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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

A SURVIVAL GUIDE

REBECCA KONYNDYK DEYOUNG

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—Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung

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Introduction

“To flee vice is the beginning of virtue.”
—Horace, *Epistles*

The Seven Deadly Sins: Then and Now

“Greed, gluttony, lust, envy, [and] pride are no more than sad efforts to fill the empty place where love belongs, and anger and sloth [are] just two things that may happen when you find that not even all seven of them at their deadliest ever can” (F. Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*).

Most Christians today have forgotten about this list of seven sins. Either that or they misunderstand the vices on it. Perhaps that is because it is so old—this collection of vices dates back to the earliest centuries of the Christian church. It was originally designed to examine the impact of sin on our own spiritual formation. It was meant to give us a roadmap for self-examination and a plan for spiritual development.

This course is a new study on the seven vices. We wrote it to recapture the wisdom of that ancient tradition and to help contemporary Christians walk with Christ more faithfully in their lives today.

Be Transformed!

We don’t often use the language of virtues and vices anymore. But many early Christians used virtue and vice talk to describe the process the apostle Paul talks about in his letter to the Colossians:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly. . . . These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things . . . seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator (Col. 3:5, 7-10).

In this passage, Paul tells Christian believers that faith is supposed to change us. To believe is to follow the way of Christ. And to follow means taking off your old, sinful nature, with its habits of thought and behavior, and become someone new. Put on your new identity in Christ, he says, with its renewed and godly habits of thought and behavior. Let the Spirit transform you.

Christian thinkers in the early church and throughout the Middle Ages thought of “taking off the sinful nature” and “putting on Christ” as a transformation of character (Rom. 12:2). They described the sinful nature in terms of vices, and the sanctified nature in terms of virtues—virtues like those listed in Colossians 3:12-14: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. . . . And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (TNIV). The transformation from a vicious to a virtuous character is a way of describing the process of sanctification. This is the heart of spiritual formation.

How Do the Virtues and Vices Help Us?

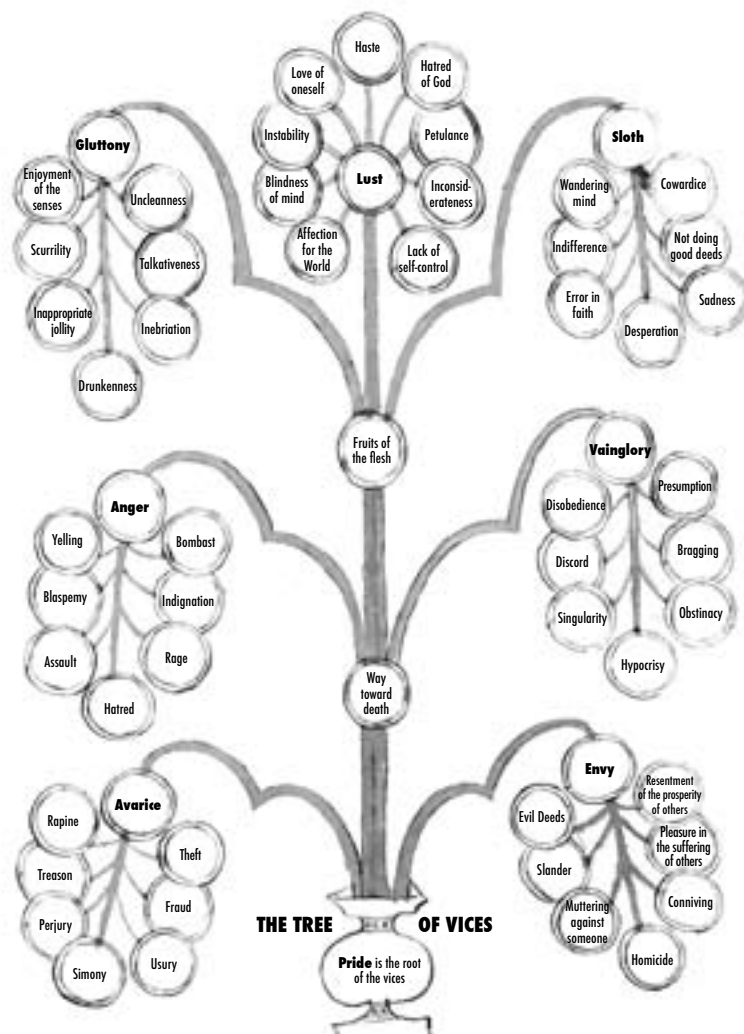
This way of thinking about becoming more Christlike in our character helps Christians in two ways.

