

Gilligan as Glutton

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Editor's Note: The *JP* asked Mark Ramsey to reflect briefly on his experience of preaching a series of sermons on the “Seven Deadly Sins” and to provide an example of one of the sermons. We hope you won’t be envious.

The Seven Deadly Sins seem to be everywhere. Everywhere, that is, except in the church. A while back, Brad Pitt starred in a movie that featured a serial killer basing his attacks on gluttony, sloth, lust, wrath, pride, greed, and envy. A national travel magazine recently included an advertising supplement helpfully outlining the “Seven Deadly Sins Guide to Las Vegas.” A couple of years ago, *Forbes Magazine* gave us a ranking of “America’s Most Sinful Cities” that included rankings based on each of the seven deadly sins.¹ Using statistics on consumer purchases and preferences, they were able, for example, to identify the “Top Ten Lustful U.S. Cities.” Congratulations Denver, San Antonio, Portland, Seattle, Salt Lake City (Salt Lake City?!), Boise, Washington D.C., Cincinnati, Columbus, and Baltimore.

There seems to be a cottage industry that has grown up around connecting each of the seven deadly sins to the seven characters on the 1960’s sitcom *Gilligan’s Island*. The interpretations shift, depending on which source you consult, but there does seem to be consensus that Gilligan is the glutton, Ginger represents lust, Mr. Howell embodies greed, Mrs. Howell is slothful, Mary Ann demonstrates envy, The Skipper is prone to wrath, and The Professor falls prey to pride.

Seventy years ago, Gandhi tried to recast a form of “seven deadly sins” into seven things that will destroy us: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce (business) without morality (ethics), science without humanity, religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle. In March of 2008, the Vatican issued its own “seven modern social sins” in an attempt to update the formula. These included environmental pollution, genetic manipulation, obscene wealth, infliction of poverty, drug trafficking, morally debatable experiments, and violation of the fundamental rights of human nature.

For all the work that others seem to invest in seeing the Seven Deadly Sins as represented in daily life, most protestant churches tend to be silent on the subject. Is it too Roman Catholic for reformed sensibilities? Perhaps, it just seems too out-dated a subject for serious conversation in church, even with the attempted updating both within and beyond the Christian tradition.

There were whispered groans in one Presbyterian church when the pastor suggested the seven deadly sins as a sermon series and companion adult education series to begin the program year. What can we do with that? What anthems does the choir sing? And yet, as the series got underway, the topic of gluttony turned to issues of control, and the world food crisis brought forth articles that parishioners had read deposited in the pastor’s box. Prayer requests changed and focused in on the plight of those who live with food anxiety. Families suffering alongside a bulimic daughter started showing up in adult education. As this was happening in the fall of 2008 with

the economic crisis careening out of control, conversations about greed and pride took on greater depth, and scripture texts were brought into the conversation started by the series, but by no means brought to closure. A stroll through the narthex of the church after a Sunday focused—in pulpit and classroom—on lust brought forth the most interesting snippets of conversation. Things that are never spoken of in Presbyterian churches were being discussed in mixed company.

Using the prism of the seven deadly sins, scriptural texts are offered to deepen the conversation. What does it mean to deal with gluttony in the context of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:2-21), but also the Christological hymn of Philippians 2? Can we go deeper into our own choices for living in the light of the lust that permeates the account of Bathsheba's treatment by David (2 Samuel 11:1-15) and also Jesus' Sermon on the Mount proclamation about adultery (Matthew 5:27-30)? Can we attempt a fresh discussion about greed in the midst of our own economic portfolio meltdowns by the light of the rich man who presented himself to Jesus who went away shocked and grieving (Mark 10:17-31), but also by David's full-throated thanksgiving and praise to God for God's abundance (1 Chronicles 29:10-17)?

Whatever the crisis and uncertainty of the moment, a crucial part of faithful living is to constantly develop the resources—within ourselves and in our communities of faith—to name our struggles and bring the light of the Gospel to shine on those challenges in ways that move us forward. The Seven Deadly Sins lay bare our idols of distraction, illusion, control, and isolation. Speaking then into the room when the people of God are gathered allows for freedom and for power to go up against gluttony, sloth, lust, wrath, pride, greed, and envy in whatever contemporary dressing they come to us—and seek together God's deeper truth and hope.

