

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

The Seven Deadly Sins are also known as *cardinal sins*, derived from the Latin *cardinalis* (“chief,” “essential,” or “principal”), from *cardo* (genitive *cardinis*), meaning “that on which something turns or depends,” and *cardin* (“hinge of a door, pivot, that on which something turns; thus principal, chief”). Cardinal sins are the chief sins on which all other sins hinge. They are also called *capital sins* (Saunders, 2013), derived from the Latin *caput* (“head”), because they begin in the head.

Preferring the word “vice” rather than “sin,” Thomas of Aquinas wrote, “A capital vice is that which has an exceedingly desirable end so that in his desire for it, a man goes on to the commission of many sins, all of which are said to originate in that vice as their chief source” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 153, 4). The word *vice* is derived from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning “defect or failing.” These terms are similar to the “defects of character” used in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: “To avoid falling into confusion over the names these defects should be called, let’s take a universally recognized list of major human failings – the Seven Deadly Sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953, p. 48).

Evagrius of Ponticus (345–399) was a Christian monk who was one of the most influential theologians in the late fourth-century church. In 375 CE, he developed a list of eight evil thoughts or terrible temptations, from which he believed all sinful behavior originates. The list was intended to serve a diagnostic purpose: to help others identify the process of temptation, their own strengths and weaknesses, and the remedies available for overcoming temptation. Evagrius stated, “The first thought of all is that of love of self; after this, the eight.” The eight patterns of evil thought are gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, *acedia* [despondency], anger, vainglory, and pride.

Writing two centuries later (590 CE), Pope Gregory I (“Pope St. Gregory the Great”) revised Evagrius’s list to form the more commonly known Seven Deadly Sins, in which *acedia* (despondency) and *tristitia* (sorrow) were combined into the sin of sloth; vainglory was combined with pride, and envy was added to the list. The traditional list of capital sins, as specified by Pope Gregory I include pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

According to the list of Thomas Aquinas, the seven capital vices—pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth—are opposites of the seven heavenly virtues. The deadly sins are considered a form of idolatry-of-self, in which the subjective rules over the objective,

all of which are based on the foundational sin of egocentrism. In contemporary language, a *major vice* is a behavior, habit, or practice that is generally considered immoral, sinful, or taboo in one's culture or society. A *minor vice* refers to a character defect, fault, shortcoming, maladaptive personality trait, or an unhealthy habit.

In Dorothy Sayers' (1955, pp. 65–67) translation, most of the capital sins are defined by Dante Alighieri (c. 1264–1321) as corrupt or perverse versions of love: lust, gluttony, and greed are excessive or disordered love of good things, whereas wrath, envy, and pride are perverted love directed toward other's harm. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Middle English author Geoffrey Chaucer immortalized these capital sins in "The Parson's Tale."

In his book aptly titled *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*, psychologist Robert Sternberg (2002), describes how smart people may be particularly susceptible to certain fallacies in thinking because they have been so rewarded for their intelligence that they lose sight of their humanity. A former president of the American Psychological Association in 2003, Sternberg observed that very smart people—such as professionals, corporate executives, and political leaders—are often very foolish because of flawed thinking. Sternberg (2003, p. 5) uses the term "fallacies in thinking" to describe the blinding effects of egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability.

According to Sternberg, *egocentrism* involves taking into account one's own interests, but not taking into account the interests of others. The fallacy of *omniscience* involves the belief that one knows about everything, when in fact one may only know a lot about a little. The fallacy of *omnipotence* involves the grandiose belief that one is all-powerful and can do whatever one wants to do. Finally, the fallacy of invulnerability involves thinking that one can get away with anything and, in the unlikely event that one gets caught, thinking that one can get out of it.

In his reviews of cases of professional misconduct adjudicated by ethics committees and licensing boards, Doverspike (2015, p. 117) has observed, "These fallacies of thinking lead to arrogance, and arrogance leads to ethical slippage." In the context of capital sins or vices, fallacies of thinking are akin to character defects that can be one's downfall. From a psychological perspective, it is not so much that people are punished *for* their sins, but rather it is that they are punished *by* their sins. Although the concept on sin may seem archaic by contemporary standards, one need only review a few state licensing board cases (e.g., Ebert, 2006) to see concrete examples of the seven deadly sins in action. For example, greed is a major source of ethical violations by psychotherapists. Haas and Malouf (2005) describe how professional practitioners may be vulnerable to a number of ethical problems associated with character virtues that are lacking, such as the absence of discretion, integrity, fidelity, or prudence.

Historian Miranda Twiss (2002) reveals deadly sins gone rampant in her review of the lives of some of the most evil men in history (e.g., the Roman Emperor Nero, Vlad the Impaler, King John, Ivan the Terrible, Attila the Hun, Rasputin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin). Men have no monopoly on evil. Shelley Klein's (2003) review provides details of the lives of 15 women—from jealous daughters to Roman empresses—whose crimes span 2,000 years and include torture, serial murder, infanticide, massacre, and murders for gain or to conceal other crimes.

