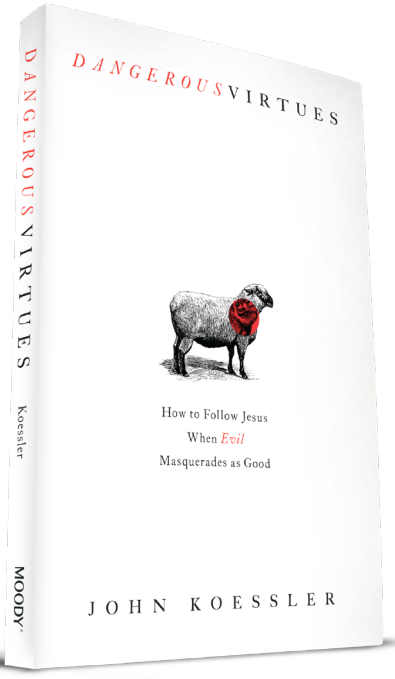

When sin is disguised as virtue, the path to cultivating righteousness becomes impossible. *Dangerous Virtues* examines how to recognize these seven deadly sins as they are subtly disguised in today's culture. Christians must develop a discerning eye in a world where good is called evil and evil called good.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Sin and the Seven Dangerous Virtues

In 1987, *Harper's Magazine* invited seven ad agencies to create a humorous campaign designed to rehabilitate the reputation of the seven deadly sins. The ad for lust pictured two silent film stars in a passionate embrace along with a headline that read, "Any sin that's enabled us to survive war, death, pestilence, and famine can't be called deadly." The ad's tagline read, "Lust, where would we be without it?" Another, for the Gluttony Society, showed a grossly obese man running in a race—or perhaps competing in the long jump—with the slogan, "Be all you can be." The ad for pride declared, "It's time to start feeling good about yourself—*really* good."

Although tongue in cheek, these ads accurately reflect the modern consensus when it comes to sin. We are sinners. We don't deny it. But most of the time, we don't think much about it. We don't seem to obsess about sin the way the ancients used

to, at least not about our own sins. We don't punish ourselves or go to extreme measures to fight sin off. Most of the time, our sin feels more like a low-grade fever than it does a raging fire. Its presence is an ongoing irritation that may hinder us from being our best, but it doesn't keep us from functioning. Sin doesn't bother us that much, either. If anything, the fact that we are sinners serves as an escape clause when things go badly. "What did you think would happen?" we want to say. "We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. Of course, we went off the rails." The fact that we are sinners is one of the few religious concepts upon which a majority of people agree. Most people identify with the label sinner.[1]

The ancients weren't as sanguine about the subject. The early Christian monastics went into the wilderness not only to pursue holiness but also to study their sinfulness. One monk, who probably lived in the fourth or fifth century, described the benefit of a life of solitude by pouring water into a cup and pointing out that its cloudy nature became clear after allowing it to stand for a time. "So it is with the man who lives among men. He does not see his own sins because of the turmoil," he said. "But when he is at rest, especially in the desert, then he sees his sins."[2]

Those early Christians analyzed sin and categorized the many ways it manifests itself. They were interested not only in identifying the specific acts that should be regarded as sinful but wanted to understand the internal dynamics that generated sinful behavior. The church's analysis and categorization of sin became so complex that the ordinary person who stumbles on its reflections may feel that such formulations read like tax documents

produced by the IRS. But the fundamental questions that prompted theologians and philosophers to such deep and complicated reflection were often quite basic. They are the kinds of questions we all ask. What kind of behavior constitutes sin? How does sin arise within those who would rather not sin? Are some sins worse than others? And, of course, the most important question of all: what alternative is there to sin? At times, we all find ourselves, like the apostle Paul, puzzled by our behavior where sin is concerned (Rom. 7:15).

In the latter part of the fourth century, a monk named Evagrius of Pontus compiled a list of sins that people commonly commit. He didn't consider his list to be an exhaustive catalog of sinful behavior. The eight actions Evagrius singled out represented the main categories under which all other sins might fall. For this reason, they came to be known as "capital" sins. His list included gluttony, fornication, greed, sadness, anger, acedia (or sloth), vainglory, and pride. Later church leaders reduced the list to seven, reasoning that vainglory and pride were essentially the same.