Mark 10:35-45 and Matthew 6:25-34

When Paul Krugman was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics, Maureen Dowd, his New York Times Op-Ed columnist colleague was quoted as saying: "Around here, we usually just compete for the 'most emailed story of the week'—but the Nobel Prize? How am I to compete with that? Not that I'm envious, of course," she quickly added."²

I have a friend whom I attend a baseball game with at least once a year. When I go to a baseball game, I try to get a ticket on the street, never paying more than face value. Once, when my friend and I were trying to get into a game in Los Angeles to see the Dodgers, I managed to get us tickets three rows behind the Dodger dugout. When we walked to our seats, I moved into our row, thrilled by the view. I'd never had tickets three rows from the field! My friend, however, kept walking, down to the first row, the one where you can see the players spit between innings...and he looked back at me and said, "I've always wanted to sit here—do you think we can sneak down here and sit so we can have better seats?"

Sometimes we envy the things other people have: I raise this in so public a forum, but two of you—at least two of you—there may be more—but two of you (you know who you are) are actively leading me into temptation. The two of you have iPhones. I see you at meetings. All I see is your iPhone. All I can think about is your iPhone. I'm so...*envious*.

Envy can come at us from all sorts of angles, but I think envy is heightened at least four times a year, when any of us receive that petri dish of envy—the quarterly college

alumni magazine. Every college alumni magazine I know has a section called “Class Notes.” In these pages, you can read about all your classmates and what they’ve been up to lately. It’s always interesting to me that these notes never say something like, “Jim reports he’s had a hard time this past year. His marriage broke up, and he has been in rehab,” or, “Susan has been treated for depression over the last six months but is doing better now.”... No, that’s not how these work. This is the place for promotions, achievements, success, and fame to be on display.

So, I read that Malcolm has just been promoted to CEO of his company that builds industrial elevators and is rehabbing a home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Or, Kerri is now the US Attorney in North Dakota and was just nominated for a seat on the Federal Court. It doesn’t matter that I don’t want to work with industrial elevators (though the house on the Eastern Shore sounds nice). It doesn’t matter than I’m not a lawyer and don’t want to live in North Dakota. All of a sudden, I read this and I feel...*envy*!

Maybe it’s just that I remember them in college. They weren’t that special, were they? So now I make the snap judgment that somehow they are *unworthy* of the fame and fortune? Even though I am perfectly happy with the course of life—maybe it’s just the enticement of a road not taken? Maybe it is that home on the Eastern Shore? I don’t know...but just like that—I am swimming in *envy*!

Although we might want to regard envy as a mere human foible, there is a good reason to take it more seriously. For one thing, it’s one of the few deadly sins that has a direct counterpart in the Ten Commandments — “Do not covet.” Murder, adultery, and theft are things that we *do*. Envy is, like many of the other Seven, something we *feel*. That doesn’t lessen the seriousness, though: to think or feel is to *do it*, Jesus said, when he equated lustful thoughts with adulterous acts. Matters of the heart matter. Our dispositions and inclinations are, at least to Jesus, as significant as our actions.³

(By the way, I can see that some of these seven might be fun for a while. A good day of gluttony, or a little lust—it might fun for a moment. But *envy*? Who enjoys envy—even for a minute. It’s miserable.) But it goes deeper than that. Contrary to what some might think, Christians regard desire as good. We believe that God has created humanity with restless hearts, imbuing us with an insatiable desire that can only be satisfied and find rest in the arms of the God who created us. Desire is good. Envy, however, is poisoned desire. It’s what happens when, failing to alight on the true object who is the source of our deepest desire—God—we consume everything else that we can get our hands on.

Things, people, relationships, achievement—we’ll try anything as a substitute for God. Often, the most well-lit shopping aisle for such substitutes is whatever *you* have. Like our text this morning. Closeness to Jesus? Looks good. “Hey Jesus, how about one of us on your right hand, one of us on your left? Great seats—right next to the dugout, er, next to the Son of God.” That looks like a great perk, ignoring the *cost* of discipleship, the *call* to serve. That’s the thing with envy—it never has the right tone or the proper perspective on whatever it is going after. It’s always a distortion that promises more than it ever delivers. Certainly, there is an element of twisted competition in envy. It takes two to envy. H.L. Menken once said that, in America, contentment is knowing that you make \$10 a week more than your brother-in-law.

When Jesus told us to “love your enemies,” or even to “love your neighbor,” his teaching was nowhere more against our inclination. Envy makes even our good

friends into our competitors, our enemies, at least in our own minds. If I didn't have a neighbor—someone whom I can observe in proximity and lay alongside my life with their iPhones and homes on the Eastern Shore—then I would have no object of envy. To be human is to be in community and to be in community is to be in hierarchy, a pecking order in which one constantly positions and repositions oneself in relationship to others. Some have found it surprising that *hate* is not listed among the Seven Deadly Sins.

