

BEYOND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

How does a person become aware of the Seven Deadly Sins without becoming grim and negative? What was the purpose of going into such a topic in the first place? Suppose we actually do realize the intricate web of the Seven as they weave their way through every day and every activity of our lives. Is there anything we can do about it – anything that will make a real difference? Does knowing about the Seven Lively Virtues mean we can claim and use them?

Somehow, the more we tune in to the meanings and machinations of the Seven, the more we recognize the demons that really do trouble our living. As Lorraine Kisly has said, “Perhaps they interest us because they are names for our suffering, for the psychic pain of our isolation, frustration and fear.”

What are we up against? What is life for? What is life like? To some degree, we give and find different answers to such questions. From culture to culture, from religion to religion, from one age to another, the answers might be quite divergent. No human has ever lived, however, who has not wrestled with greed and lust and the rest of the Seven.

To talk about sin is not to be negative. To talk about sin without any hope of redemption is to be negative. To talk about joy, prosperity, promise, and success without any acknowledgment of the barriers and pitfalls may be the most profoundly negative stance of all.

In Mark’s passage, Jesus reminds us where our real struggles are: blaming it on the externals. It was Adam; no it was Eve; no it was the serpent. Who made me worried and anxious the last time I was worried and anxious? The trouble is, I can answer that question! It really was *not* my fault. You see, I had these four appointments to keep, and the first person showed up fifteen minutes late with this incredible problem ... It goes on almost forever, doesn’t it? Nothing can happen to my finances, my health, my popularity, my attitude, or my performance without my finding some external cause to explain it, justify it, carry the blame for it.

“No,” Jesus reminds us. All of our real problems come from within our own hearts. That’s the very first lesson when it comes

to sin and learning to deal with it. We blame the externals to try to escape the conviction of sin. Then we will not have to deal with it. Whoever or whatever it was, it was not me!

It's a whole new world, a whole new game, a whole new LIFE when we come awake to the inner life – to the spiritual dimensions all around us. The awareness begins with the realization that the externals are not the causes, but are only their symptoms. The interior – the heart, the soul – is either alienated from God or in harmony with God. That is our true condition. The externals tend to reflect the inner condition. Sometimes there is a time lag, but the externals are not the source. Is that not what Jesus is trying to tell us in this teaching?

J.C. Penney was well-advanced in years before he began to realize this truth. He was a “good” man, as we say – an honest, hard-working man – but he was primarily interested in externals like success and making money. When he worked at Joslin's Dry Goods Store in Denver for six dollars a week, his ambition was to be worth one hundred dollars. By the time he reached that goal, he wanted to be worth a million dollars. Nothing wrong with that – no evil implied or intended; just limited and narrow-minded.

Business was everything until Mrs. Penney caught a cold, developed pneumonia, and died. “When she died,” said Penney, “my world crashed around me. To build a business, to make a success in the eyes of men, to accumulate money – what was the purpose of life? What had money meant for my wife? I felt mocked by life, by God Himself.” Yes, well, who mocked whom?

After several more fiery trials, J.C. Penney was financially ruined. Only then could God break through for real, to stay. Afterward, Penney said: “It is not enough for men to be upright and moral. When I was brought to humility and to the knowledge of my dependence upon God, sincerely and earnestly seeking God's aid, then it was forthcoming, and a light illumined my being. I cannot otherwise describe it than to say that it changed me.”

Augustine wrote in his Confessions: “I inquired what iniquity was, and ascertained it not to be a substance, but a perversion of the will, bent aside from Thee, O God, the Supreme Substance, towards these lower things”

Maybe God never threw us out of The Garden. Maybe we are still in The Garden but are lost, so we have no sight of God and worry that God is no longer here. It would come to the same thing, in any case. There is no Paradise without the conscious awareness of God's presence. Hell, by definition, is merely the absence of God. We have only to shut the eyes of our souls, lose the contact, go spiritually to sleep – to find hell anywhere, to make a hell out of any place.

The choice is there. We try to blind ourselves when we blame things on externals. That means we have no choice – it's not our fault. But the choice is there! "*Behold I set before you life and death Choose life*" (Deuteronomy 30:19)

How I wish I could remember that, in the grim times as much as in the lilt and laughter. My head believes it. My heart knows it's true. It is possible to choose life in the very teeth of death. We have seen Jesus do it. We have seen many people do it, even on their deathbeds. Death could not hold them. The sting was already gone; they were too close to their Lord.