No doubt, some of the items in the old monk's list seem odd to us. Hardly anyone today would call sadness a sin, let alone a capital sin. When someone's sadness is debilitating, we usually treat it as a disease. Likewise, gluttony seems to moderns to be a throwback to an age when food was scarce. We might think that it is unhealthy or perhaps rude, but we generally don't consider it to be a sin. Indeed, we usually don't think about it at all. I've heard only one sermon on gluttony in my life, and that was from a guest speaker during a chapel service while I was a student in seminary.

The athletically fit speaker told the audience that those of us who were overweight preached the gospel with our mouths but contradicted it with our lives (or more specifically, with our bodies). In the class that followed chapel that day, several of us were eager to know what our professor, a man of some girth, thought of the message. "Give me a moment," he said. "I am enjoying a Snickers bar." He chewed for a while and then in a wry tone declared: "All I have to say is that Proverbs 11:25 says, 'The liberal soul shall be made fat.'"

Acedia also seems out of place to most of us. After all, what's wrong with taking things a little easy? We don't even know what vainglory is, though we tend to recognize it in others. In those instances, we call it boasting. While we may be reluctant to categorize boasting as a sin, we do agree that it is bad form. Unless, of course, it appears on a resume. Fornication is still considered to be a sin by some. But hardly anybody fornicates anymore. Instead, people "make love." Love is widely regarded to be a good thing, and for many people making love is simply part of the dating ritual. Many today who stumble upon the Bible's denunciation of sexual sin wonder what all the fuss is about.

Contrary to the famous line uttered by Michael Douglas's character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street*, most of us do not think that greed is good. But neither do we view it as a sin. At worst, I suppose, we consider it to be impolite, at least when it is displayed publicly. As long as greed is not put on display, people look at it as either thriftiness or success.

If you follow social media or drive the expressway, you already know that nobody believes that anger is a sin these days. We view

it as an emotion. Actually, we now consider it to be a virtue, especially if it is exercised in the political sphere and is characterized as a "passion for justice." Indeed, most of the sins in this list have been turned upside down, so that what the ancients once regarded as sin modern people have relabeled to be less than sin. In an age that has learned to call evil good and good evil, the seven deadly sins are now the seven dangerous virtues.

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Why do we think so differently from previous generations about sin? One reason is that we have radically different notions about virtue in our day. Moderns think as little about virtue as they do about sin in the traditional sense. The word seems outdated. Virtue sounds more like something that would have concerned our Victorian great-grandparents. So before we go any further, we should unpack the idea.

The notion of virtue is indeed an ancient one. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle saw virtue as the pattern of right behavior that characterizes a person. Virtue is a habit of life that moves one in the right direction. Vice is the same, only moving one in the opposite direction. Although the *term* may seem archaic, the *idea* of virtue is not, if we understand it as a preferred pattern of life. We may have dropped the philosophical language as a culture, but we still have strong feelings about the way people should live. If you doubt this, spend a few hours reading through the opinions expressed on your favorite social media feed. We do not all agree on the standard of what is

considered good, but enough of us have strong opinions about what goodness looks like that we regularly criticize those who don't measure up to our standard. However, contemporary interest in virtue seems to be primarily negative. Our ideas about what is good do not necessarily serve as a basis for self-examination and personal improvement. Often, they merely provide the grounds for carping against others who fall short of our standard.

The ancient idea of virtue grew from a desire to overcome the human disposition that the Bible labels sin. This classical understanding of virtue assumed the need for improvement. Consequently, the quest for virtue required not only an understanding of its opposite but a sense of personal accountability. Not only has our downgraded sense of sin snuffed out interest in this ancient idea of virtue, but it has also seriously degraded contemporary notions of what it means to be human. "No modern formulation of humanness comes close to the virtue-and-vice tradition in capturing both the grandeur and the fatally flawed nature of human existence," Os Guinness has observed. "Modern views, instead, tend to be flippant about vice and reduce its seriousness to a yawn or a snicker."[3]

For Christians, God is the key component in any notion of virtue. He is also the key component in any notion of sin. Virtue doesn't just involve the measure of what *we* think is good as individuals. It is more than the community standard. In the Christian view, God is both the measure and the measurer of what constitutes genuine virtue. That same measure provides the dividing line that separates sin from virtue. It is popular to treat sin and virtue as if they were merely matters of subjective judgment. This

view regards sin as a violation of one's individual standard or that of the community. The popular measure used to determine what constitutes sin is a movable scale and one that assumes the more lenient the measure, the more enlightened the standard. Such a view reduces many of the things that used to be called sins to exercises in bad taste, or at worst, judges them to be little more than a matter of gross insensitivity. In some cases, it removes many of the thoughts and practices that were once called sins from the category of sin altogether. They are choices, alternative lifestyles, or if they are negative, simply mistakes. The fatal flaw in this perspective is its exclusion of God. It is the same flaw that has corrupted our notion of virtue. Where there is no God, there is no sin. Where there is no God, there is no virtue, either. There are only privately or commonly held standards. What renders an action a sin is that it is ultimately committed against God.

