



STILL DEADLY: A PREFACE

Pride. Envy. Anger. Sloth. Greed. Gluttony. Lust.

When you think of this list, *where are you in your mind's eye?* A school? A college? Some workplace? A bad party? A television soapie?

Philosopher Simone Weil once said that 'imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating.'¹ It is like that with these seven: to list them on paper looks provocative. The disturbing movie *Seven*, while obviously portraying each of the seven as somewhat repulsive, still retains a strangely seductive drawing power. Weil was right: on paper, or on a screen, evil is fascinating.

Indeed the seven deadly sins have come to seem a bit sexy, a bit retro, and not even all that evil. One website remembers the 1993 MTV special where music and television entertainers agreed the seven were not really vices.² Another site devoted to the seven notes with ironic detachment, 'you probably commit some of them every day without thinking about the rich

tradition of eternal damnation in which you're participating'.³ The sense that they are quaintly hilarious reflects our culture's relentless drive for new forms of entertainment, and laughter happens when you subject old taboos to new contempt.

In Australia, the seven were even used to market a series of high fat, high sugar ice-cream confections. We begin to see that far from being our enemies, the seven very usefully raise brand awareness because they perfectly trademark our culture's worship of consumption.

Sadly, Weil was also right about the list of opposites: humility, thankfulness, gentleness, usefulness, generosity, contentment and faithfulness. They seem so nauseating and *nice* in comparison. Would you have picked up a book with *them* on the cover?

Evil attracts us. Yet we haven't written this book because we fear the seven deadly sins, or because we think that newfound interest in them somehow represents a threat to Christianity. Nor do we feel the need to get angry about them, as if it is either us or them.

It is simply that they sadden us. For ask yourself, with Simone Weil: who is the 'new, marvellous, intoxicating' person to be with? We don't mean for one or two dinner dates. Who would you prefer to go with for a lifetime?

- The proud or the humble friend?
- The envious or the thankful sister?
- The angry or the gentle father?
- The slothful or the useful brother?
- The greedy or the generous boss?
- The gluttonous or the contented pastor?
- The lustful or the faithful husband?

When you thought about that school, college, workplace or party in response to the seven deadly sins above, we're betting that it was a bleak memory of a place you wanted to get away from.

(The only one that was likely to be interesting was the television soapie, and that is sad for different reasons.) Each of the seven deadly sins represents a malfunction. Some good thing, originally given by God to be enjoyed with thanks, has filled someone's horizon. Their desire grips them so intensely that it eats away from within like a cancer, wrecking their relationships because they just don't care for anyone else.

We wrote this book as a 'thank you' to Michael Hill, a teacher at Moore College in Sydney who has helped many of us to see things differently. But we're using a different approach from the way Michael taught us.

Our method will be to watch and talk about people's *habits of action and feeling*. When these are good, we call them 'virtues', but the seven deadly sins are examples of the dark side of virtues, called 'vices'.

But we also like the Bible's angle on how to live, and you won't find a list of seven virtues or vices there. Its way of describing life includes far more than seven virtues or vices. So why consider *seven* deadly sins? It is an artificially reduced version of what humans do wrong.

The task of thinking through life in a complex world is difficult, and 'seven' at least offers a way for frail and forgetful humans to cover their bases. (Of course even seven is a little hard for *us* to remember, but ancient and medieval people, who originated this approach to life, could reel off the seven deadly sins and seven major virtues with ease.)

Why would we attend to seven deadly *sins*, and not perhaps to something more useful, such as the nine virtues—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control—that the Bible calls the 'fruit' of God's Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22)?

We have attended to these seven vices because they offer us

a vehicle for examining our desires when they have gone haywire. In 1 John 2:15-17, the apostle John tells of a problem that we all carry behind our eyeballs (in what is elsewhere called 'the heart'). He notices the way people become lost in 'the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes', and 'pride in possessions'—which, when you think about it, is a desire for the approval and adulation of others. It is almost as if God has made his world 'too good'. We attach to aspects of it voraciously, intensely, obsessively, and destructively.

We hope then that our attention to the seven deadly sins will offer sober opportunity to assess this malfunction in our emotional world, because until our emotional world begins to be changed (with God's help), we won't be free to enjoy the goods that God dreams of for us.

Never mind for the moment why we settled on the thinkers who will aid us in this quest, except to say that each offers long-lost resources to a society so deeply weird that it thinks it is on to something when it 'rediscovers' and celebrates the sins themselves, rather than the Christian sages who so passionately and caringly argued their hearers toward new and better directions.

So although you've picked up this book because it seemed interesting, we hope that you'll become really, really bored by it. Not by the writers, of course; nearly all of them are terrific, and we're honoured that they joined in. No; we hope you'll become bored witless by the pathetic pointlessness of pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. In fact in almost every way, it is entirely inappropriate to organise a book about the seven deadly sins; and we hope you'll lose interest in them when you see what God dreams of for you instead. We hope you'll catch a glimpse of what it would look like for each of us to love each other and God himself in humility, contentment, gentleness, usefulness,

generosity, patience and faithfulness.

Of course God has many more ‘new, marvellous, intoxicating’ goods in store for you than even that list. But it’s a start.

– Andrew Cameron (for the team)

ENDNOTES

1. *Gravity and Grace*, tr. Arthur Wills, University of Nebraska Press: 1997, 120.
2. <http://www.whitestonejournal.com/seven>.
3. <http://www.deadlysins.com>.