Hate seems so much more robust and vigorous than envy. Think of envy, in its fully developed form, as a sort of refined, subtle form of hate. Envy is less obviously sinful than crude, public hate, but it can be no less deadly. Twisted desire, jealousy, competition, scorekeeping, hate—all help us here, but I think the word that comes closest to fully describing envy is *sadness*. The thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas looks upon envy as a sort of sorrow,⁴ saying, “The object both of charity and of Envy is our neighbor’s good, but by contrary movements, since charity rejoices in our neighbor’s good, while Envy *grieves* over it.”

Aquinas described envy as that sin of constantly wishing that things were other than they are with your life. Is there a better word than *sad* to describe going through every day wishing your life was other, saying “if only...if only...if only...” If that is not utter sadness, I don’t know what it is.

But that really describes all seven deadly sins. These are not “trap door” sins—you get caught bursting with pride and you’re sent down a chute to eternal punishment. It’s not that you display some wrath and you get zapped by God, or a slothful day finds you left in the dust by God. There is such *sadness* in the heart of God when we get caught in lust or gluttony or greed...because we get so lost, so far from happiness, so far from who we were created, in JOY, to be. *Gluttony...Lust...Sloth*—all lead us into distraction and have us chasing an illusion of what truly satisfies us, but never really does. *Greed...Pride...Wrath...* and yes, *envy*—deceive us that we can control our life. Each leads us to obliterate community.

If we are going to score our life by these sins and how they get us off track, we have no hope of joy. But of course, that is not the only option. Because the God who created us has made it abundantly clear that God does not keep score. Paul’s “score-keeping” had it this way:

Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends, but more than that, God’s love saves us. It does not leave us in our sad state of jockeying for position and vainly trying to play every angle. It lifts us out of all our distraction and all our illusion and all our fake control and all our isolation that destroys community, and it finds us and brings us home and knows us through and through and yes, loves us without condition.

In his book, *A Whole New Life*,⁵ Reynolds Price describes how, right after he

learned that he had a terrible form of spinal cancer, he began to dream each night. The third night was worst, but that dream finally stated its point with brute candor.

I was walking the seventy miles from Durham to Warren County, North Carolina—to find my birthplace. . . . When I found the house and searched the rooms, it proved abandoned and sadly empty. But once I was outside again in the dark, a small young black-haired man appeared like a cringing demon, writhing around me in a sinuous dance; then saying “Now you must learn the bat dance.” I suddenly knew that his bat dance was death, death from cancer. Still dreaming, I summoned my strength to refuse him. Weeks later I’d preserve that third nightmare in a poem:

I will walk all night. I will not die of concern.
Nothing will make me dance in that dark.
I will walk all night. I will not die of concern.
Nothing will make me dance in that dark.

Reynolds Price did not play on the pride of his reputation to prevail. He did not shrink in sloth and give up on his life. And he did not simmer in envy—looking in veiled hate at everyone around him who didn’t have cancer, everyone he met who wasn’t trapped in a wheelchair. He was not trapped and he was not envious. He was God’s, and God’s love was everything. You are not trapped in the darkness, the trap, the sadness of the Seven Deadly Sins. You never have to be trapped in distraction or illusion or control or isolation.

At the very end of Reynolds Price’s account of his illness, his pain, his near death, he expressed his amazement that he had not abandoned God, and God had not abandoned him. He expressed his astonishment that even cancer, even confinement in a wheelchair, even a near death sentence of prognosis, still found him living in hope. He concluded the book this way: “I sleep long nights with few hard dreams, and now I’ve outlived both my parents. Even my handwriting looks very little like the script of the man I was (before my illness). Cranky as it is, it’s taller, more legible, with more air and stride. It comes down the arm of a grateful man.” Exactly.

Set free from the traps of greed and envy and all the rest, all God desires is our gratitude. Our flat out wonder and awe and thanksgiving that, with God, through God, in God, we are free and we are whole, and we are loved.

And so, to all the sins we call “deadly,” we say,

We will walk all night,
We will not die of concern.
Nothing will make us dance in that dark.

Notes

1 http://www.forbes.com/2008/02/14/cities-sinful-lander-forbeslife-cx_lm_0213sinful_land.html2345

2 Maureen Dowd, *New York Times* blog, October 15, 2008.

3 William Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), 49ff.

4 Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, II, 2, Q.36.

5 Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, (New York: Scribners Press, 1995).