David understood this. In Psalm 51:4, he declared, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." This is an astonishing statement, given the events that prompted it. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. He arranged the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, after he learned that she had become pregnant. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. explains, "All sin has first and finally a Godward force."[4]

Virtue or goodness also has God as its primary reference point. Theologian John Murray observed that the essence of human virtue is "to be like God in the sense of reflecting his image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness."[5] Or as Jesus puts it, no one is good but God. Virtue is what we were made for. It is a

life that reflects our design as creatures made in the image of the God who is Himself good and the source of all that can be rightly called good. But as Jesus' response to the man who called Him a "good" teacher implies, we can't think about personal goodness or virtue without also taking our own sin into account. Any possibility of true goodness depends ultimately upon God. We must receive goodness as a gift before we adopt it as a practice.

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Perhaps all of this sounds too abstract and detached for ordinary people like us. It's one thing for theologians and philosophers to debate about sin and virtue. Why should we concern ourselves with such matters? We have jobs to go to and bills to pay. We mow the lawn and drive the kids to school. What does any of this have to do with the real world in which we live? The answer is that sin and virtue lie at the heart of everything we do. Our ideas of sin and virtue shape the way we work at our job, live in our neighborhood, and treat the members of our family.

What is more, these matters are a deep concern for us. Sin and virtue drive the storylines behind the television programs and movies we watch. Our law courts are backlogged with cases in which the parties involved dispute with one another over these same concerns. We may use different language when we talk about sin and virtue. We may speak of "doing the right thing" or talk about what people "ought" to do. But philosopher Charles Taylor captures the importance these ideas hold for us when he describes our assumptions about these issues as "moral and

spiritual intuitions" that express "strong evaluations" about the things "that make life worth living."[6]

We also seem to know intuitively when others have crossed a line. We may not agree about what is right, but nearly every one of us has a kind of moral radar that is hypersensitive to those who do something we consider wrong. C. S. Lewis called this intuition the "law of human nature," or the "rule of fair play," and characterizes it as an almost instinctive appeal to an unspoken common standard that we expect others to know and observe.[7] According to Lewis, this way of thinking is most evident when people quarrel with one another. It is a way of thinking that is as common among children as it is with adults. The rule of fair play is that inner sense that the person who transgresses against us should have known better. Suppose you are at the theater and leave your seat to buy popcorn. The line is long, and you are beginning to worry that the film is about to start. You would feel irritated if someone jumped the line and cut in front of you just as you came to the counter. You would feel an even greater instant sense of outrage upon returning to your seat to find that someone else was sitting in it. In such cases, we instinctively measure the behavior of others by the golden rule (Matt. 7:12). We say, "How would you like it if I treated you that way?"

Lewis goes on to point out that most of the time when we take someone to task for such offenses, they rarely reject the standard. "Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse," Lewis explains. "He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took

the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given a bit of orange, or that something turned up which lets him off keeping his promise."[8]

However, our moral radar seems to operate on only one band. We are hypersensitive to the transgressions of others but find it difficult to see our own. Not only do we disagree with the ancient consensus of the church about the gravity of our sins, but we are also strangely comforted by its universal presence. For some of us, the comfort we take in knowing we are sinners is the kind that a poor student might take who places their trust in the grading curve. We reason that if sin is normal, then we are normal. Even if there is something wrong with us, we can at least say that it is only your average, garden variety of wrong. Everybody suffers from it. Surely God won't penalize *everybody*.

Others treat sin the same way they do high cholesterol. They know that if they ignore it, things will go badly. But they hope that if they take certain basic measures, it can be kept under control. This approach to sin takes two primary forms: one is medical, and the other is athletic. The medical model sees sin as a kind of disease. The athletic model approaches sin like a weakness that can be remedied through discipline. Either view makes sin seem manageable. If sin is a sickness, it can be cured through treatment. If it is a weakness, that weakness can be eliminated with training.

One of the appeals of the medical model of sin is that it alleviates the moral pressure that comes with an awareness of sin. So far, I have had two major illnesses in my life. When I was a child, I contracted polio. As an adult, I was diagnosed with a form of cancer. I felt bad on both occasions, but I did not feel responsible.