Cardinal sins are as prominent among the religious as they are among secular and political leaders. In his book *Unholy Popes*, Irish writer Bob Curran (2010) describes 40 perverse prelates who sat in St. Peter's chair. Curran's review includes accounts of popes who resorted to bribery and racketeering, turned the Vatican into a brothel, murdered their opponents, and seemingly broke as many commandments as possible. The seven deadly sins, which are personified throughout the "outrageous stories of papal misbehavior" (the subtitle of Curran's book), are not limited to any single religion. The Catholic clergy sexual misconduct "seems no different statistically than the rest of the population, perhaps lower than in some organizations" (Smith, 2017, p. 221). Whereas the Catholic Church has released detailed data about its internal problems, little or no comparative information is reported by Protestant, Evangelical, or non-denominational churches.

In his research and comparative religious studies, Charles Kimball (2002) describes five warning signs of how any religion can become dangerous. Although every religious tradition has elements that tend toward rigidity, authentic religious truth claims are never as inflexible and exclusive as some of their most zealous adherents insist. The founders of the major world religions—as recognized by their most observant adherents rather than their opponents—reflected humility, compassion, and kindness rather than arrogance, pride, and wrath. Kimball distinguishes between *authentic religious claims*, which are inherent in most religions, and *absolute truth claims*, which can lead to disastrous consequences for all involved. Declaring war "holy" is a sure sign of corrupt religion. At the center of authentic religion, according to Kimball, one *always* finds the promise of peace, which includes both an inner peace for the adherent and a requirement to seek peaceful coexistence with the rest of creation and humanity.

The Seven Deadly Sins

This list includes the seven deadly sins and examples of how they can manifest in our daily lives and work. Some examples are taken from observations in academic settings and practices of mental health professionals. Listed in what has become a somewhat standard order, pride is always considered the primary capital sin.

1. Pride derives from the Latin *superbia* (pride) or *vanagloria* (vain glory or vanity, in the contemporary narcissistic sense). Pride involves excessive admiration or boasting of oneself. In his classification, Thomas Aquinas lists pride first—because it is the source of all sins. When someone is completely full of it, honoring only his own will, pride is said to be “complete.” A person with complete pride makes himself a false god, and self-worship becomes the worst a form of idolatry. Arrogance is the enemy of spirituality.

Pride is the downfall of those who think of themselves as powerful or omnipotent. As stated in the *Book of Proverbs*, “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). The phrase *haughty spirit* is often translated as a spirit that is arrogantly superior and disdainful. By whatever name it is called, arrogance can permeate a culture and society as well. A culture that worships itself cultivates a sense

of entitlement in its members. At best, self-interest manifests itself as individualism or “What’s in it for me?” (Kelly, 2002, p. 17). At worst, self-inflation reveals the ugly face of pathological narcissism. The co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous states, “It is not by accident that pride heads the procession. For pride, leading to self-justification, and always spurred by conscious or unconscious fears, is the basic breeder of most human difficulties, the chief block to true progress” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services (1953, pp. 48-49).

- egocentrism
- sense of entitlement
- intellectual smugness or snobbery
- boasting or bragging about oneself
- putting others down by shaming them
- engaging in false advertising
- externalizing blame onto other people
- avoiding asking for help from others
- self-pity is a disguised form of pride
- inflated sense of self-importance (i.e., narcissism)
- verbally bullying others as a way of acting out one’s own unrecognized shame
- being inflexible, rigid, or stubborn (e.g., “It’s my way or the highway.”)
- absolutistic thinking, such as when one’s beliefs are equated with reality (i.e., “If I think it’s so, then it’s so.”)
- giving advice to someone when it has not been solicited (i.e., “I know best.”)
- judging others (i.e., which assumes an attitude of self-appointed superiority)

- exaggeration of academic degrees or professional credentials
- listing an institutional, professional, or university affiliation for purposes of self-aggrandizement
- accepting testimonials from former clients or patients
- listing on one's vita or résumé a degree that has not been conferred
- listing on one's automated email signature a degree that has not been conferred
- citing ideas of others without proper attribution or citation (i.e., plagiarism)
- listing vanity board credentials on one's résumé, website, or Facebook page
- listing a degree that is not in the field of competence in which one is practicing
- Licensing Board examples: incredulity at being investigated, blaming a client for one's own behavior or misconduct
- Social media example: Instagram

2. **Greed** derives from the Latin *avaritia* (avarice, covetousness). Avarice is "the inordinate love of having possessions or riches" (Prümmer, 1957). It involves an excessive acquisition of money, status, or power. Greed can become an obsession with acquiring, having, or hoarding more—yet more is never enough. Greed can also take the form of being *miserly* (being stingy or unwilling to share with others)—which is not the same as being *thrifty* (using money and resources carefully and not

wastefully)—with money, time, or other resources. It can involve doing only what will benefit ourselves—rather than others. Greed can also make us blind and indifferent to the needs of those who are less fortunate. Greed can distort our attributions, such as when we attribute our fortunes to our own efforts and we attribute the misfortunes of others to their laziness.

Greed can also manifest as a fear that we will not get what we want or that someone will take what we already have. In this sense, greed is at the core of *envy* (the resentful desire to have what others have) and *jealousy* (the resentful anxiety that someone will take what I have). From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, the two prototypical covert self-statements are as follows: (1) "I want what you have and I resent you for having it" (envy) and (2) "I fear you want what I have and I resent you for wanting it" (jealousy). Envy involves two people, whereas jealousy involves three.

