

# Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Wrath & Love

Luke 9:51-56; 1 John 3:11-24

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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## Part One: Wrath

We've arrived at our last Sunday of our summer series on the seven deadly sins.

Throughout this summer I have occasionally apologized for spending a whole summer focusing on sin and virtue. Nobody particularly appreciates hearing about sin or the importance of confessing our sins, right?

Wrong, as it turns out.

I have had numerous conversations throughout the summer during coffee hours and beyond where people have told me that they have been glad for this worship series. Nearly every week, someone has told me, "Ooh, that one really hit home this week" or "I hadn't thought about this area of my life in a while" or just "Ouch."

Some of you have mentioned how much you have appreciated focusing not just on sins but on the virtues that we should be seeking in their place.

Worship leaders have regularly commented on how much they appreciated the resources we have been working with which were put together by a group of pastors and leaders from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan.

In particular, the structure of the services and the overall framing of moving from "disoriented love" to "reoriented love" has been something that many of you seem to have resonated with.

So, I have kind of been brought up short with my preemptive apologizing. I have been reminded that the church is the place where we can and we *must* have the courage to tell the truth about

ourselves, to name and confess the sins that so easily beset us, to hear words of forgiveness, and to be reoriented toward the virtues that we were created for. Where else can we do this?

Yes, it's possible for churches to go overboard in obsessing about sin. Some of you know this from personal experience. But the answer is not to cease speaking about it altogether.

I have been heartened to discover this summer that the church can still be a place where we tell the truth about ourselves, even when the truth isn't flattering.

I also thought it would be worth just a brief comment about the seven deadly sins more generally before we leave them behind.

This list is not found in the bible. You won't find a passage that names these sins explicitly and calls them "seven" or "deadly."

The list seems to have originated in the fourth century with a monk named Evagrius Ponticus who taught about "eight evil thoughts" (he included both "sloth" and "despair," which were later combined into one).

The list was formalized by Pope Gregory I in the sixth century and then over the centuries made its way into Catholic devotion, later being adopted in various ways by Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and even Mennonites!

So, the seven deadly sins are very much a product of the historical church, as Christians have sought to pay attention to lived experience in contrast to the teaching and example of Christ.

And of course, to say that the seven deadly sins aren't explicitly found in Scripture is not to say that they aren't scriptural!

You've probably noticed a common thread running through each of the seven sins this summer, and that is that each sin involves a turn *away* from God and neighbour and *toward* the self.

Self in place of God and neighbour goes right back to the original sin in Genesis 3, where the first humans chose not to trust God and God's parameters for human flourishing, but instead to believe that they could be "like God," could be their own gods in knowing good and evil for themselves.

The entire biblical narrative and the unfolding of human history could in many ways be read as the fallout from that fateful decision. Self instead of God and neighbour is at the root of nearly every problem our world has ever known, from our closest relationships to the broader domains of human culture and conflict.

- Pride: the self thinks more highly of itself than it ought to
- Envy: the self wants what other selves have and it doesn't
- Greed: the self craves more, more, more!
- Lust: the self seeks sexual gratification for itself rather than as an expression of mutual love
- Gluttony: the self and its appetites are never satisfied with "enough"
- Sloth: the self can't be bothered to care about the things that need its care

And, today, we have wrath. The self reacts angrily when it doesn't get what it wants or when it feels like it has been slighted.

I think each of the seven deadly sins are fairly prominent in our time, but wrath could possibly be the poster-sin for the internet generation.

There are too many examples to possibly cite, but I came across a relatively trivial one on Thursday.

There was an NFL exhibition football game in Winnipeg this week. The Green Bay Packers and the Oakland Raiders ventured north for a game in preparation of their season south of the border. To honour the occasion, a few players took to donning Winnipeg attire as they stepped off the plane.

One unfortunate player from the Raiders, AJ Cole, ordered a T-Shirt from Amazon with the word "Winnipeg" on it as a gesture of good will to a city he had presumably never visited and didn't know much about. The only problem was that the t-shirt said, "Winnipeg, Alberta" on it. Oops.

Well, you can imagine what happened next. The headline in news articles across the nation were merciless. One in particular read, "NFL player suffers wrath of Canadians over 'Winnipeg, Alberta' T-shirt."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/nfl-player-suffers-wrath-of-canadians-over-winnipeg-alberta-t-shirt-1.4560161>

Cole tried to use humour to atone for his “sin”: “Just a kid from Atlanta, Florida playing football in Oakland, Nevada with a low geography IQ.” Yup, that sounds about right.

It was a pretty innocent mistake by a young man who didn’t know much about geography who was trying to make a good impression. But the response was wrath.

Why?

Well, because nothing gets people’s back up like the perception that they have been disrespected, that their group has been misrepresented or attacked. And so, an utterly harmless oversight was blown up on the Internet and became a perceived insult to a city, a province, even a nation.

Wrath is, in many ways, the oxygen of the Internet. Think about how often you read a headline about some issue or other which is then dutifully and almost automatically followed by “expressions of outrage.” (If you have any doubt about this, read the comments section in any online local posting about the Safe Consumption Site!)

Somebody is always outraged about something. We are increasingly unable to say, “You know, they might have a point about this, but not that” or “I’ll have to think about this a bit” or “I’m not sure what I think about that.”

No, what we are conditioned, by the immediacy of our media and the tribalisms that it inflames, to react. Angrily. Because anger sells and wrath generates clicks.

It has ever been thus, even if our media makes it easier (and perhaps more emotionally satisfying) than ever before.

In our first Scripture reading today, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem from Galilee by way of Samaria. Jesus knows that Jerusalem is the place where he will be “taken up,” which is Luke’s way of referring to his death, resurrection, and ascension.