I knew that something was wrong with me, but I did not think that I was at fault. Jesus Himself seemed to give credence to the medical model when, after being criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners, He observed, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Matt. 9:12).

Many problems like addiction that we used to consider to have a moral component are treated as if they were only diseases. Others, like homosexuality, which used to be considered a moral problem or a social disorder, have been normalized. The medical model of sin is appealing because it seems to mitigate human responsibility and provides a familiar frame of reference for understanding how sin works. What is more, although sin is a spiritual condition, it does have qualities that seem organic. Like certain medical conditions or genetic defects, sin is passed on from one generation to another (Ps. 51:5). The Bible speaks of sin as something that is "alive" (Rom. 7:9). In Romans 7:18, the apostle Paul characterizes sin as something that is "in" him. More specifically, according to this verse, it is the "not good" that is in him.

The appeal of the athletic model of sin is its promise of improvement. The athletic approach to sin seems to imply that we can replace sin with virtue merely by applying the right combination of willpower and methodology. The apostle Paul seems to endorse it when he employs athletic imagery to describe the Christian life. He says that the Christian life is a race and that those who run it must go into "strict training" (1 Cor. 9:25).

According to Paul, discipline and effort are not the only elements needed to deal with the problem of sin. Sin is more than

the absence of positive qualities, and virtue is more than muscle memory. Sin is a living force that resides within us (Rom. 7:17). The apostle even gives sin's location. It dwells "in my sinful nature" (v. 18). Flesh, in this case, is not a physiological term. It does not mean the skin that covers our bones. It is not organic in that sense. Rather, it is organic in an altogether different way. Sin is a force that is integrated into our nature. As New Testament scholar Handley Moule so vividly puts it, "The intruder has occupied the whole dwelling, and every part of it is infected."[9]

When Paul employs the term "flesh" in this way, it serves as a synonym for sin itself. Flesh, in this sense, is the sin that dwells in me. This biblical language hints at sin's point of origin. In one sense, sin is an intruder into God's creation. All that God created was "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). This "good" creation included humanity. Sin did not originate with God. As theologian Herman Ridderbos explains, "It is unmistakable that sin is not a cosmic but an ethical quantity, i.e., that it is not an original principle standing independently against God to which the world and man have fallen prey apart from their own will, but that it has entered into the world through man."[10] As the cartoon strip character Pogo observed, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Sin has another organic quality. It has physical consequences. These consequences extend beyond human beings to creation itself. As Paul puts it in Romans 8:20, creation has been "subjected to frustration" as a result of Adam's sin. This euphemistic language is a nod to the judgment pronounced by God in Genesis 3:17–18: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will

produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." It is not only ourselves but the world in which we live that has been affected by Adam's sin. To use the stark language of Genesis, creation is under a curse. Everything in it is subject to change and decay. Even the rocks and hills, which seem so firm and immovable to us, wear away in time.

Sin's universal consequence is death. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. notes, "The association of sin with physical and spiritual death runs like a spine through Scripture and Christian tradition."[11] When Adam was commanded not to eat of the forbidden tree, the Lord warned, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen. 2:16–17). Physical death offers universal proof of human sinfulness. Death is the objective evidence that we are "in Adam" and subject to the penalty for refusing to heed God's warning (1 Cor. 15:22). Through Adam, "death came to all people" (Rom. 5:12).

In Scripture, death is more than a physical condition. Death is also a pattern of living. The second-century handbook of the Christian life known as the *Didache* begins, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways."[12] As might be expected, the way of death described in this work includes sinful deeds. Among them are murder, adultery, magic arts, sorcery, robbery, lying, hypocrisy, duplicity, deceitfulness, pride, malice, stubbornness, greed, abusive language, jealousy, arrogance, pride, and boastfulness. We would probably agree that most of the items in this list are unbecoming for someone who claims to follow Christ. We could

also see how living such a life would lead to spiritual problems, although death might seem like an extreme penalty to some of us for attitudes that we normally regard as rude behavior or personality flaws. But there is more to the way of death than behaviors that warrant the penalty of death. The items mentioned in the *Didache* are drawn from the New Testament vice lists that describe the acts of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:3–5; 1 Cor. 6:9–11). More than a Christian "don't" list, these New Testament passages provided Christians with a kind of mirror that showed how the spiritually dead live. They would have recognized what they saw because the attitudes and actions included in these lists were prominent features of their old way of life (Eph. 4:22). In other words, the "way of death" might more accurately be called the "way of the dead." It is a mode of existence.