- overbooking appointments in order to increase billable hours
- "padding" supervision log by reporting indirect hours as direct service hours
- diagnosing for dollars (i.e., pathologizing a normal condition as a mental disorder)
- diagnostic up-coding (e.g., diagnosing adjustment disorder rather than a partner relational problem) so that a

session will be covered by third party reimbursement

- diagnostic down-coding (e.g., diagnosing adjustment disorder rather than major depressive disorder) so that a client will continue to come for sessions rather than dropping out due to pejorative diagnosis
- fraudulent billing (e.g., coding a conjoint session as 60-minute individual psychotherapy session [90837] rather than as 45-minute individual psychotherapy session [90834]) so the 45-minute session will be paid at a higher rate (aka, insurance fraud)
- fraudulent billing (e.g., coding a conjoint or couple session as 60-minute individual psychotherapy session [90837] rather than as family psychotherapy with patient present [90847]) because 90847 is not a covered benefit (aka, insurance fraud)
- Licensing Board examples: failure to explain fees in advance, engaging in insurance fraud, overcharging a client
- Social media example: LinkedIn

3. Wrath derives from the Latin *ira* (rage, anger, rabies). It involves a strong and non-cooperative response to a perceived hurt, provocation, or threat. In contrast to *righteous anger*, which involves perceiving an injustice and a desire to restore justice, *wrongful anger* involves “the inordinate desire for revenge” (Prümmer, 1957). In this sense, wrongful anger offends

restorative justice by seeking revenge. St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a lay member of the Dominican Order, once observed, “There is no sin or wrong that gives a man such a foretaste of Hell in this life as anger and impatience.”

A more subtle and silent form of wrath is resentment. Resentment is a multilayered a mixture of anger, bitterness, and disappointment at having been treated unfairly. It is like taking a poison in the hope that it will kill the other person. Its covert toxic effects can be as deadly as more overt forms of rage. In the words of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, “Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p. 64).

- self-righteous anger
- emotional dysregulation
- aggressive displays of anger
- maintaining a sense of irritability
- expressions of contempt to a person
- passive aggressive or sarcastic speech
- displaying impatience or hurry-sickness
- harboring or holding on to resentments
- certain types of depression (e.g., turning anger inward)
- acting out a loss of temper (e.g., raising one’s voice in anger, exhibiting road rage)

- inappropriate anger (e.g., anger that is out of proportion to the stimulus)
- having unrealistic expectations that become premeditated resentments
- whining in a passive or submissive manner rather than being assertive in a respectful manner
- engaging in passive-aggressive behaviors (e.g., not returning emails or phone calls, arriving late to meetings)
- complaining or gossiping about a person rather than speaking directly to the person
- displaying irritability or trying to control another person's behavior
- Licensing Board examples: being aggressive toward a client (assault), raising one's voice inappropriately, using cursing or profanity with a client
- Social media example: Twitter

4. Envy is derived from the Latin *invidia* (insatiable desire). Aristotle defined envy as an emotional pain at the sight of another's good fortune, stirred by "those who have what we ought to have." It occurs when a person lacks another person's achievement, possession, quality, or skill, and either desires to have it or wishes that the other person not have it (Parrot & Smith, 1993). It is a type of mental greed or sense of entitlement. Envy is a more specific, narrower, and personalized type of greed. That is, whereas greed is a strong desire for possessions, envy is a strong desire for the possessions or success of another

person. In this sense, envy is more personalized whereas greed can be depersonalized.

One of the roots of envy may be low self-esteem, especially from very early unmet childhood needs in which one feels inherently not good enough, lacking, or unworthy. An envious person may thus "compare and despair" and find themselves wanting and falling short. In this sense, envy is a type of self-resentment that is projected onto others. To quote a line from *Courage to Change*, "Envy is nothing more than a hostile form of self-pity" (1992, p. 170).

In Chapter 6 of *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell (1930) considered envy to be the most potent form of unhappiness. The sin of covetousness can include both *envy* (wanting what someone else has) and *jealousy* (anxiety that someone will take what I have). Envy is when I have resentment toward a person because he has what I want. Jealousy is when I have resentment toward another person because he wants what I have. As stated earlier, the two prototypical covert self-statements are as follows: (1) "I want what you have and I resent you for having it" (envy) and (2) "I fear you want what I have and I resent you for wanting it" (jealousy). Whereas jealousy involves three people, envy requires only two.

- (noun) resentful longing aroused by someone else's luck, opportunities, or possessions
- (verb) desire to have a quality, possession, or other attribute belonging to someone else
- resenting a hard-working peer who earns a bonus, pay increase, or royalty income
- schadenfreude, or the experience of pleasure or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of the troubles or failures of another person
- engaging in professional gossip by listening to a peer talk negatively about someone who is not present at the same time and place of the discussion
- attributing a colleague's honest success in an endeavor to dishonest practices
- engaging in slander (oral or verbal) or libel (written or posted comments) about another person
- lodging complaints against others rather than speaking to them directly
- Licensing Board examples: filing a complaint against a competitor because the other practitioner is more successful
- Social media example: Facebook

5. Lust derives from *luxuria* (intense desire) and *fornicatio* (fornication). It is an intense or excessive desire for an object (sexuality, money, power) while already having a significant amount of it. *Luxuria* is based on *want* rather than actual *need*.

One of the worst forms of lust is when it is acted out by someone in a position of power over someone who is vulnerable. Sexual relations in psychotherapy are considered "professional incest" (Bates & Brodsky, 1989). In their survey of 958 patients who had engaged in sexual intimacies with a psychotherapist, researchers Kenneth Pope and Valerie Vetter (1991) found that one-third (32%) of these patients had experienced incest or other sexual abuse as children and 10% had a history of rape.

