

## Beware When Sin is Defined Differently These Days

On 12 January 2002 the *Spectator* had an article “Making a Virtue of Vice.” It pointed out that our modern culture has defined six out of what the church used to call “the seven deadly sins” as medical or psychological problems. The article begins by quoting Frank Furedi: “Once upon a time there were seven deadly sins. They were called deadly because they led to spiritual death and therefore to damnation. The seven sins were (and are) lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy, and pride. Now all of them with the exception of pride, have become medical conditions. Pride has become a virtue.”

The classification of the seven deadly sins probably came originally from sayings of monks. The monk John Cassian catalogued eight principal sins in his *Conferences*. He counted sloth and dejection as two separate sins. By sloth he meant something like weariness of the world. The original Greek word “accidie” meant negligence or not caring. The traditional number of seven is found in Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*. In it he replaced sloth by sadness or spiritual torpor. Thomas Aquinas took the list up from there in his *Summa Theologica*. We have to be careful about classifying some sins as more serious than others are. The New Testament tells us that hatred and calling a neighbour a fool are equivalent to murder in God’s sight and deserve hellfire. So there is no point trying to treat sins on some kind of scale. All deserve hell. Besides, original sin, the inherited sin that corrupts human natures and is the cause of sins in thoughts, desires, words, and deeds is human beings’ greater problem. Paul had a different list, about which he said that those who commit them would not inherit eternal life. His catalogue is just as deadly. “The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, people used by homosexuals, homosexuals, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, slanderers robbers will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

We some point in the list of the seven deadly sins when we contrast them with their opposites. The opposite of lust is chastity. The opposite of gluttony is self-control. The opposite of avarice is liberality. The opposite of sloth is diligence. The opposite of anger is patience. The opposite of envy is kindness. The opposite of pride is humility. This list of “virtues” is similar to Paul’s statement in Galatians 5: “What the Spirit produces is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

The writer in the *Spectator* observes that the Church used to consider pride as the most deadly of the seven sins. However, he remarks, pride is the only one in the list of seven that our modern culture has not redefined, but, instead, now recommends as a good thing. He even says, “Pride has become one of the prime virtues of our time.” Jesus certainly regarded self-righteousness as a very serious problem in human beings. The many modern books available about self-esteem blame low self-esteem as a serious psychological problem. We would class many of these books as “New Age.” If a student does not do well in school, if a single teenager becomes pregnant, if someone is anorexic, if vandals make a mess of something, or if a young person leaves home and lives on the street, what is blamed is low self-esteem. This way of explaining sinfulness away encourages people to blame others, or blame their medical or psychological condition instead of blaming their unspiritual condition. That then makes it harder for people to repent.

Discussions about pride and humility often fail to distinguish humility before God and humility before other people. The Bible does not tell us in so many words that the reason for Satan’s initial rebellion against God was his pride in his high position. It could be argued that sins against the First Commandment, lack of fear, love and trust in God could be summarised as pride. Sinful man sets himself up independently of God. However, a person who has genuine skill should not mask it under false modesty, and those who do not have much skill should not attack “tall poppies.”

What is important is that all sins are serious not only because they hurt other people, but chiefly because they offend against God’s holiness. Modern people often think that sin is only crime against others in society, with reference only to state law or to the harm done to others in society, but without reference to God. Sins against the neighbour are also sins against God. Sins against both God and against the neighbour bring His wrath and punishment. Many people today who are heavily influenced by humanism, the idea that man is the ultimate measure of everything, have trouble even understanding what sin is. Christians should determine not to discuss sin out of its right connection with the Ten Commandments. John wrote: “Everyone who keeps on committing sin also keeps on committing lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 Jn 3:4).

Since those who belong to Christ Jesus “have crucified their sinful natures with their passions and desires” (Gal 5:24), they should refuse to have sexual lust characterised as some kind of addiction that needs therapy to cure it. Lust or coveting is itself sin in God’s sight.

People who have become seriously overweight through gluttony (excessive eating or drinking) should not

simply blame their genetic inheritance. At base, alcoholism is more than a disease. There is a streak of churlish wilfulness in it. People who suffer from drinking to excess have been lightly ignoring warnings that they are doing irreparable harm to themselves. Lack of self-control is sin in God's sight.

People who are greedy, compulsive shoplifters, gamblers, or professional burglars should not be allowed to blame the consumer society in which they are living, or excuse themselves as though they had some kind of medically classifiable addiction. People who use their credit cards to excess to run themselves into hopeless debt should be told, simply, that they have been very silly, not comforted by being told that they have some kind of curable "plastic disease." Avarice and envy are not merely diseases. Even if it is said that a person has a tendency to steal, it is his duty to fight against such a temptation of the Devil. Envy, greed, and avarice and the wish not to give a fair equivalent for what one acquires are sins in God's sight.

People who give way to rage at other drivers on the road or impatiently push supermarket trolleys into other people should not be told that their problems with anger are psychological. Nor is the remedy the taking of some course to teach them how to manage stress better or manage their emotions better. Jesus talked about anger in the context of God's wrath and punishment: "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment" (Mt 5:21).

Sloth is another word for laziness. Early writers described sloth as a state of restlessness that made a person unable to work or pray. Monks were thought of as easily affected by sloth because their lives were monotonous, particularly in the heat of early afternoon. That is how they interpreted "the disease that lays waste at midday" (Ps 91), but at least they regarded sloth as a spiritual problem. We should not assume that every person who is unemployed or has chronic fatigue is lazy. However, if a person is too lazy to pay attention, to concentrate, or is unwilling to work, or is happy to sponge off others, he should not be allowed to comfort himself that he has some kind of "activity disorder." His slackness should not be praised as though he had the right answer to stress-related illnesses, and his slackness should not be excused by saying that, at least, he is not a "workaholic." Paul wrote bluntly: "If anyone does not want to work, let him not eat, either." We should not blame anything outside ourselves if there is a lack of prayer in our lives or if we fail to pray with devout attention.

Discussion of sin such as this has been dare not stop here. It must include the confession by those who write about it that they are themselves part of the whole sinful lump of mankind, alienated by their sinful natures from God and His holiness. Repentance is the admission that we are responsible for our wrongdoing. When we speak about inherited sin we do not merely blame Adam and Eve, but admit that we have joined Adam and Eve in their rebellion against God.

Moreover, such a discussion about sin as this is purely legalistic if it does not go on to point sinners to the remedy for their sin. The righteousness that God requires has been earned by Jesus Christ's perfect obedience to the Law in the place of sinners and by His payment of the full cost of human sin in His vicarious suffering and death. God forgives sinners by His grace when they receive what Jesus Christ has done for them. God, the just Judge, declares the ungodly righteous in His sight by reckoning Jesus' obedience to them.

Christians are not people who congratulate themselves for avoiding deadly sins. They are people who praise God for justifying them apart from the works of the Law.