More than this, these vice lists, when contrasted with the catalog of Christian virtues that often accompany them, make a powerful statement about the nature of Christ's life (Gal. 5:22–25; Eph. 4:32–5:2). Like all of creation, we are leaning into redemption. This is the essential point of the virtue lists in the New Testament. They are not meant to serve as a grocery list of good behaviors. The standard of behavior described in these passages is a mirror as much as it is a measure. They remind us of who we are and of what is possible for those who are alive in Christ. In other words, they describe the way of the living. Good is something we do, but thanks to Jesus Christ, it is also what we are. As far as our sinful nature goes, the part of us that is inclined to shake its fist at God and that the apostle calls the flesh, there is no good in us (Rom. 7:18). But believers have another force that

determines the contour of their lives. This is the transforming work of Christ, which enables us "to become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Theologians use the word *sanctification* to describe this work. It is progressive, cooperative, and imparted to us by the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is progressive. It does not happen at once. We grow in grace and add to our virtues. It is cooperative in the sense that we have a role to play in this transformation process through our obedience and practice. But sanctification depends upon the finished work of Jesus Christ and the empowerment of His indwelling Spirit. We are not earning our righteousness through these efforts. We are bringing into personal experience the righteousness that has been given to us as a gift by God's grace.

Even though we may sometimes slip into old patterns of thinking and acting, we are fundamentally different from the people we once were. Indeed, according to Romans 6:11, all those who are in Christ are not dead at all but "alive to God." When this verse tells us to "reckon" ourselves dead to sin, it is not urging us to think positively about ourselves. In the apostle's day, this was banker's language. What Paul calls believers to do is to make "a deliberate and sober judgment on the basis of the gospel."[13] We are urged to bank on the fact that our relationship both to sin and to God have fundamentally changed.

This means that virtue is more than a matter of what we do. Ultimately, it is a function of who we are. In the Christian life, *being* always precedes *doing*. To make such a distinction does not eliminate the necessity of choice or action. Virtue is not automatic. If it were, we would not need to be told to "add" virtue

to our faith (2 Peter 1:5). But neither is virtue natural, at least as far as the flesh is concerned. Virtue is the disposition of our new nature in Christ. We might describe it as the power of God, which tends toward life. Virtue is that power that comes from God and that provides "everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). In his commentary on 2 Peter 1:3, John Calvin described it as something "over and above the common natural order."[14] We access this power through faith because the knowledge of it can be found only in those "very great and precious promises" recorded in Scripture.

In other words, virtue is a matter of acting in accordance with our God-given new nature. But before we can act upon these promises, we must first hear and believe them. Or to put it another way, virtue in the Christian realm is a matter of choosing to live in a way that is consistent with who we are in Christ by God's power. Before we can live this way, we must first be told who we are. This is the function of the gospel and God's Word in general.

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Understanding the nature of virtue also enables us to truly understand sin. Sin is what virtue looks like after it has been twisted. Satan's false narrative in the garden of Eden implied that ignoring God's prohibition about eating from the forbidden tree could be a path to virtue. "You will not certainly die," the serpent assured the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from

it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4–5).

This explains the nature of sin's appeal, at least in part. Sin is a distortion of goodness. When we sin, we are often attempting to achieve a legitimate goal by illegitimate means. Sometimes the means that is presented to us seems to offer a shortcut. We think that if we throw off the restraints that God has placed upon us, we will obtain our ultimate desire more quickly. At other times, as in Eve's case, it is a matter of bait and switch. What Satan promised Eve was good—the possibility of being like God—but what he actually offered her was the opposite. His promise was a lie, and Eve was deceived by it (Gen. 3:13; 1 Tim. 2:14).

We might conclude from this that sin is merely a misguided attempt to get what God has promised us and that those who succumb to it are only spiritual victims of a cosmic trickster. But God's evaluation sends a different message. Satan is indeed a deceiver, but sin is also an act of rebellion. Paul's clarification in 1 Timothy 2:14 that Adam "was not the one deceived" places human sin squarely within the framework of conscious rebellion against God. Whatever Adam's motive may have been for ignoring what he knew to be true when he partook of the forbidden fruit, he knew what he was doing. Adam's action was not an error; it was a sin. However, Paul makes it just as clear that Eve's deception did not mitigate her guilt. Even though Eve was genuinely deceived by Satan, she "became a sinner" when she acted in error.