- lust is an excessive desire, whose goal is gaining pleasure for oneself, which contrasts to passion, which is intense love, enthusiasm, or excitement directed towards another person or activity
- lust is negative demotivating energy, whereas passion is positive motivational energy
- lust is the unrealistic expectation that hedonic pleasures will lead to happiness
- lust is excessive focus on *hedonism* or "If it feels good, do it!" (Kelly, 2002, p. 18)
- overt sexual impropriety expressed by acting out of sexual behavior
- engaging in reaction formation by sexualizing neutral comments of others
- professional voyeurism, which involves seeking information beyond the need to know

- encouraging the confession of sexual secrets, whether in the confessional booth or the psychotherapist's office
- vicarious sexual curiosity expressed, inadvertently or otherwise, by focusing work with sexual trauma patients
- trauma tourists and therapists obsessed with treating sexual addictions
- inappropriate hugging or touching of a client or congregant
- covert sexualized thoughts about another person
- overt sexual impropriety
- sexual boundary violations
- Licensing Board examples: asking inappropriate and sexualized questions without clinical necessity, sexual impropriety involving religious priests or secular priests (i.e., psychotherapists) is the worst form of professional incest
- Social media example: Tinder

6. **Gluttony** derives from *gula* (from Latin *gluttire*, “to gulp or swallow”) means over-indulgence and over-consumption of food, drink, or wealth items—particularly as status symbols. It is especially considered a sin—a major vice—if the excessive desire for food causes it to be withheld from the needy.

St. Thomas Aquinas listed five forms of gluttony: *laute* (eating too expensively), *studiose* (eating too daintily), *nimis* (eating too much), *praepropere* (eating

too soon), and *ardenter* (eating too eagerly). According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (see Broderick, 1986), *ardenter* is often considered the most serious type of gluttony, because it is a passion for a mere earthly pleasure. *Ardenter* can make the sinner eat impulsively, and it can even reduce the goals of life to mere eating and drinking. The classic example of *ardenter* is illustrated by the impulsive Esau who sold his birthright to his twin brother Jacob for a bowl of “that same red pottage” (Genesis 25:30).

The excessive desire and compulsive behavior of withholding food from oneself can be viewed as a type of *reverse gluttony*. Reverse gluttony (Doverspike, 2021) refers to forms of restrictive eating, purging, or self-starvation characteristic of deadly disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Reverse gluttony does not refer to the physically and spiritually healthy practice of fasting for religious purposes.

- eating too much or more than needed
- poor self-management of body weight
- eating during classes or counseling sessions
- skipping meals, which can be a form of reverse gluttony
- drinking coffee or colas during therapy sessions
- bingeing or purging before or after sessions

- process addictions such as pathological gambling (as opposed to social gambling)
- driving while intoxicated, or simply drinking and then driving
- having the scent or odor of alcohol or ketones on one's breath
- using a non-prescribed substance in order to stay alert or focused at work
- alcohol or substance abuse or dependence
- being at work with a withdrawal tremor
- falsifying or forging a prescription
- going to work with a hangover
- Licensing Board examples: driving while intoxicated, practicing a profession with a hangover, falsifying or forging a prescription, substance use
- Social media example: Yelp

7. **Sloth** derives from *acedia* (discouragement) or *socordia* (laziness). Interestingly, sloth is considered to be the only *sin of omission* (*omission* Latin: *omittere*, "to lay aside, to pass over"). It is an act of the omission of desire or performance. In contrast to the other deadly sins that are considered *acts of commission* (i.e., resulting from actions performed), sloth is an act of omission. Technically, an act of omission is considered a sin of omission only if it is committed intentionally, willingly, and willfully not performing a certain action that one can and ought to do (Delany, 1911). In his discussion of Omission, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*,

Joseph Delany (1911) provides more context:

"The degree of guilt incurred by an omission is measured like that attaching to sins of commission, by the dignity of the virtue and the magnitude of the precept to which the omission is opposed as well as the amount of deliberation. In general, according to St. Thomas [Aquinas], the sin of omission consisting as it does in a leaving out of good is less grievous than a sin of commission, which involves a positive taking up with evil. There are, of course, cases in which on account of the special subject matter and circumstances it may happen that an omission is more heinous. It may be asked at what time one incurs the guilt of a sin of omission in case he fails to do something which he is unable to do by reason of a cause for which he is entirely responsible. For instance, if a person fails to perform a duty in the morning as a result of becoming inebriated the previous night [sic]. The guilt is not incurred at the time the duty should be performed because while intoxicated he is incapable of moral guilt. The answer seems to be that he becomes responsible for the omission when having sufficiently foreseen that his neglect will follow upon his intoxication he does nevertheless surrender himself to his craving for liquor" (Delany, 1911, p. 251).

