

The Seven Deadlies

Poisons and Antidotes



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SLOTH



Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

(Prov. 6:6–11)

INTRODUCTION

The seven deadly sins? Where does that categorization come from? The question can be addressed in two ways—historical and systematic. The historical question is the simpler of the two. Gregory the Great (late 6th century) is responsible for the list as we have it today. He saw the list in an order of increasing self-absorption. Sloth was the least offensive to God and Pride the most.

The list is not intended to compete with or supplant the Ten Commandments. It is simply a list, like other lists in the Bible. Each of these sins is mentioned in the Bible, but this list is not taking away from or supplanting

the Ten Commandments. Proverbs 6:16 gives another list of seven sins that God really hates according to Solomon. But that list does not seek to compete with God's Ten Commandments either.

The list is simply an exercise in moral systematics—looking for a pattern in Scripture to help us understand a wide range of human disobedience. The Old Testament law does not tell us directly that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart mind soul and strength, nor that the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. But Jesus tells us that that is what they are. The same is seen with the seven deadly sins: it is an exercise in systematics. You take the sins of the Bible, line them up and pick the ones that dominate the others, and order them in a systematic way. In this case we are taking the seven sins and organizing them in a particular order of evil or self-absorption. We do this while being careful not to supplant the Scripture or to put the “list” into competition with the Word of God.

That said, the seven deadly sins are sloth, covetousness, anger, lust, gluttony, envy, and pride.

Review the passage at the beginning of this chapter (Prov. 6:6–11). In that place, sloth is contrasted with wisdom. The fool follows the path of sloth, while the man of God follows after wisdom. As industry has a fruitful harvest, so does sloth—poverty. When you sow brambles you cannot expect to harvest wheat. Whatever a man sows, that also he reaps. Sloth has alternatives to consider, compelling choices, like sleep and slumber. He says, “I need some sleep, I'm tired.” Or, “You know it is awful hot today, maybe I'd better lay down here and wait for it to cool down a bit.” Sloth is always

filled with excuses and reasons why he can't get to the job, or even to the job site at all.

And lastly, the slothful are handled with considerable roughness. Poverty comes on the slothful man like an armed man. It comes to him like a mugger. This is how God designed the world to work. "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat" (Prov. 13:4). This happens because the sluggard is hard to "get through to" and so God comes on him like an armed man.

PHYSICAL SLOTH

Physical sloth neglects the tools given to us for our physical provision. God provides for us by requiring us to provide for ourselves. But he does this in a world that is filled with abundance.

Preparation

A man has to work in order to be able to work. He has to work at plowing, for example, in order to be able to work the harvest. But the slothful have excuses at the first sign of work. "The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing" (Prov. 20:4). There are all sorts of reasons why such a man shouldn't plow: it is too hot, too cold, too wet. Whatever it takes to avoid the work, the sluggard comes up with reasons why he can't do the job. And in the end he cannot participate in the harvest, because he has not participated in the preparation for the harvest. This turns out to be perfectly fine with the sluggard, because he didn't want to do the work that was required for the harvest anyway. In the end however, poverty comes upon him like a thug and he must beg to eat.

Work

The biblical Christian understands that he was created for the work he finds in front of him (1 Thess. 4:11). And if he will not do it, then he should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). This, unfortunately, he will hear more clearly than the words of a book like this. How does he know that he has been created for the work in front of him? That's where his hands are. God has created us so that we can work. And God has commanded us to use the tools he has given us and to work hard. Men and women achieve a true dignity in work and cannot be gained in any other way.

Testimony

“As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him” (Prov. 10:26). When a sluggard is given a task to perform, it is astounding how many reasons come up for not carrying out the duty. But slothfulness is a public act. When the slothful are connected to others, as they frequently are, the word gets out. Their lack of work or refusal to work is news; the whole thing is public knowledge. People will talk about the lack of work—and they should. This is not gossip. Gossip is the passing on of unnecessary information to the detriment of others. Reporting on the slothful character of a sluggard is not gossip—it is actually helping the community. When a report says, “Bill is lazy and you shouldn't hire him,” this is actually helping people to not be taken in by the sluggard. In the long run it even helps Bill. It is not gossip.

SPIRITUAL SLOTH

The reason for physical sloth is spiritual sloth. We don't understand what God has given to us in his word.

Physical sloth neglects the gifts God has given us to do whatever work He has given us to do his will. Spiritual sloth neglects the means of grace which God has so kindly provided us. The result of all such neglect is spiritual poverty. Just as physical sloth brings poverty with regard to finances and livelihood, so spiritual sloth brings on spiritual poverty—like a band of robbers.