First, it starts from a real role model, someone who lived out this ideal—Christ himself. The goal is to look at Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2) and strive to be like him.

What does the virtue of Christian courage look like? Watch Jesus when he faced suffering, pain, fear, and death. When we struggle with the vice of greed, we recall Jesus’ life of poverty and simplicity, which shows us how to entrust our needs to God rather than building bigger barns to secure the future for ourselves. We learn how the vice of wrath undercuts both gentleness and righteous anger when we see what provokes Jesus: “Smite his cheek, and he turns you the other; slap the dignity of the house of prayer, however, and he turns over a table” (G. Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger*). Christ’s example gives us the perfect pattern of virtue. To become like him is to have abundant life and fullness of joy (John 10:10; 15:11).

Second, the virtues and vices take our general goals—“getting rid of the sinful nature” and “being more like Jesus”—and focus them into specific areas of self-examination and spiritual discipline. Before we can get rid of sin, we need a diagnosis. Before we can try to be like Jesus, we need to see how patterns

and practices shape a life. How can we be guilty of gluttony even if we don’t overeat? How can the discipline of silence help counter our tendencies to vainglory? Put together, the seven vices serve as specific guides to spiritual renewal.



The Tree of Vices

The picture of spiritual *mal*formation that medieval Christians used to represent the seven capital vices is a tree. The sin of pride is the root and trunk that upholds and nourishes the tree. The tree itself has seven main branches. Each of those branches, in turn, has many smaller branches that bear fruit. Everything on the tree is the outgrowth and offspring of its corrupted source, pride.

The idea behind the tree picture is this: If your goal is to get rid of sin in your life, you can’t just keep picking fruit off the top branches. More fruit will grow—unless you get the source of the problem. Your aim, therefore, is to chop off the branches that bear the fruit, and ultimately, to take an axe to the trunk of the tree itself.

The Branches

The main branches of the tree of vice are the seven capital vices or deadly sins. Take, for example, the vice of envy. Envy, as one author put it, is “the consuming desire to have everybody else [be] as unsuccessful as you are” (F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*). In other words, if the envious can’t be the best at something, then they will make sure no one else can either. The underlying desire to be superior, to be “number one,” fuels envy’s bitterness at others’ success and reflects its rootedness in pride. Envy also “branches out” into other vicious traits like spitefulness and rejoicing at the downfall of others. It ultimately bears the “fruit” of hatred—hatred of others for being better and hatred of God for giving others better gifts.

The Wrong Recipe for Happiness

Why is envy such a powerful and prolific evil habit in our lives? Like the other seven, it takes a strong, natural human desire for something good—in this case, the need to be unconditionally accepted and affirmed by others—and twists it into something evil. The envious seek to manufacture value for themselves by putting others down, rather than receiving self-worth as a gift from God. “Wickedness is always easier than virtue, for it takes the shortcut to everything.” (S. Johnson, *Boswell: Journey of a Tour to the Hebrides*). Envy’s shortcut, however, is doomed to fail. God is the only one who can fulfill us and give us joy. When our pride leads us to take his place and fill this need for ourselves on our own terms, we end up confessing with Saint Augustine,

My sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in [God] but in myself and in his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error (*Confessions*).

We all have deep desires for pleasure, recognition, acceptance, and security. Vices like lust, vainglory, envy, and greed take good human desires for good things and distort them into demonic masters that leave us empty and unfulfilled. Each vice has a relentless, addictive quality, because we are trying to use them “to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone” (B.B. Taylor, *Home by Another Way*). Each failed attempt at fulfillment leaves us hungrier and more desperate than we were before. When good things are wrongly pursued, sin happens. As sin accumulates, our characters becomes warped and misshapen as well.

The Tree of Virtues

The picture of godly spiritual formation was also a tree—this time a tree of *virtues*. This tree’s branches were the qualities of character that make us more like Jesus—virtues like courage, justice, wisdom, and hope. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, the mark of a disciple is to “bear much fruit” (John 15:8). Of course, the root of this tree was self-giving love, not selfish pride. Like many early Christians, Saint Augustine understood all the virtues as fruits or forms of love:

Courage is love readily bearing all things for the sake of God; justice is love serving only God, and therefore ruling well everything else that is subject to the human person; [wisdom] is love discerning well what helps it toward God and what hinders it (*Augustine, On the Morals of the Catholic Church*).