- carelessness, negligence, or laziness
- procrastination of assignments or tasks
- failure to complete assignments or tasks
- failure to review the literature on a topic
- passive dependency on others to do the work or carry the load
- apathy or indifference to one's commitments, duties, or obligations
- neglecting responsibilities (e.g., not replying to emails, missing meetings)
- displaying *citation bias* (i.e., confirmation bias rather than critical analysis)
- *minimalism* or "What is the least I can do?" (Kelly, 2002, p. 19)
- expectations that others will carry the load or do the work, such as committee assignments, group or team projects
- using secondary sources rather than making the effort to access and read the primary sources
- citing or referencing articles without having read them
- allowing others to do all the work on a group project or team assignment
- expecting others to bear the cost of a work assignment that benefits everyone
- failure to complete reports in a timely manner
- *assignment crises*, which is failing to complete an assignment because an "emergency" occurs at the deadline
- making excuses for not meeting deadlines
- failure to review the literature on a topic
- arriving late to class, internship, or work
- arriving late for appointments in the office
- leaving internship or supervised work setting early
- forgetting an assignment or appointment
- using another person's slide deck rather than developing one's own presentation
- Licensing Board examples: professional negligence, use of obsolete or out of date tests or therapy methods, failure to obtain minimal continuing education requirements, failure to maintain competence, forgetting to renew a membership, letting a license lapse, practicing after a license has lapsed or expired
- Social media example: Netflix

Seven Cardinal Virtues

1. Humility (from the Latin *humilitas*) is the virtue that provides a counterbalance to the sin of Pride. In its purest form, humility is reflected in the Latin phrase *ama nesciri*, transliterated as “love to be unknown,” which means “do not seek fame.” Some of us may not ever be humble, but we can all practice acts of humility.

- ✓ willingness
- ✓ being humble
- ✓ foregoing status
- ✓ showing respect to others
- ✓ being flexible and willing
- ✓ letting go of self-interests
- ✓ asking for help from others
- ✓ expressing accurate empathy
- ✓ giving credit where credit is due
- ✓ listening and learning from others
- ✓ letting go of always having to be right
- ✓ accepting—rather than judging—others
- ✓ avoiding boasting, bragging, or blaming
- ✓ admitting it when one has made a mistake
- ✓ letting go of the need to control others
- ✓ learning to listen and letting go of the need to dominate others verbally (i.e., by frequency, intensity, or duration of talking)
- ✓ practicing anonymity can be a way of cultivating humility
- ✓ showing respect by using a professional’s title or rank when referring to the person

- ✓ using one’s influence or power for the good of others rather than for ourselves
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: being respectful of others in authority, being particularly respectful toward those who are vulnerable (e.g., during oral examinations and investigative interviews)

2. Charity (from the Latin *caritas*) or **Generosity** (from the Latin *liberalitas*) provides an answer to Greed. In the *Book of Wisdom*, it is known as The Common Good.

- ✓ being generous
- ✓ providing pro bono services
- ✓ giving anonymously to charities
- ✓ being generous with time on the clock
- ✓ giving without expectation of return
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: striving for excellence in best practices, recognizing others who strive for excellence

3. Patience (from the Latin *patientia*) provides an antidote to the sin of Wrath. In the *Book of Wisdom*, this virtue relates to Prudence. The two Greek words for patience are *makrothumia* (i.e., patience with respect to persons) and *hupomone* (i.e., endurance or putting up with circumstances). Immersed in a culture in which instant gratification is the norm, patience is a long lost art. Patience is measured not so much in

our ability to wait, but rather how we act while we are waiting.

When navigating by spiritual principles, direction is more important than speed. Yet any destination can be reached by the Three Ps—patience, persistence, and perseverance. In the words of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515 – 1582), “Patience attains all that it strives for.”

- ✓ being patient
- ✓ practicing patience
- ✓ waiting without urgency
- ✓ letting go of resentments
- ✓ being comfortable with silence
- ✓ waiting and listening attentively
- ✓ showing endurance and forbearance
- ✓ having realistic expectations about time
- ✓ forgiving others without saying anything (unless asked by them)
- ✓ forgiving myself for judging the actions of others
- ✓ allowing others to experience their choices (i.e., loving detachment)
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: taking one’s time, genuine listening rather than thinking of a rebuttal

4. Gratitude (from the Latin *gratiam*) or **Kindness** (from the Latin *humanitas*) can overcome the sin of Envy. Gratitude is an antidote for the poison of envy. Gratitude not only combats the vice of envy, but practicing gratitude is also one of the keys to

abundant living. Along with of humility, practicing gratitude diminishes a sense of entitlement, shifting our focus from what we think we deserve to a focus on what we already have. Gratitude is required for there to be generosity. Appreciation and gratitude is evidenced in the old adage to “count your blessings.”

Kindness has little or nothing to do with being “nice” but it has everything to do with the Three Cs of being caring, concerned, and compassionate toward others. In the *Book of Wisdom*, kindness is related to Justice.

Speaking of justice, when we feel grateful for someone’s kindness toward us, we are more likely to engage in an act of kindness in return. Our gratitude can have a positive reciprocal effect on the actions of others. In other words, by expressing our gratitude for their kindness, we make it more likely that they will show kindness to others. It is the justice of *mercy*—a gift given by someone acting with compassion to someone who is suffering. Mercy is the gift of compassion toward those in distress, especially when it is within our power to harm or punish them.

Whereas envy focuses us on what we don’t have, gratitude focuses on what we do have. Whereas envy focuses on what others have, kindness focuses on what others do not have—and what we can give to them. Kindness can be

as simple as leaving people a little better than we found them when they crossed our path that day.

