

7 on Sin

Rethinking the
Seven Deadly Sins

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Foreword by John Norton



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You won't find the seven deadly sins listed anywhere in the Bible. It was Pope Gregory the Great who came up with them back in the sixth century AD. Why seven? I suspect for no other reason than the fact that this numeral has always held a religious fascination. The original list of sins included sadness, which was later changed to sloth. The other six are: pride, avarice (greed), envy, wrath (anger), lust and gluttony. The seven deadly sins became part of Roman Catholic teaching in the 13th century, the Church preferring to call them "capital vices" rather than sins, since they aren't in themselves sins, but rather personal vices that led a person to sin. The use of these seven sins as a useful framework for enquiry and reflection has survived through the ages, crossing from Catholicism into Protestantism and Evangelicalism, as well as popular culture.

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Foreword

Seven is a Hollywood thriller from the mid-1990's featuring Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman who play detectives hunting down a serial killer. The killer chooses seven victims who represent egregious examples of each of the Seven Deadly Sins, then proceeds to hand out horrific punishment to each in turn. As the killer works his way through the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, killing each "sinner" in corresponding fashion, the two detectives are able to guess his next move. While I don't recommend the movie to you, I do recommend quiet reflection on the Seven Deadly Sins and their influence in your life.

The tagline from the movie's trailer drove home the point that evil must be fought, quoting Ernest Hemingway who said: "*The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.*" I, for one, believe the second half.

There is merit in practicing the discipline of contemplation, reflecting on each of the Seven Deadly Sins, one at a time. Ancient Christians recognized that evil stemmed from certain basic instincts—or sins—that pervade human nature. It is said that the list of the Seven Deadly Sins (or Capital Sins, as they were also called) dates back to at least Pope Gregory I of the sixth century. The list of Seven Deadly Sins was in common usage in Medieval Europe and preached against with great fervour. However, sin is not so popular today as a topic of discussion, in or out of the church.

Unfortunately, self-delusion is a common human tendency, and so few will admit to being a captive to one or more of the Seven Deadly Sins. Perhaps it is the one sin we think we have no trouble with that needs our special attention, the one sin we have rationalized away and so perhaps it has a grip on our lives. It is that sin on which we should focus first in our time of contemplation.

Lest you lose hope, know that the early Christians also taught a corresponding Seven Virtues, which if practiced, will tame and diminish the influence of the Seven Deadly Sins in our lives. Let them be your focus:

Purity – opposes lust
Self-Control – opposes gluttony
Kindness – opposes anger
Satisfaction – opposes envy
Humility – opposes pride
Diligence – opposes sloth
Generosity – opposes greed

I commend this booklet and its author to you.

In the season of Lent, 2007

John Norton,
London, Ontario.

gluttony 1

Eat and Drink... for Tomorrow They Die!

“Wise temperance of the stomach is a door to all virtues. Restrain the stomach, and you will enter Paradise. But if you please and pamper your stomach, you will hurl yourself over the precipice of bodily impurity, into the fire of wrath and fury, you will coarsen and darken your mind, and in this way you will ruin your powers of attention and self-control.”

Ignatius Brianchanov, 19th-century Russian Bishop

I recently watched the film *Super Size Me*. It is one of a relatively recent spate of first-person, socially conscious documentaries. The hero of the film, producer and director Morgan Spurlock, tackles obesity in America through the paradigm of fast-food culture—specifically, the McDonald’s corporation. After a check up by doctors (who continue to monitor him throughout the experiment), Morgan embarks on a month-long “study” in which he exercises as little as possible and eats all his meals—three times a day—at McDonald’s. Interspersed with interesting facts and statistics, humorous tangents and speculative conclusions, this essentially is the plot. Morgan inevitably gains weight (over 24 pounds) and sustains damage to his kidneys as well as his relationship with his girlfriend, a vegan chef. Before watching *Super Size Me*, I had eaten a huge meal. As the end credits rolled and I made my way out of the theatre, I admittedly felt rather queasy. So I guess you can say that it was an effective documentary. Then again, maybe I just have a weak and susceptible mind. Consider some of Morgan’s facts, though:

- Each day, 1 in 4 Americans visits a fast-food restaurant.
- In 1972, Americans spent 3 billion dollars a year on fast food—today they spend 110 billion dollars annually.
- In order to burn off a super-sized coke, fries and Big Mac, you need to walk for seven hours straight.
- In the U.S., more than 1,000,000 animals per hour are eaten.
- Obesity will soon surpass smoking as the leading cause of premature death in America.
- The World Health Organization has declared obesity a global epidemic.

As always, Canada trails proportionately. I recently heard a talk by the former Minister of Health for Ontario. She stated that the number one health concern in Canada at the moment is obesity among children. Diabetes is on the upswing, as are a number of other weight-related conditions. Experts are blaming sedentary lifestyles, inordinate amounts of TV viewing and computer usage, and lousy diets. In short, it seems that our children are under exercising and overeating. If the health experts are worried, should not the rest of us be?

But there are no real surprises here. North Americans by and large are overweight. Does this mean we are gluttons, though? The word “glutton” comes from the Latin *gluttire*, meaning to “swallow or gulp down,” and can be applied to overindulgence in anything. Although used to refer to various situations (as in, “he is a glutton for punishment”—a familiar refrain from my own childhood) and, like many matters in the (evangelical) church, often over-spiritualised, the word continues to be primarily associated with excessive eating.