Word of God

The Word of God is declared to you week after week. Do you prepare to hear it? Do you go to church prepared to hear the word of God? Do you know what psalms and hymns will be sung, and are you prepared to sing them? Just as you have to prepare in the physical realm you have to prepare to receive a harvest, so too in the spiritual realm do you have to prepare to receive a harvest. The Word of God is the source of the messages preached. What is your degree of familiarity with your Bible? God's people should be in love with God's book and they should know it inside out. They should be steeped in the truths contained in the Bible. And they should know it well enough that they are prepared to hear its exposition on Sunday mornings when they come together to worship God.

When we neglect the word of God, and as we neglect the Word of God, we find that God's word neglects us and poverty comes upon us.

Sacraments

Suppose you have not been baptized. Then believe and be baptized. Have you been baptized? Then improve on your baptism; live in terms of it. The mark of Jesus Christ is upon you. Has He invited you to His table? Do

you come to sit down at His banquet without foresight or preparation? Do you make sure your children are prepared for worship and the meal? Do you dabble with the sacraments, or do you apply yourself to them? If you don't prepare or if you are not prepared, you are acting as a spiritual sluggard. Spiritual sloth has come upon you and spiritual poverty will come upon you.

Spiritual poverty

“The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason” (Prov. 26:16). The condition of the contemporary church is exactly this—the result of spiritual sloth. We are wise in our own conceits. Like the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22), we think we can see, but we are blind. We think we are rich, but we are poor with regard to the things of God.

We are impoverished and the worst thing is that we don't know we are impoverished. We don't have an understanding that this is our condition. Part of the reason is pressure from the unbelieving culture that is around us and our failure to withstand the pressure.

CALLING EVIL COOL

In times of cultural deterioration, pressure is always applied to invert the moral order. Isaiah 5:20 says, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.” The world has always had lazy people, but historically they were always recognized as such. We live in a time when this sluggard-mentality is treated as something that should be praised. In 1950, the average fourteen-year-old kid had a vocabulary of 25,000 words. Today, the average kid has a vocabulary of 10,000 words, four of which appear to be *cable*, *X-Box*, *Netflix*, and *dude*. But how is this up

and coming generation of the ignorati described to us in our public discourse?—street-smart, savvy, irreverent, and refreshing. Industry and diligence are mocked, and the baseball hat on backwards is the mark of a sage. We praise the lazy and exalt the sluggard. We do this even though we know that God mocks the ungodly, the lazy and those who refuse to work for what they desire. This means laziness is a sign of contempt for God.

THE ANTIDOTE TO THE SIN OF SLOTH

The danger of preaching against sin is that if it is heard wrongly, it turns us to ourselves. We hear a message on sloth, and are convicted of our sin. As a result, we resolve to work harder. But every glimpse of sin should always drive us to Christ. When we see our sinful hearts, our sinful behavior, it should drive us to Christ. It should not drive us to try to do better works or to be “less lazy.” The law is a schoolmaster designed to turn us to Christ (Gal. 3:24–25). And when we recognize that our work (even our diligent work) is necessarily insufficient, the response should be to turn to the one who worked perfectly throughout His life.

Some men in John 6 came to Jesus and “said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent (v. 28–29). Our work is to believe in the one whom God has sent (John 6:28–29). We can’t do anything worthwhile unless the spirit of God is in us working his will out of us. He does this in us as we believe and trust in Him. This is the work of God, that we believe. All of our work should be a response of God working in us. It

is the response of a life that trusts in the works of God in the earth. Jesus was born, lived, died, rose, ascended. When we believe this, this is the work of God. And it means that God is working in us. When this happens, we know that whatever we do, we do because God is working in and through us. Our theology comes out our finger tips.

The alternative to sloth and laziness is therefore Christ's work. When we believe in Christ, we work hard in the power of God.

COVETOUSNESS



What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. (Rom. 7:7–9)

INTRODUCTION

The prohibition of covetousness shows us the authority of God's law over the inner man. The fact that this commandment nails us so completely perhaps accounts for our dislike of it.