- ✓ being kind
- ✓ being thankful
- ✓ being thoughtful
- ✓ practicing gratitude
- ✓ showing compassion
- ✓ being grateful for what I have
- ✓ expressing appreciation to others
- ✓ showing empathy and compassion
- ✓ keeping a gratitude diary or journal
- ✓ writing letters of appreciation to others
- ✓ being aware of good things that I have that I did not earn (grace)
- ✓ being aware of bad things that I do not have to bear (aka, "negative grace")
- ✓ being fair and impartial with others (justice)
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: speaking in a kind voice, expressing appreciation, thanking someone, being fair and impartial

5. Chastity (from the Latin *pudicitia*) provides proper boundaries for controlling the sin of Lust. It involves being pure in thought and action.

- ✓ providing a safe office environment
- ✓ maintaining clear and firm boundaries
- ✓ being a safe person toward those may be vulnerable (e.g., with LGBT)
- ✓ being careful about making comments that relate to someone's attire or appearance

- ✓ being aware that some people have a tendency to sexualize neutral comments
- ✓ being careful about the therapeutic use of touch
- ✓ being careful about non-sexual touch with people who sexualize neutral actions
- ✓ avoiding sexist or sexualized comments, language, slurs, or words
- ✓ avoiding inappropriate hugging or touching of a client or congregant
- ✓ avoiding covert sexualized thoughts about another person
- ✓ avoiding *counselor voyeurism* (i.e., seeking information beyond the need to know)
- ✓ avoiding encouraging the confession of sexual secrets, whether in the confessional booth or the psychotherapist's office
- ✓ avoiding double entendres (i.e., words or phrases open to two interpretations, one of which is usually risqué or indecent)
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: respecting proper boundaries, maintaining a safe space at work,

6. Moderation (from the Latin *moderatione*) or **Temperance** (from the Latin *temperantia*) controls the insatiable appetite of Gluttony. In the *Book of Wisdom 8:7*, this virtue is known as Temperance.

- ✓ being moderate
- ✓ avoiding extreme diets

- ✓ striving for the middle path
- ✓ avoiding extremes in eating
- ✓ maintaining a healthy bodyweight
- ✓ exercising restraint and self-regulation
- ✓ avoiding any use of alcohol the day before a session (i.e., the pilot's rule)
- ✓ avoiding drinking colas or coffee during sessions
- ✓ avoiding eating in the office between sessions
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: avoid drinking coffee during an oral examination or investigative interview

7. **Diligence** (from the Latin *diligentia*) combats the vice of Sloth. In the *Book of Wisdom*, this virtue is related to Fortitude. Diligence requires a careful, steady, persistent effort. The difference between diligence and fortitude is that *diligence* refers to conscientiousness or determination when doing something, whereas *fortitude* refers to emotional or mental strength in the face of adversity. Fortitude may require doing something in the face of adversity (bravery), although it may also require not doing something in the face of adversity (courage).

- ✓ just do it
- ✓ taking notes
- ✓ being diligent
- ✓ perseverance
- ✓ taking the lead
- ✓ putting forth effort
- ✓ displaying initiative
- ✓ admitting a mistake

- ✓ showing persistence
- ✓ keeping a commitment
- ✓ avoiding procrastinating
- ✓ checking one's homework
- ✓ double-checking one's work
- ✓ being careful and conscientious
- ✓ making amends when there is a mistake
- ✓ editing and proofing articles and papers
- ✓ practicing *festina lente* (Latin: "make haste slowly" (or "more haste, less speed")
- ✓ Licensing Board examples: making amends for mistakes, double-checking work, reviewing a rule or regulation

Practical Application

Putting virtues or character strengths into practice involves a few simple mental efforts and behavioral actions.

- ✓ Maintain vigilant self-awareness throughout each day.
- ✓ Take an ongoing inventory of ourselves – not others – throughout the day.
- ✓ Practice the virtues by acting as if we already possess them (e.g., acting as if we are generous, pretending we are patient).
- ✓ Notice our vices and use them as early detection signals for practicing opposite action.

Using Vices as Signals for Opposite Action

Vices are not all bad if we use them as early warning signals and reminders to practice the corresponding virtue. A key is to correctly identify the vice at a subclinical level and then to use that urge as a cue to engage in opposite action.

- ✓ When feeling arrogant, strive to be humble.
- ✓ When feeling greedy, strive to be generous.
- ✓ When feeling angry, strive to be patient.

- ✓ When feeling envious, strive to be grateful.
- ✓ When feeling lustful, strive to be chaste.
- ✓ When feeling hungry, strive to be moderate.
- ✓ When feeling lazy or careless, strive to be diligent.

Summary of Vices and Virtues

Vices

Pride

Greed

Wrath

Envy

Lust

Gluttony

Sloth

Virtues

Humility

Generosity

Patience

Gratitude / Kindness

Chastity

Moderation

Diligence

Epilogue

Having practiced as a psychotherapist for over 45 years, I have seen many people enter counseling and psychotherapy as poor substitutes for making amends to others they have harmed. Although the confessional process of psychotherapy can lead to the increased self-awareness needed for making amends to others, there are many people who begin psychotherapy by confessing the faults and shortcomings of others. Projection is an automatic process by which the unacceptable conflicts and contents of our own unconscious are perceived to exist in others. To use the old adage, "If we spot it, we got it." Rather than seeing others as they really are, we may see others as we really are. For psychotherapy to be effective, the person must eventually make an epistemological change—essentially a second-order change—that involves a paradigm shift. In other words, we learn to stop projecting our faults onto others and to spot them in ourselves. By doing so, we can choose to stop trying to change others and to take responsibly for making changes in our own actions, beliefs, and expectations.