These pictures of vice and virtue lead us to ask ourselves, Where are *we* rooted? What are the main strengths of our character? Are there patterns to our weaknesses? Naming our sins can be the

confessional counterpart to counting our blessings. An accurate diagnosis is the first step toward healing. “To flee vice is the beginning of virtue.”

The Task of a Lifetime

This study is therefore meant to take us on a spiritual journey into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Our walk with him is an attempt to imitate his actions—but even more, to become the kind of person he is. The journey depends on the relationship, and is intended to enrich and enliven it. The vices are not merely another set of “thou shalt nots” to avoid with self-satisfied, legalistic hearts. Nor can we purge our life of evil practices on our own effort—for that we need the grace given by the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts. But receiving grace is not a passive thing! It gives us a call to action, a gift to use, and a relationship to cultivate. We show our confidence in God’s grace when we seek to grow and keep growing spiritually.

A Curriculum on Spiritual Formation

Our aim in this curriculum is to take the tree of vices and to walk contemporary people through this ancient pattern of growth in godliness. We are convinced that what Christian saints and sages of the past have to say about the different ways sin can entangle us is as insightful and relevant today as the day they wrote it.

Our objective is to help people, especially young people, embark on the same lifelong journey of spiritual progress and practice as Christians before them. We hope to help them do so with discernment and purpose. That means our job is to take centuries of theological wisdom and pastoral advice and translate it into language and life lessons that contemporary Christians can understand and apply to themselves. We’ve designed each session to be interactive and engaging, full of examples and activities for today’s growing Christian.

Each session offers

- a warm-up activity to start students thinking about the topic of the session.
- a definition of the vice or sinful habit.
- an exploration of what the vice looks like in contemporary life and in students’ lives in particular.
- spiritual disciplines designed to counter the vices in our lives.

We encourage leaders to select activities and sections from each session to suit their particular audience and time frame.

Why use this course? Why study the vices? C.S. Lewis once said,

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea (C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” *The Weight of Glory*).

The point of examining our vices is to turn to the sea. To do so, we need to know ourselves—the vices and sins that cling to us and clutch at us—so that we might turn from them to the abundant life and love that only God can give.

Note

In addition to this leader’s guide, you’ll need a booklet of student handouts for each student.

1

Discipleship Versus Deadly Sins

What do anger, lust, gluttony, avarice, vainglory, envy, and sloth have in common? Each is one of the seven deadly sins, also known as the seven capital vices. And each is rooted in pride, the source of all sin.

We don't often use the language of virtues and vices anymore. But many early Christians used virtue and vice talk to describe the process the apostle Paul calls "taking off the sinful nature" and "putting on Christ" as a transformation of character (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-14; Rom. 12:2). Vices are bad, selfish habits—the grooves of the sinful nature. Virtues are good, godly habits of character that come with the Spirit's work in our hearts. God has equipped us with his power so that we may become like him (2 Pet. 1:3-11). Becoming a virtuous person is to become an imitator of Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:1).

This task starts with a role model—Christ himself. The virtues and vices help us focus this general goal—imitating Christ—into specific areas of self-examination and spiritual discipline. Looking at the vices gives us a specific diagnosis of the habits that hinder us and hold us back. The virtues and spiritual disciplines give us practices and patterns that resist vice and transform our character to be more and more like Jesus'.

Session Focus

Virtues and vices and their role in the life of discipleship.

Session Overview

Step 1	Warm-up: Build Your Own Superhero	Students begin identifying qualities they admire by describing superheroes and real-life heroes.	Materials needed: Handout 1: "Superheroes" Pencils or pens Colored pencils, crayons, or markers; optional
Step 2	Imagine Your Funeral	Students reflect on their own lives and characters by imagining their own funerals.	Handout 2: "In Memoriam"
Step 3	Scripture Study	Students explore how Scripture describes the process of moral formation or sanctification.	Bibles Handout 3: "Building a Christlike Character"
Step 4	The Deadly Seven	Students encounter the seven deadly sins as a practical guide to discipleship.	Handout 5: "Seven Deadly Sins" Handout 6: "Seven Virtues" optional Handout 4: "Name That Vice," optional

Step 1. Warm-up: Build Your Own Superhero

Materials: *Handout 1: "Superheroes"; pencils or pens; colored pencils, crayons, or markers, optional*

Name That Hero

Distribute pencils and student handout 1: "Superheroes." Invite volunteers to describe the superheroes listed and briefly describe their super-powers for those who might not know about each superhero.