In Romans 7 Paul is showing the point of the Law. In the first three chapters, he has shown that men are sinners, both Jews and Gentiles. Then, in chapter 4 and 5 Paul shows us that we are justified before God apart from works of the Law. Pharisaical Jews in the first century taught that the Law was central to salvation in an

efficacious way. If you keep the law, you will earn God's favor. Paul is not diminishing the purpose or magnificence of the Law, but he is saying that the popular Judaic teaching of it in the first century was in error. The Law was/is important for salvation, but not in the way the first century Judaizer assumed. In chapter 7 he answers a different question: "If the Law was not given to save us, what was it given for?" His answer is that the Law was given to excite our sinfulness, to bring us to Christ, by revealing to us just how sinful we are.

The Law speaks to man in his sinful condition and shows us how corrupt and how in need of salvation from a source outside ourselves we are. The Law acts as a spotlight, revealing our sinfulness. The problem is not the Law (the spotlight). The light is not the problem, the dirt the light reveals is the problem. Paul isn't trying to get rid of the light; he is trying to shine the light all the brighter because he knows the light will shine on the sin and drive us to Christ. In verse 7 he asks, Is the Law sin? Is the Law the problem? He goes on immediately to say, no the problem is not the Law, the problem is the sin the Law reveals. If the Law hadn't come to reveal the sin, we wouldn't have known the sin existed. If the light hadn't come on, we wouldn't have known that the room was dirty.

Paul said if the Law had not come to show him his problem with lust, he would have gone on lusting and would have never known what was destroying his life. The purpose of the Law is to provoke sin, to reveal sin, to accentuate sin. Once the Law does its work, men are ready to hear about the Savior and to embrace him as their own.

We come now to the sixth sin—covetousness. This requires great attention because this is an area where we tend to sprinkle lavender water on our vices and call them virtues. We think that covetousness is something other than what God calls it. We think people are industrious, or hard working, or self controlled and driven (in a good way). We think at least they aren't slothful and lazy. We think we can't condemn a fellow for working hard just because he is covetous, but we can and we must. If a man is driven to do what he does because he is filled with covetousness, he is driven to sin by sin.

COVETOUSNESS

The sin of covetousness is discontent with what you have, a discontent which motivates you to yearn for what you do not have in a way contrary to the Word of God. It is contrary to the Word of God, and necessarily contrary, because it is the word of a competing god, an idol. Covetousness cannot be done in a godly way because it is the word of another god.

How can you go to the store and buy anything without coveting? You need to understand the desire to acquire in the light of the authority of the God you are serving. If you want “this item” so that you can glorify God more and more then you are not coveting at all. You are receiving God's gifts with thankfulness and are doing what you ought.

If, on the other hand, you cannot buy the object of your affections without trying to hide what you are doing from God, you are almost certainly involved in the sin of coveting. You are serving the god of your lusts—idolatry. If you can't afford the thing and you

go home in order to mope, you have a problem with covetousness.

Here's a good way to check your heart: suppose you go to the store and see a thing you want to buy. Your thoughts suddenly go to wondering if you are being covetous and so you decide to go home and spend a few days thinking about the purchase. If something in you says, "No! I can't go home. What if someone comes and buys it before I can get back." You have the problem of covetousness. You need to go home and not come back at all. When you've got to have it, you aren't listening to God and you are coveting. Covetousness is a form of idolatry. And not surprisingly, God hates it (Is. 57:17).

The heart of the matter

The sin of covetousness is not caused by modern advertising. Our covetousness-inflaming advertisers do abound, but they have the good fortune to operate in a seller's market. The sinful heart wants to want things. "And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed . . . covetousness . . . All these evil things come from within, and defile a man" (Mark 7:20–23). Covetousness is not imposed on you by mysterious forces outside you. Covetousness comes from within the heart of man. "They" have not created this sinful desire within your heart. They are appealing to it, but they have not created it. Jesus tells us that this sin requires a sharp lookout (Lk. 12:15). We have to understand that covetousness is problem that lives inside each of us.

Sexual covetousness

It is not an accident that one of the things listed in the tenth commandment is your neighbor's wife. You aren't to covet anything that you neighbor has, including his wife. This overlaps with another sin, which is of course lust, but covetousness still has to be understood separately. "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled . . . Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:4–5). It is not enough to say the marriage bed is honorable. The verse he goes on to say that in the marriage bed you must be content with what God has given you. You must be content with what you have because you have Him. You have Christ. What more could you possibly want?

The law of love

The man who covets does not love. The man who loves his neighbor refuses to covet. If a man covets his neighbor's possessions, he does not love his neighbor. Covetousness is not a victimless activity. Covetousness shows and displays a lack of love for others. It is not something that is merely going on in your own heart or head. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. "For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his