Daily Inventory of Vices and Virtues

Watch for
Vices

Strive for
Virtues

Pride	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Humility
Greed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Generosity
Wrath	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Patience
Envy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Gratitude / Kindness
Lust	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chastity
Gluttony	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Moderation
Sloth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Diligence

Adapted from Doverspike, W. F. (2021). *How to understand the seven deadly sins*.

<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Format adapted from Mark W. (1946, June). My daily personal inventory. *AA Grapevine*, 3(1), 10.

Notes

The *Book of Wisdom* (aka, the Wisdom of Solomon), is a Jewish work written in Greek and most likely composed in Alexandria, Egypt. It is generally dated to the mid-first century BCE. It is one of the seven Sapiential (“wisdom”) books in the Septuagint (i.e., Greek version of the Old Testament), along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Song of Solomon), Job, and Sirach. It is included in the *anagignoskomena* (Greek, “those which are to be read” aloud to a gathering) of the Eastern Orthodox Church and it is included in the deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church. Most Protestant denominations consider it part of the Apocrypha (Greek, “the hidden” [things]), which consists of biblical books received by the early Church as part of the Greek version of the Old Testament, but not included in the Hebrew Bible. The Septuagint was excluded by the non-Hellenistic Jews from their biblical canon.

Karl Augustus Menninger (1893-1990), an American psychiatrist and a member of the Menninger family of psychiatrists, founded the Menninger Foundation and the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. Published when he was 80 years old, Menninger came to believe that the term *sin* would be replaced with medical and psychiatric terms such as illness, disorder, and dysfunction. He hypothesized that the moral concept of sin would become increasingly irrelevant and that explanations of wrongdoing would be replaced by

rationalizations that excused individual accountability and responsibility. Eventually, the human condition would be explained away as a product of biochemistry and childhood experiences (including trauma). In retrospect, Menninger seems like a psychiatric prophet in his prediction of the biologicalization of morality.

Father Dominic Prümmer first published his *Handbook of Moral Theology* in 1921. Translated and edited several times since its original publication, it has served as a reference book for generations of seminarians and confessors.

Matthew Kelly (b. 1973) is an Australian author, business consultant, and motivational speaker. In his popular book, *Rediscovering Catholicism*, Kelly serves an indictment against three popular philosophies that seem pervasive in contemporary culture: “Although there are many philosophies influencing the modern schema, I would like to propose that there are three major practical philosophies upon which we have constructed modern culture. I will leave it to the reader to decide whether we have built our culture on rock like the wise man, or sand like the fool (cf. Matthew 7: 24-27)” (Kelly, 2002, p. 16).

Father Luke Marion Kot (1911-2014), whose 100th birthday party was like an extended family reunion, was unknown to many in the outside world. I was honored to be present for the celebration of his 100th birthday (2012). Those who knew him closely knew that his motto was *ama nesciri* “love to be

unknown” (i.e., “do not seek fame”). He was an ordained priest and a monk of the Cistercian (Trappist) Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. On Thursday evening January 9, 2014, he died peacefully (at age 102) in the monastery infirmary in the company of his Cistercian brothers. The burial service took place on Monday January 13, 2014 at 9:00 AM in the monastery church. Fr. Luke was the last surviving member of the 20 founding monks who came to Conyers, Georgia in 1944 to build a Trappist monastery. He was blessed with the gift of 76 years in religious life, 66 years as a priest, when the Lord called him. Fr. Luke was the oldest monk of the worldwide Cistercian Order (OCSO).

Father William Saunders is pastor of Our Lady of Hope parish in Potomac Falls, Virginia. He is dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College. His article entitled “What are capital sins” was in a column he wrote for the *Arlington Catholic Herald*. With permission from *Arlington Catholic Herald*, the article has been reprinted and is available at the Catholic Education Resource Center (<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/what-are-capital-sins.html>).

Rev. Colin S. Smith (b. 1958) is a United States evangelical pastor and author. He serves as the senior pastor of The Orchard Evangelical Free Church in Illinois, which has seven campus locations in the Chicago area. In a blog post titled “The temptation to covet and envy,” Smith (2021, para. 3) provides a perspective on the difference between envy and coveting:

Coveting is when you want what someone else has. Envy is when you don’t want someone else to have what they’ve been given. Coveting wants to gain something for yourself. Envy wants to deny something to someone else. Coveting is saying, “I want the same as you.” Envy says, “I don’t want you to have more than me.” There is a meanness of spirit about it. “Envy makes the bones rot” (Prov. 14:30). (Smith, 2021, para. 3)

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber (b. 1969) is a Lutheran minister, public theologian, and American author. Until July 8, 2018, she served as the founding pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Denver, Colorado. She describes herself as “Foul-mouthed for a preacher, grammatically challenged for a bestselling author, surprisingly hopeful for a cynic—Grace is the source-code, but snark is the gift.” She is the author of the *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Patrix*. In her depiction of sin from a psychological perspective, she provides these insights:

“But honestly, I’m much more tortured by my secrets, which eat away at me, than I am concerned about God being mad at me. I’m more haunted by how what I’ve said and the things I’ve done have caused harm to myself and others than I am worried that God will punish

me for being bad. Because in the end, we aren't punished *for* our sins as much as we are punished *by* our sins."