Have each person share his or her responses to these questions:

- **Who is your favorite superhero?**
- **If I could have one superhero quality, I would choose . . .**

Have students form pairs or trios. Give them instructions along these lines: **Work with your partner(s) to create the ultimate superhero. First, decide on the top five qualities you want your hero to have. These can be qualities that other superheroes have, like the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound, or unique abilities you think up on your own. When you've decided what your superhero will be like, sketch a rough draft in the space provided on the handout ("Build Your Own Superhero!") and name him/her! If you wish, provide colored pencils, crayons, or markers.**

After about 5 minutes, or when most groups are done, invite students to share their new superheroes. Have fun with it!

Name Your Hero

Now ask:

- **Who are your real-life heroes?**
- **Why do you admire those people?**
- **Describe the person you least want to become like (your anti-hero).**
- **Why don't you want to be like that person?**

Make a transition to step 2 by saying something like, **Let's think about the qualities we admire from a little different angle now.**

Step 2. Imagine Your Funeral

Materials: *Handout 2: "In Memoriam"*

My Life Remembered

Have students turn over their handouts to the side titled, "In Memoriam." Give instructions like these: **Imagine that you died today. What would someone who knew you well say at your funeral service? Take about 5 minutes to write that speech in the space indicated on your handout.**

Tip

In step 2 of this session, you'll be asking students to share somewhat personal details about themselves and their values. Lighthearted questions like those in step 1 help "warm up" students for deeper sharing later. If you're short on time and have a group that's already comfortable and open with one another, you could skip step 1 and begin the session with step 2.

After about 5 minutes, or when most people are finished, invite volunteers to share what they wrote if they feel comfortable. If students are hesitant to volunteer, read your own eulogy to model openness.

Follow up by saying something like this: **Funerals are perhaps one of the only times we sit down and think about who we are. Often we are too busy living to think about who we are becoming or the shape our character is taking.**

My Life as I'd Like It to Be Remembered

Next point students to the second sentence starter on the handout and give instructions like these: **Write down in a short paragraph the way you *wish* the eulogy at your funeral would be. What do you wish people will say about you when you actually do die? What sort of person do you want to have been?**

Again give volunteers the opportunity to share, if they wish. Then point out the following: **If you're like most people, there is a difference between the person you really are right now and the person you hope to become. You may be asking yourself (for the first time, perhaps) how you might get from who you are to who you ought to be. Bridging that gap is just the exercise in character formation that this series is about.**

Character Analysis

Point students to the "Character Analysis" section of the handout and ask them to list three good qualities or character traits they see in themselves—three things they feel are personal strengths.

Go around the group and have each student share one item on his or her list, asking, **What is your best or most positive character trait as a person? Your greatest spiritual strength?**

Then have students write down three negative character traits or areas of weakness they see in themselves.

Go around the group again, acknowledging, **We all have things we need to work on. What is one of your weaknesses or areas of moral failing as a person?** Encourage openness, but do not force anyone to share.

Wrap up this portion of the session with the following comments:

- **We rarely sit down and reflect on the sort of people we are becoming.**
- **This kind of reflection is a spiritual exercise: it gives us a sense of who we are now, helps us identify things we need to work on, and helps us be intentional about the sorts of people we are trying to become.**
- **Deliberate cultivation of character traits is called "formation" (either "moral formation" or "spiritual formation"). Our characters are formed over time, whether we are intentional about it or not.**

As a transition to the next part of the session, ask, **What do you think it would look like to be intentional about the formation of our character?**

Explain that the remaining sessions in this series on the seven deadly sins will help participants—both students and leader—become more intentional about spiritual formation as disciples of Christ.

Step 3. Scripture Study

Materials: *Bibles; handout 3: "Building a Christlike Character"*

Some Basic Terms and Ideas

Distribute Bibles and handout 3: "Building a Christlike Character."

Ask a volunteer to read aloud the section "Goals and Means" on handout 3.

