

# **The Seven Deadly Sins: #1 – Lust**

## **August 19, 2018**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – for a right relationship with God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven! Matthew 5:6

Is anybody here interested in Sin? I hope you are, because for the next several weeks we are diving into what has historically been known as the “Seven Deadly Sins”. There are several reasons why I chose to follow up a sermon series on the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words of God with a series on the Seven Deadly Sins. One is that now that we have revived our understanding of what God instructs God’s people to be about in loving God and each other through the “Big Ten”, it follows that we might want to spend some time wrestling with those things that most often are stumbling blocks as we proceed to love God and one another. Ask me later about the other reasons if you want to know – I am happy to share but don’t want to take time right here.

The first observation I want to make about sin is that it doesn’t have the same impact that it had in Jesus’ day – or even 50 years ago. In current culture sin is kind of an antiquated notion that seems to have lost its ability to interest contemporary folk. We talk about something being “sinfully delicious” – without connecting it in any way to our relationship with God – more likely, we are thinking about its connection to our waistline. Since we rely on Jesus to bring God’s grace and forgiveness to bear on any “sinful” deed or part of our existence, we seem to have lost interest in how we define, resist or commit sin, and what the long-ranging consequences of ignorance (that is, ignoring) sin might be.

So where did these seven “deadly sins” come from originally? There are some conflicting stories but I like best the one about a monk in the fourth century, who fled to the desert to try to deal with all the ways he was challenged to abandon love for God and people in city life, only to find a list of eight things constantly battling his spirit even with no one else around. Later he compared his lists with others in his community and learned that they were much the same! In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great condensed the list to 7 and later Thomas Aquinas expounded on them. The truly interesting thing about this list of “deadly” sins is that they don’t seem, at first blush, to be all that important! How could a little envy possibly be as potent as, say, a little “murder”? Those studying these sins indicate two things: first, while they seem to be trivial at the outset, they lead to great destruction. Second, each of them can be disguised or begin with something that appears to be holy and good and useful.

To simplify an understanding of sin, it is helpful to think of sin as that which harms our relationship with God and often with another person. At the outset of this series on Deadly Sins, I want to acknowledge that often, sin is a perversion of something innately good. Enjoyment of a well-prepared tasty meal is a great joy – where sucking down every morsel in sight marks gluttony. Healthy self-esteem is an important part of every individual’s self-understanding, but focused with singularity risks becoming sickly pride.

To get a better grasp of what we will be dealing with in the coming weeks, let’s begin with a definition of sin. The Hebrew language of the Old Testament has three common words for sin. The first is Chatah, which means to “miss the mark”. You can start off ok – with the best of intentions and in harmony with God’s will and way, and then “BAM”, you find yourself distracted and off-target – moving away from life nestled in the loving joy and praise of God. King David was a great and powerful leader, with a heart even God admired – until he got distracted by Bathsheba, and we remember how that whole torrid story worked itself out. Sometimes sin is a good life distracted.

Another Hebrew word for sin is Avah – meaning to act wrongly. Most often this gets translated as “iniquity”, and inhabits the violating of God’s commands. I know what the right thing to do is, but yet I choose the wrong thing...our iniquities, like the wind, carry us away, writes the prophet.

The third Hebrew Word is Pasha – to rebel against God and God’s ways. This separation from God is full-fledged rebellion. Transgressions – like those the prophet Micah denounces: foreclosures by wealthy landowners who turn poor people out of their homes, unjust laws that hit women and children hardest and preachers who say whatever people want to hear! Pasha involves consciously denying the sovereignty of God in our lives and holding up a flimsy vision of a wimpy God who will take whatever crumbs God’s people have left over to offer after they have sated their whims and fancies in life.

Onto this scene of sin being about external activities that were hurtful to one’s relationship with God or with each other comes Jesus – who brings a deeper and eventually more singular definition of sin. For Jesus, sin is not just a matter of aiming for good and missing the mark. For Jesus sin is about mislaying our identity as children of God. Sin is about forgetting the love of God that formed us in the beginning and succumbing to the temptation to be and do that which we are not at the core. For Jesus, sin is a heart matter.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus makes it clear that the state of our hearts will inform our lives as citizens of God’s kingdom. Blessed are the pure in heart, Jesus says – for they will see God. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – not for being right, but for having right relationships with God, for they will be filled.

Later in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus addresses the deadly sin we focus on today, saying that to look with lust at another person is the same as committing adultery. So what is the difference between looking and looking lustfully? Someone once said the difference is “5 seconds”. When a glance at a person’s beauty becomes a hard-to-break gaze that continues until the subject of the gaze becomes the object of an obsession, that is lust. King David began that fateful afternoon with a simple gaze off the rooftop, and spying a beautiful woman bathing down below his gaze, he could have conceivably noted her beauty and then moved to the opposite side of his roof to watch the sun set. But no – he has his fellows go find out who she is and when they tell her she is married to Uriah the Hittite, King David DOES NOT CARE! He proceeds to bed Bathsheba, then lie to her husband and try to trick him, and finally arrange for his death. The tiny insignificant little gaze held too long becomes the atrocious acts of adultery and then murder. Deadly indeed.

In a society that barter in lust it is difficult sometimes to get clear on how detrimental this looking with uninterrupted desire can become...yet you know people as I do whose whole lives and families and reputations have been destroyed by this deadly sin. I recall the shock and amazement experienced a few years back when a fellow intern supervisor was arrested, tried and convicted of soliciting sex with minors on the internet. I can only imagine how all of that began with a gaze...

Some people claim that because we have a loving and gracious God who forgives sin, we shouldn’t worry too much about sin. Just come and confess and receive forgiveness. Don’t worry about how to live – God will accept and love you no matter what.

Some people claim that God’s very heart breaks with each sin that draws us out of loving relationship with God and harms our neighbors and that we would do well to pay careful attention to sin, know well its insidious and tiny beginnings, and seek to orient our hearts in God’s life and love.

What do you think?

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