So Jesus’ face is set toward the city where God’s purposes will be accomplished, where he will give his life for the forgiveness of sin and as an expression of God’s love for a sin-sick world.

But they have to go through Samaria to get there. And a Samaritan village did not receive him.

And so, despite having seen Jesus feed and heal across ethnic and tribal lines, despite having just seen Jesus' on the mountaintop with Elijah and Moses and hearing a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, listen to *him*," despite just being told that true greatness involves become the least and the lowest, despite *all this*, the disciples instant response is wrath.

*Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?*

*These people resist us, so they should be destroyed, right Jesus? These people aren't for us, so we should get rid of them, right Jesus? These people resist your message, so they should be eliminated, right Jesus?*

We do this *so* naturally. That's the problem with each of the seven deadly sins—they are just so *easy* to do! They require no thought or deliberation. Selfishness and reactivity are the most natural things in the world.

Wrath is instant. And it is gratifying. It *feels* really good to be outraged about stuff.

It reinforces our default conception that we're right and justified and anyone who resists us or disagrees with us is wrong, stupid, evil, or all three.

It neatly divides the world into the category of "good people like us" and "bad people who don't think like us or do what we think they should or whose presence offends or inconveniences us."

Few things feel better than watching our enemies smolder in the fires of righteous judgment (metaphorically of course!).

This is who we are. These are the selves that we bring to confession this morning.

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## **Part Two: Love**

Our summer series ends with the virtue of love. And of course, it's appropriate that love should have the last word.

Love is at the center of it all—it is the virtue that encompasses all the others. Love is the most crucial and central concept in Christian theology and ethics. It is the very nature of the God in whose image we are made.

All of Scripture, Jesus taught, can be summed up in the dual command to love God and neighbour. Christians rightly talk a lot about love.

“This is the message you have heard from the beginning,” John says in our reading this morning, “We should love one another” (1 John 3:11).

Yet it is so easy for us to reduce love to less than it ought to be.

I think many of us—even those of us who have walked with Jesus for a long time—imagine that God’s love is a rather calculating kind of love.

God became human in order to enter into our suffering, teach us how to live, to die in our place in order to defeat the power of death and to offer us the hope of new life.

God counted the cost, weighed the potential benefits, ran the formulas and then decided upon the course of action that love would take in order to maximize desired outcomes.

If we respond appropriately (i.e., accept his gift of salvation, embrace the path of discipleship, get our theological i’s dotted and t’s crossed, etc.), then we can expect to experience God’s love.

If not? Well, then God’s love will be withheld until we make some adjustments to our beliefs and/or behaviour.

This is, perhaps, a caricature, but I don’t think it’s too far from what’s going on in many people’s minds when it comes to faith.

We naturally think in these terms because this is the form that our loves often tend to take.

We fumble towards love. We try and fail and try again. We give and withhold love based on the moral performance of our neighbour, our spouse, our child.

We treat love as a prize for good behaviour. We love when it doesn’t ask too much of us, when our love is responded to in kind.

But God, we must remember with no small amount of reverence and gratitude, is not like us.

God *is* love. And God's love is not like ours so often is—self-serving, measured, conditional.

God's love is like a father at a gate whose love does not wane no matter how often it is scorned. God's love does not demand a reckoning when the sin-sick prodigals stumble home seeking little more than a corner of the servants' quarters.

God's love is not carefully measured out in proportion to what God receives in return. God's love is prodigal, which is to say, extravagant, wasteful, reckless, irresponsible.

It doesn't make sense. It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. It never fails.

God's love is not calculation but revelation. It reveals what God is truly like and it reveals what we were truly created for.

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.*

This is a profound statement.

We know that we passed from death to life because... we believe the right doctrines about God? Because we attend the right church? Because we have the right positions on the defining issues of the day?

Because our faith feels certain and sure and we are able to easily and naturally defend it? Because we can point to a long list of blessings in our life which obviously prove divine favour? Because we have an excellent moral track record and are on the right side of theological progress?

We default to each of these lesser options easily and naturally. But John insists that it is none of these things but the love we have for one another that is the evidence that we have passed from death to life.

And it is even more sobering to hear the corresponding truth. If we *don't* love one another—if we remain imprisoned within the confines of our small, calculating, mostly self-interested selves? Well, then we remain in death.

Many of you know that the Greek language in which the New Testament was written has at least four words for love: *Eros* (passionate romantic love), *Philia* (the love of friendship or brotherhood), *Storge* (instinctual love, as of a parent to a child).

And, of course, *agape*. Selfless love, sacrificial love, love that seeks the good of the other, that is full of mercy and compassion.

*Agape* is the word used throughout our passage from 1 John. This is the love that Christ commands us to practice. This is the love that is evidence that we have passed from death to life.

And we love this way, of course, because Jesus loves us in this way. A few verses later, John will say, “In this world we are like Jesus” (1 John 4:17) and “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The love of Jesus consistently, patiently, stubbornly, at times, pushes us outward. Away from the self. Toward God. Toward neighbour.

He commands us to die to ourselves that we might truly live. To take up a towel and serve, to take up a cross and follow. He commands us to love as he has loved us, which goes far beyond the impoverished notions of love that we settle for.

He models and invites us into a love that is an expenditure of the self, not an extension of it, a love that involves giving instead of taking, a love that is a rising toward instead of a passive falling into (as our culture is so fond of describing it).

This is a love that can take a lifetime to understand and practice. But this love is the defining characteristic Christian faith.

And now these three virtues remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these—the one that stands over and encapsulates and weaves through all the others—is love.

Amen.