Clarify if needed, then invite another volunteer to read aloud the section on the handout titled "Virtues and Vices."

Allow students to share their ideas about the "thought starter" questions, but don't spend a lot of time on it. Students may cite the Ten Commandments or the Bible as determining what they view as vices or virtues; they may express societal views as having an impact on what we view as "worse" vices. Affirm any appropriate responses, drawing out also the fact that the character of Jesus—our ideal moral role model—shapes our lists of which traits count as virtues and which ones become more important.

Bible Study

Point students to the section on the handout titled "Getting Practical" and read it aloud.

Have students form groups of two and assign each pair one of the first three passages listed. Give them a few minutes to read their passages and discuss the question with their partners, then call the groups back together and share their responses. Make sure the following points come out:

- In these passages, Paul writes about the lifelong practice of identifying and breaking down bad habits and destructive patterns, and cultivating good habits and constructive patterns in their place. The two go together: turning away from vice and turning toward virtue.
- Paul talks about taking off the "old sinful nature" and putting on the "new regenerated nature." This is the work of the Holy Spirit by grace. But grace requires that we live according to the Spirit, not that we just sit around and wait for God to wave a magic wand.

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11 together. Ask:

- **When God gives us grace, that doesn't mean we're all done being made holy. What does God expect us to contribute to the process?**
- **Do you have any ideas of what types of things we should be doing to become sanctified and more like Christ?** Expect and affirm answers like "pray" and "read the Bible." Explain that prayer and Scripture reading are among many spiritual disciplines. Later sessions will give students a range of disciplines to try.

Tip

It's fine to have more than one pair work on the same passage. If you have fewer than six students, you can assign each pair two or more passages.

Step 4. The Deadly Seven

Materials: Handout 5: “Seven Deadly Sins”; handout 6: “Seven Virtues,” optional; handout 4: “Name That Vice,” optional

The Tree of Vices

Begin this step with this explanation: **We have seen that the vices and virtues are a way of thinking about sanctification and the life of discipleship in concrete terms: Which qualities should we be getting rid of, and what do they look like? Which qualities should we be cultivating, and how do we do that?**

The Christian tradition often identified certain virtues and vices as the main ones.

Distribute handout 5: “Seven Deadly Sins” and make the following points:

- **This picture shows seven vices that we know more familiarly as “the seven deadly sins.”**
- **These seven vices are singled out not because they are the worst sins, but because they tend to be sources of other sins in our lives.**
- **The tree picture illustrates this: pride is the root or trunk of the tree, and the source of all the branches. The seven vices are the main branches. Their offspring vices are the vices’ poison fruit.**
- **It won’t do any good to keep picking off the fruit. We need to cut off the main branches and ultimately, uproot the tree.**

Invite volunteers to read aloud the descriptions of the vices/sins.

Optional: The Tree of Virtues

Have students turn to handout 6: “Seven Virtues.” Highlight the following points:

- **There is a tree of virtues too. Its root is love.**
- **The list of virtues that grows from this tree is meant to cover all aspects of our character—to depict spiritual health and growth in all major areas of our person—from our thoughts to our feelings to our actions toward God, ourselves, and others, that is with our whole self.**
- **The seven principal virtues are Faith, Hope, Love, Practical Wisdom (prudence), Justice, Courage, and Temperance. As the St. Augustine quote reminds us, they are meant to help us love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37) that is, with our whole self.**

Optional: Identifying the Seven Deadly Sins

Have students turn to handout 4: “Name That Vice,” and invite them to see if they can match each of the seven deadly sins and the few virtues (listed on the righthand side of the page) with the appropriate quote. Allow them to use handout 5: “Seven Deadly Sins” to help them.

Tip

Handout 4 (on the reverse side of handout 3) is a quiz titled, “Name That Vice.” You won’t be using that handout immediately.

Tip

Use these optional activities if you have time at the end of your session.

Answers:

1. Anger
2. Lust
3. Envy
4. Greed
5. Vainglory
6. Pride
7. Gluttony
8. Sloth

Concluding the Session

Conclude the session with this explanation: **In each of the remaining sessions in this course, we will talk about one of the seven deadly sins and its “poison fruits,” and how they all grow out of pride.**

Close with prayer.

For the Next Session

Be sure to save your copy of handout 5: “Seven Deadly Sins” to display in session 2.