As a sin, gluttony is described as “an inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires”—or more simply, “to

overindulge.” The main issue here is that it goes against reason, “darkening the mind” and “acting against the powers of attention and self-control” (Brianchanov). Thomas Aquinas said of gluttony: “*Gluttony denotes, not only desire of eating or drinking, but an inordinate desire...leaving the order of reason, wherein the good of moral virtue consists.*” (Summa Theologiae 2,148, ad 1)

The issue is the defiance of reason and the willful disregard for necessity in order to slake one’s appetites. Gluttony is a sin of the flesh that reduces people to the level of animals (though, to be honest, few animals will overeat in the way many humans will).

As an interesting aside, according to the Catholic encyclopedia, it can also be applied to spiritual matters. Citing St. John of the Cross’ classic work *The Dark Night of the Soul*, there is a brief examination of something termed “spiritual gluttony”: “*The disposition of those who, in prayer and other acts of religion, are always in search of sensible sweetness; they are those who **will feel and taste God, as if he were palpable and accessible to them not only in Communion but in all their other acts of devotion.** This, he declares, is a very great imperfection and productive of great evils.*”

I wonder what St. John would have made of the Toronto Christian Airport Fellowship, or many of the other charismatic-tinged, emotionally charged, experientially focused worship contexts that I increasingly find myself party to in these post-modern, post-denominational times? But, I digress.

There is little to be gained by discussing general concepts. It is more productive to charge away at specific targets. So we’ll stay with the definition of gluttony as excessive eating. Caution needs to be exercised here and a lesson taken from Tony Campolo, who, in his 1987 book *Seven Deadly Sins* starts off his chapter on gluttony by dealing with the arrogant insensitivity of those who harangue overweight Christians, ignoring the fact that there

are often complex factors contributing to the problem of obesity, ranging from chemical imbalances to matters of metabolism. It is not always simple indiscipline or sinful gluttony binges that is to blame. Overweight people are often plagued by guilt, depression and self-image problems. They would prefer not to be overweight.

I am certainly not the one to stand in judgment or condemn those who are overweight. By nature, I am chronically undisciplined and wired with an addictive obsessive/compulsive temperament. If it weren't for the fortune of having been born into a Salvation Army family (read: completely tee-totalling), there is every possibility that I would have been a hopeless alcoholic and/or a profligate drug user. As far as my metabolism goes, I lucked out there, too. Running to fat has never been an issue. If I were prone to putting on weight due to poor eating habits, I would likely be obese. In each case, my relative trimness has little to do with any personal virtues. In my eating habits, I am often a glutton. In my predilection to indulge my physical wants over my reasoning of what is necessary and needed, I sin as much as anyone. In his book *Freedom of Simplicity*, Richard Foster suggests that the only way to counter the militant gluttony and consumerism of Western culture (for what is materialism and consumerism but gluttony?) is by nurturing a "theology of enough."

I know numerous overweight people. I also know some *really* overweight people. And true enough, among the latter are those whose condition is largely a result of a chemical imbalance or other medical factors beyond their control and little to do with a lack of discipline. For many of my overweight acquaintances, however, there actually might be some sin involved. The blanket assertion that "most people can't help it" is actually not true. Most can help it. But the issue here, at the end of the day, is not really about how overweight (i.e. obviously gluttonous) a person is. The result of gluttony may be more apparent in some people than in

others, but both persons, fat and thin, may sin in the same way.

The extant situation is really rather simple. Six million children under the age of five die every year as a result of hunger (to break it down, this means over 115,000 every week, over 16,000 every day, almost 700 children every hour). Add to this those who die from hunger-related illnesses and diseases (diarrhoea most prevalent), and the number goes up to about 30,000 a day for children (that is just over 1000 children who die in the time it takes you to eat a Big Mac). Add to that teenagers and adults, and the situation becomes truly ridiculous. However, this terrible stuff mostly happens over *there*.

Meanwhile, over *here* (and this is where it gets really weird), there are people who spend hundreds of dollars monthly on health clubs in order to stay slim. Weight clinics and courses are ubiquitous. Every year a new revolutionary diet is invented. With yawning regularity, movie stars check themselves into medical centres in order to deal with various eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (gluttony of a different type). Obesity and weight-related conditions such as diabetes are skyrocketing in the general population. As God looks on our world, he must conclude that the whole lot of us are schizophrenic or suffering from multiple personality disorder.

The reasons why so many people die because of a lack of food are complex. To understand it well would involve a grasp of geo-politics and foreign policy, security issues, weather cycles, migration patterns and a host of other factors. If it were as easy as every overweight person in the West eating only what he/she needs and then sending the money saved to the Sudan or wherever, then this would be one thing. Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

Having said that, as the saying goes, "*Because you can't do everything is no reason to do nothing.*" Gluttony is a sin that in many

ways has become socially acceptable, tolerated and accommodated and even encouraged within the church. When it is juxtaposed with the scandal of world hunger, then it becomes a sin. I believe some sins make God sad and some make him angry. I reckon this is one of the “angry” ones.

We evangelicals tend to belabour certain sins and completely ignore others. Gluttony is one that we ignore. We eat and drink and often make merry, while people are dying. Are they dying because of our gluttony? Not directly, maybe. But indirectly, yes. I believe it is called being an “accessory to a crime.” “Am I my brother’s keeper” is as poor a defence in 2007 as it was when Cain first used it.