In general, our thinking about both sin and virtue is backward. We think more of individual sins than we do of sin. We treat virtue the same way. We tend to see virtue as a collection

of righteous actions. Our concern when it comes to sin is that it will grow. Small infractions will become larger. Anger will accelerate until it becomes murder. Lust will take control and lead to adultery. According to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, sin moves in the opposite direction. It does not start small and increase. Those sins that we usually treat as minor infractions bloom from the same root as those we think of as large. Sinful anger springs from a murderous heart, not the other way around (Matt. 5:22). A lustful gaze is the offspring of an adulterous desire (Matt. 5:27–28). This does not mean that there is no difference between thought and action, or even that every sin is the same. Angry words are not the same as a shotgun blast to the head, though some might argue that both can be equally destructive in their own way. They might even say that between the two, the effects of someone's cruel words might last longer.

If the punishments described in the Law of Moses tells us anything about this matter, they reveal that God does not treat every sin the same. As far as individual actions go, there are greater sins and lesser ones. Even Jesus used the language of comparison when talking about sin (John 19:11). Theologian G. C. Berkouwer observes, "It is simply an undeniable fact that Scripture makes various distinctions and speaks of several 'degrees' of sin."[15] Those who want to place every act of disobedience on par with every other act of disobedience do so in the hope that it will heighten awareness of sin by magnifying the sinful character of the smaller act. Ironically, this way of thinking about sin often has the opposite effect. Moral egalitarianism tends to desensitize us to the gravity of sin. Actions that we used to consider grave sins

are now simply "struggles" and in some cases, even acceptable behavior. We fear that condemning the greater sin when we are guilty of so-called lesser sins is hypocritical.

Sin is impartial. We are all equally guilty of sinning. But this does not mean that we are equal in our practice of it. A child is a sinner as much as an adult but is not as accomplished. Sin, like virtue, has an expandable quality.

But it is not enough to merely catalog our actions. Too often, when we categorize sin, we are looking for loopholes that will excuse us. Our tendency to sort sinful actions into those that are greater and lesser does not always spring from a desire to understand the depth of our failure. It often springs from a desire to rationalize away what we have done. We are like Lot when he begged for permission to ignore God's command to flee to the mountains: "Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it—it is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared" (Gen. 19:20). When we take refuge in the smallness of what we have done, we fail to see that the difference in size means only that what we have done is a sprout from the same root as its larger kin. The problem of sin is deeper than the individual act. Even when we manage to avoid a specific sinful act, it does not mean we have evaded the sin that prompts it.

We treat virtue the same way that we do sin, looking at it through an accountant's eyes as an accumulation of good individual actions. Many people treat goodness the way they do their IRA, hoping to store up enough to counterbalance the bad they have done. Christians can also fall into this error by assuming that their relationship with God is only as secure as their daily

track record of performance. If it's been a good day, they feel that they can approach Him with confidence. If not, they may try to balance things about by performing a few righteous acts so they can approach God with something in hand.

Righteousness or virtue has the same expansive quality that sin does. When Jesus describes the true nature of sin in the Sermon on the Mount, He also exposes the true nature of righteousness. Righteousness is not an accumulation of actions that can be classified as good but the other way around. What Jesus says is true of our speech also applies to our actions: "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Matt. 12:35). Righteousness in the Christian life is not a collection of good acts that balances out our bad deeds. Righteous actions spring from righteousness. Individual acts reflect the nature of those who do them. We have been made righteous to be righteous. Those who come to Jesus Christ in faith do not lose their capacity to sin. They gain the capacity to obey. This new ability springs from a changed nature, which is a reflection of their new standing before God. The Christian can do good because he or she has been made good through the blood of Jesus Christ.

This is a book about sin. In particular, it is a book about those sins that the church has traditionally labeled the seven deadly sins. What I will be talking about in the following pages is much more than a list. It is a kind of Rosetta Stone. We are living in an age when the seven deadly sins have become the seven deadly virtues. By focusing on these sins, we can see how our culture's ideas about what is right have gone dangerously wrong. But more importantly, we will also discover something about ourselves. Like

those ancient monks did, we are about to embark on a journey of self-discovery that will take us to the trailhead where the sin in our lives begins. It is a difficult journey, fraught with perils. But sin is not our ultimate destination. This is a book about virtue or goodness as much as it is a book about sin. By considering the alternative to these deadly sins, we will discover much more than a way of life. If we look at them through the lens of Christ and His saving work, we will see the way of the living.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How would you define virtue?

2. In what ways have you seen our culture's ideas about what is good change during your lifetime?

3. What is a biblical definition of virtue?

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