(Bolz-Weber, 2016, p. 120)

References

- Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1992). *Courage to change: One day at a time in Al-Anon* [B-16]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1953/2010). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author. Copyrighted in 1952 by The AA Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (now known as Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.), the first printing was in April 1953.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1976). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Author.
- Bates, C. & Broadsky, A. (1989). *Sex in the therapy hour: A case of professional incest*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Bolz-Weber, N. (2016) *Accidental saints: Finding god in all the wrong people*. New York, NY: Convergent.
- Broderick, R. C. (Editor). (1986). *The Catholic encyclopedia: Revised and updated edition*. New York, NY: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Curran, B. (2010). *Unholy popes: Outrageous but true stories of papal misbehavior*. New York, NY: Fall River Press. Bob Curran's book was originally published in 2006 by the O'Brien Press Ltd. as *Holy Smoke: True Papal Stories That Will Amaze and Amuse*.
- Dante Alighieri. (1955). *The comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica II: Purgatory [Il Purgatorio]*. (Dorothy L. Delany, J. (1911). Omission. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. 11). New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved May 29, 2022 from <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/omission>
- Sayers, Translator). Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books. See cross-reference to Sayers (1955).
- Doverspike, W. F. (2015). *Risk management: Clinical, ethical, and legal guidelines for successful practice* (2nd ed.). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Doverspike, W. F. (2021). Virtue ethics: Practicing virtue ethics and building character. Workshop with live stream with no recording presented at Richmond Graduate University, Atlanta, Georgia, September 13, 2021.

- Ebert, B. W. (2006). *Multiple relationships and conflict of interest for mental health professionals: A conservative psycholegal approach*. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Evagrius (2006). *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek ascetic corpus*. (Robert E. Sinkewicz, Trans). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Haas, L. J., & Malouf, J. L. (2005). *Keeping up the good work: A practitioner's guide to mental health ethics* (4th ed.). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Kelly, M. (2002). *Rediscovering Catholicism*. Cincinnati, OH: Beacon Publishing.
- Kimball, Charles. (2002). *When religion becomes evil*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Klein, S. (2003, January 1). *The most evil women in history*. New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Books.
- Lazarus, A. A. (2000). Multimodal replenishment. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 31(1), 93–94.
- Mark W. (1946, June). My daily personal inventory. *AA Grapevine*, 3(1), 10.
- Menninger, K. A. (1973, September 1). *Whatever became of sin?* New York, NY: Hawthorn Books.
- Parrott, W. G., & Smith, R. H. (1993). Distinguishing the experiences of envy and jealousy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64 (6), 906–920.
- Pope, K. S., & Vetter, V. A. (1991). Prior therapist-patient sexual involvement among patients seen by psychologists. *Psychotherapy*, 28(3), 429–438.
- Prümmer, D. M. (1957). *Handbook of moral theology* (Gerald W. Shelton, Trans.). New York, NY: P. J. Kenedy and Sons.
- Russell, B. (1930). *The conquest of happiness*. New York, NY: Liveright.
- Saunders, W. (2013). What are capital sins? *Arlington Catholic Herald*. <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/what-are-capital-sins.html>
- Sayers, D. L. (1955). *The comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica II: Purgatory*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books. See cross-reference to Dante Alighieri (1955).
- Shuchat, Chaya. (n.d.). *Eight degrees of giving*. Chabad. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/256321/jewish/Eight-Degrees-of-Giving.htm

Smith, C. S. (2021, March 10). *The temptation to covet and envy*. OpentheBible.

<https://openthebible.org/open-the-bible-daily/the-temptation-to-covet-and-envy/>

Smith, R. D. (2017). *Strategic planning for public relations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Sternberg, R. J. (2002). *Why smart people can be so stupid*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sternberg, R. J. (2003). Responsibility: One of the other three Rs. *Monitor on Psychology*, 34(3), 5.

Thomas, Aquinas, St., 1225?-1274. (192042). *The "Summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*. (Roy J. Deferrari & M. Iviolate Barry, Sister, Dominicans, Trans.). London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, Ltd.

Twiss, M. (2002, March 21). *The most evil men and women in history*. New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Books.

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2021). How to understand the seven deadly sins.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, “How to Understand the Seven Deadly Sins,” September 05, 2021.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William F. “How to Understand the Seven Deadly Sins.” 05 Sept. 2021 [Date accessed]

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, because some instructors still ask for it, check with them to determine whether they require it.

Ethics Seminars

The ethics seminar is based on these files:

Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour.pptx
Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour - Handouts.pptx
Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour - Handouts.pdf

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Understand the Seven Deadly Sins.doc

Server path:

http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_the_seven_deadly_sins.pdf

Server file name:

[how_to_understand_the_seven_deadly_sins.pdf](http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_the_seven_deadly_sins.pdf)

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Understand Deadly Sins

Workshop Presentation Deck:

N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:

N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Daily Inventory of Vices and Virtues

[Click this link for downloadable form.](#)

Ethics Seminars

The ethics seminar is based on these files:

Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour.pptx
Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour - Handouts.pptx
Ethics Workshop - Virtue Ethics - 1 hour - Handouts.pdf

Published September 05, 2021 | Last updated February 14, 2024.

Copyright © 2021 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content last updated 2024.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2021). *How to understand the seven deadly sins*.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

