

The Seven Deadly Sins

The seven deadly sins, also known as the capital sins or cardinal vices, are really attitudes that underlie sins, whether mortal or venial. They do not belong to an additional category of sin. Rather, they are the sins that are seen as the origin ("capital" comes from the Latin *caput*, head) of the other sins. They were first identified by Saint John Cassian (360-435) and refined by Pope Saint Gregory the Great (540-604). While the list itself is not strictly biblical, the Bible proscribes all seven. Their listing is meant more as a help for spiritual progress than a doctrine. It provides keys to understanding our faults and the actions that result, and a framework for self knowledge. If we understood how they factor into who we have become we would understand much more about ourselves and our effect on others.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was a Catholic layman who wrote the epic Italian poem, "The Divine Comedy." Dante considered the seven deadly sins as offenses against love, and grouped them accordingly:

Perverted Love – Pride, Envy, Anger/Wrath
Insufficient Love – Sloth
Excessive Love of Earthly Goods – Greed/Avarice, Gluttony, Lust

This is insightful, for the seven deadly sins are called "deadly" because they wound love, and therefore do great harm to our relationship with God and others. One can interpret 1 John 2:15-17 in this light. The inspired author warns against the things of this world that are opposed to God, distorting our love and undermining our fidelity to Him: "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:16). Are not the seven deadly sins lust of the flesh (gluttony, lust, sloth), lust of the eyes (greed), and pride of life (pride, envy, anger)?

Speaking of the seven "capital sins" Saint Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) says "it is not then the gravity of the vice in itself that makes it capital but rather the fact that it gives rise to many other sins." They can lead to other offenses against God, destroy sanctifying grace in the soul and eventually harden our hearts to the good.



Pride is an unrestrained and improper appreciation of our own worth. It is an excessive belief in one's own abilities that interferes with the individual's recognition of the grace of God. As distinct from the holy recognition that one's self-worth is grounded in God and His goodness, pride designates the acceptance of glory, attention, credit, and honour that is self-centred and perverse. It can manifest itself as a desire to be more important or attractive than others. Pride has been called the chief sin from which all others arise and is traditionally seen as the cause of Lucifer's fall from grace. It causes one to turn away from dependence on God and fosters a sinful self-reliance – arrogating to oneself what is really God's. Pride is also known as vainglory.



Envy is characterized by pain and misery when one sees another prosper. It is contrary to the law of love which rejoices in the good fortune of others. Saint Thomas Aquinas described envy as “sorrow for another's good.” He said that those guilty of it take “pleasure at another's misfortune” for they resent that another person has something they perceive themselves as lacking, and wish the other person to be deprived of it. Dante thus defined envy as “love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs.” Envy removes joy for it is the opposite of gratitude, and gratitude is the seedbed of joy.



Gluttony is over-indulgence or over-consumption of food or drink. It is derived from the Latin *gluttire*, meaning to gulp down or swallow. Traditionally theologians have classified as gluttonous not only those who eat too much but those with an excessive craving for delicacies of food and drink, along with a fastidiousness about such. Saint Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) explained that *“it is not a fault to feel pleasure in eating: for it is, generally speaking, impossible to eat without experiencing the delight which food naturally produces. But it is a defect to eat, like beasts, through the sole motive of sensual gratification, and without any reasonable object”* (*The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*).



Lust, Aquinas noted, “is about the greatest of pleasures, and these absorb the mind more than any others.” Sexual desire is not sinful in itself. The willful seeking of sexual satisfaction alone or with another solely as the means to that end is sinful. Lust is primarily associated with an inordinate desire for carnal pleasures that inclines one to perceive others as mere objects solely for personal gratification, or that inclines one to perceive sex acts as solely for pleasure and thus legitimizing things like masturbation, fornication and adultery. It puts sexual pleasure above the greater good of love, God’s designs, the well-being of a person or society, and one’s own or another’s eternal destiny. Lust attacks the ability to love, which is at the very heart of what it means to be human. In his *Inferno* Dante represented the unrepentant souls of this sin as blown about in restless hurricane-like winds, symbolic of their own lack of self control to their lustful passions in earthly life.



Anger (or wrath) is a complex passion. As an emotion it is not sinful for we cannot completely control emotions. We become responsible for our anger when the will directs it. It is characterized by the desire to redress some real or perceived evil that has been committed. Aquinas said anger is “good in so far as it is regulated by reason, whereas it is evil if it set the order of reason aside” (2, 158, ad 2). Anger becomes sinful when the uncontrolled desire for revenge enters and leads to offenses against justice and charity. It is manifested in the individual who spurns love and opts instead for fury or hatred. The vice of anger gives rise to indignation, the loss of interior tranquility, harsh speech, and quarrels. Dante described wrath as “love of justice perverted to revenge and spite.” Anger can be pointed internally as well as externally.



Greed (or avarice or covetousness) is the immoderate desire for material wealth or gain, ignoring the realm of the spiritual. The object a person is greedy about need not be evil, but the issue lies in the way one regards the object, placing inappropriate value on it. Dante portrayed penitent's of this sin in Purgatory being bound and laid face down on the ground for having concentrated too much on earthly things. Like lust and gluttony it is a sin of excess – in this case an excessive desire to obtain or retain earthly possessions. It puts a premium on possessing what is less than ourselves (things, objects) rather than being possessed by what is greater than ourselves (God and His attributes).



Sloth is often described simply as the sin of laziness. While this is part of the manifestation of sloth, the central problem with sloth as a capital sin is spiritual laziness. Sometimes called *acedia* (Greek: not caring), sloth is a kind of sorrow or apathy for the spiritual good that renders one unwilling to do the good that one can. Aquinas described sloth as an “uneasiness of the mind,” being a progenitor for lesser sins such as restlessness and instability. Dante defined it as being the “failure to love God with all one's heart, all one's mind and all one's soul.” The modern view highlights its contrary virtue of zeal or diligence and thus sees it as representing the failure to utilize one's talents and gifts. This makes it more a sin of omission.

Contrary Virtues

There are contrary virtues to the seven deadly sins. A traditional list is derived from the *Psychomachia* (“Battle for the Soul”), an epic poem written by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-c.410). The practicing of these contrary virtues strengthens one against temptations toward the capital vices: *humility* against pride, *kindness* against envy, *abstinence* against gluttony, *chastity* against lust, *patience* against anger, *liberality* against greed, and *diligence* against sloth.

Contemporary Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft (b. 1937) contrasts the seven deadly sins with the eight beatitudes preached by Christ (Mt 5:1-12). “Pride is self-assertion, selfishness; *poverty of spirit* is humility, selflessness. Avarice is greed, the centrifugal reach to grab and keep the world's goods for oneself; *mercy* is the centripetal reach to give, to share the world's goods with others, even the undeserved. Envy resents another's happiness; *mourning* shares another's unhappiness. Wrath wills harm and destruction; *meeekness* refuses to harm and *peacemaking* prevents destruction. Sloth refuses to exert the will toward the good, toward the ideal; *hunger and thirst for righteousness* does just that. Lust dissipates and divides the soul, desiring every attractive body; *purity of heart* centers and unifies the soul, desiring God alone. Gluttony needs to consume an inordinate amount of worldly goods; *being persecuted* is being deprived of even ordinate necessities” (*Back to Virtue*, 1986).

Source: Various websites including deadlysins.com, Wikipedia, aquinasandmore.com, and whitestonejournal.com