Life and good. Death and evil. They are synonyms, are they not? To find the good is to find life; to find evil is to find death. The sins are deadly; the virtues are lively. We are not punished *for* our sins; we are punished *by* our sins. We are punished not by God but by *our sins* – by separating ourselves from God, by trying to go it alone. Paul is not making it up when he writes that "the wages of sin is death." He is just remembering Deuteronomy 30.

The first principle is to not blame the externals. If I do, I am trying to pretend there is no source of sin in me. That means fix everybody else and do not mess with me. It also means there is no hope for me.

The second principle is to remember that the choice is before me – it is mine to make. When I do see or admit any of the Seven Deadly from within, I am overwhelmed. I do not move or even twitch without seeing at least one of the Seven at work.

All the saints attest to this horrendous side of awakening. The first time the young preacher realizes that preaching is a lust for power, that counseling is the ego trying to act superior, that doing unselfish deeds is the most selfish deed there is, that the "call" to the ministry itself is backside by the hope of getting an inside track with

God – well, it is horrible. Every motive is a two-sided coin: virtue on one side, sin on the other. So it is necessary to realize that the choice is set before us. God sets it there. Nobody can take it away.

We cannot, however, decide to wipe away one side of the coin. That's what most people think religion is about: an act of will whereby we decide to wipe off the sin side and keep the virtue side of our coins. That's "theory religion" made up by people who have never tried it. The choice is whether to spend the coins for God or for ourselves, or maybe, in some cases, for some third party we *think* is God or we think is a better us. People cannot just wipe off the sin side of the coins; they cannot redeem their motives just by wanting to or trying to. To choose life is to choose God, to want God with us, to want to be with God.

Of course! Everybody wants that! The reason the Seven Deadly Sins devastate us, however, is because there is so much distance between us and God. In our culture and society, it is obvious that most people do not want very much to do with God, not directly or personally or for very much of their time. Checking my own inner being, I understand why.

Contemplating the Seven Deadly Sins shows us more and more clearly what we are up against. The more we awaken spiritually, the more powerful and all-pervading the Seven become to our consciousness. Trying to make rules against the Seven Deadly Sins only shows the hopelessness of our condition in ever-starker terms. There is simply no way to make sufficient rules, make sufficient vows, enforce enough of our good intentions, keep enough New Year's resolutions. Willpower is simply not adequate to cope with the Seven Deadly Sins. It's the proverbial squirt gun in hell.

We need help! I preached the series on the Seven Deadly Sins because I know that anyone who contemplates them with any earnestness and honesty for very long will come into the clear, simple, soul-splitting truth of how much we need Jesus.

Yes, I know that name bothers some of you. Use Holy Spirit, God, Higher Power, or Eternal Mother, but Jesus is the one we could *see*: the ONE who loved enough to die for us – the ONE who cared enough to come among us in the first place. The truth is, we do not know very much at all about God or the Eternal Mother or the Holy Spirit or the Higher Power – unless it is like Jesus. We do not know about the magnitude of love and mercy and grace and personal salvation – except for what Jesus showed us.

Without Jesus, we go back to trying to wipe off the sin from one side of our motives. Jesus says: “You will not make it that way. It sticks too close. You cannot do it on your own. This is not a do-it-yourself religion. Come with me and I will show you how to spend the coins and live the motives according to the pattern and design God made and intended for you. We need a new covenant here, a new understanding between us. Never mind getting perfect first and then making an application for employment.”

He says: “Come with me now, just like you are. What we need is time together – time to talk and practice and do things together, and just be together. It is not going to work with rules; it takes relationship. I love you. Try to love me back, as much as you can. You will get the hang of it, but most of all you have to be with me, spend time with me. Start rearranging your life so you can spend all your time with me, until you do not do anything without me. You will start knowing yourself better and better, and you will find out who you really are.”

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- 1.) Stop blaming the externals.
- 2.) Know that the choice is always there, always possible, no matter how closed up or closed off everything may seem.
- 3.) Know that the choice is between being with God or going it alone. The choice is not about being right or keeping all the rules.