us who are trying to take Jesus seriously, sin is not a foible, a slipup; it is offense against and rebellion against our Creator. Sin is that which

separates us from a holy and righteous God, no matter how great or how small.

Jesus makes the rather astounding claim that, when it comes to sin, it's the thought that counts. Sin not only hurts the neighbor that we sin against, but also reflexively bites us as well. Sin carries within itself its own punishment. It erodes our soul. It severs an intended relationship between Creator and us.

**Thomas Aquinas** in thinking about why the Seven Sins are sins, writes that people never see evil as evil. When we think of evil we almost never think of anything within us. Evil is always depicted by us as an impersonal source outside ourselves - tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and sickness. Hitlers and the Mao's.

When we speak of sin, instead of focusing outwardly and talking about everyone else's sin, we need to focus inwardly and speak of our sin, my sin.

**Scott Peck** says that, if one is looking for genuine evil, then one ought to look first within the synagogue and church. It is the nature of evil to hide among the good.

**G. K. Chesterton**, most influential English writer of the 20th century, was asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject, *What is Wrong with the World?* Chesterton sent back a two sentence essay: *What is wrong with the world? Me.*

The point is, we, as Christ followers, often forget that our sinful nature is so deeply rooted in all our thought and action that no amount of clear thinking and clenched-fisted determination can overcome it. We have been seduced by our society in which it has taken these Seven vices and repackaged them and presented them as virtue.

What would Madison Avenue advertising do without Envy as their major marketing device? Lust for power and recognition is viewed as a great quality to have in order to work your way up the cooperate ladder.

Or on the other hand we have psychoanalyzed these Seven:

- \* gluttony becomes a quaint name for various eating disorders.
- \* Wrath is a wholly treatable in anger management seminars.
- \* Pride is replaced by talk about self-esteem

**Psychologist Solomon Schimmel** recounts a session with a patient who was struggling with lust: Someone asked him what effect did his therapy have on this client.

Referring to his client he said, *My client overcame unpleasant feelings about premarital sex with an affectionate companion who was also a marriage prospect...therapy made her much happier.*

In **Augustine's Confessions**, the infamous episode about the stealing of the pears, Augustine magnifies a sin that seems so inconsequential. By this time in the account of his life, Augustine has fathered a child out of wedlock, has hinted at many youthful indiscretions. And yet when he comes the prime example of his deep perversity, he gives as evidence the stealing of a few pears. Is Augustine being overscrupulous?

The theft of pears by a group of boys may not seem to us like a great sin, but it becomes for Augustine a revelation of the way in which his problem is not simply the sins that he commits, **but his inclination toward sin.**

**He finds that the human being is fascinated with some actions simply because the actions are illicit and prohibited.** He and some friends steal a few pears from a neighbor's pear tree, not because they are hungry or need to steal the pears, but from *eo liberet*

*quo non liceret*, “that which is not permitted allured us.” Which is to say, just for the heck of it. The important thing is not the transgression, rather the problem is the inclination, the desire.

As long as I have thoughts in my mind of violating God’s law, even if I don’t do it outwardly at that moment, doesn’t mean that I’m above from succumbing to those thoughts.

In the Christian faith, an act or inclination is sinful to the degree that it alienates us from God by offending God. Sin is about God. To those who do not know, or do not serve this God, the Seven are bound to seem rather silly, much ado about nothing.

We have to remind ourselves that yes,

- \* Lust is a sin. Because the Son of God is the one who stoops and serves.
- \* Pride is a sin. Because God is the source of all that we have and all that we are.
- \* Envy is a sin because Jesus taught us to pray for no more.
- \* Gluttony is a sin, we are to be content with what we have.

Throughout this series, I pray that we resist the temptation and point out the sins in others, but rather to confess it in ourselves.

**In Hieronymus Bosch’s** painting in the Madrid, painted around 1485, The Seven are depicted as spokes in a wheel, or rays of the sun. At the center is a large eye, the all seeing God who sees all our secrets. It is God who sees the center of our hearts.

These next few weeks, I want you to be ruthless and examine your soul and look at yourself in a mirror and say, *God which of these sin or sins have a hold on me that I don’t even realize it?*

The mistake that we make often times in our confessions, is to **generalize** our sins into one lump. God wants us to examine each sin specifically, call it by its name, and to ask him for grace to root it out.

We are to engage in this self examination daily.

New treatments in Cancer - Target the area where the cancer is growing. God is wanting us to target specific sins in our lives.

CONFESSION.

The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible study and resource material for pastors.

Resource Material:

Deyoung, Rebecca: *Glittering Vices*

Willimon, William: *Sinning Like a Christian*