

I. Set Up

- A. Good morning/ Welcome / Glad you are here, especially if you are new.
- B. As many of you know, today we kick off Seven, the fall series on The Seven Deadly Sins. Let me read a passage that helps set this series in context. It's 2 Peter 1:3-9

II. Introduction

A. Twenty-five years ago – back when I was a college pastor – I was occasionally invited to speak at a dorm meeting or in a fraternity or offer the “faith” perspective on some topic in a class. These were situations where I knew there were people who were not happy that a pastor had showed up, so I needed a strong start – something to disarm folks. Something that helped me come off a bit more like a regular, likable guy. Occasionally I'd use this joke – this high risk but potentially high reward joke.

A.1. It was about a guy who died and went to heaven. And as he was looking around at the pearly gates, streets of gold and all the people lying on clouds playing harps, he saw a bunch of clocks - millions of them. And as he looked more closely he saw that each clock had someone's name on it. So he asked, “What's with the clocks? Is this how much time people have left on earth?”



- A.2. “No,” the angel said. “These aren’t clocks. They are sin dials.”
- A.3. “Sun dials?”
- A.4. “No, sin dials. We keep track of everyone’s sin, and this is the gauge. Those that are moving fast are for people who are sinning a lot. Those who don’t sin very often have slower moving hands. Lot over there is Billy Graham’s dial. The hand is barely moving.”

A.5. Well, this was all for interesting so the man did what some people might do, he started looking up his friends to see what they were up to. To see how much sin was going on in their life. (This is where the joke got a bit risky.) He saw Alice here, and her dial wasn't moving that much. Neither was Jeff's. Bill's, well it looked more like a second hand than an hour hand, if you know what I mean. He found this all pretty interesting. Not that surprising, he might have guessed it, but interesting. However, as much as he looked he couldn't find (high risk moment – this is where the joke either really worked or really didn't. I needed someone well known, well liked and able to laugh at them self). As much as he looked he couldn't find Glenn's. So he asked. He said, "I've looked all around but I can't find Joe Smith's dial."

A.6. "Joe Smith," the angel responded. "The Joe Smith?"

A.7. "Yeah, where's his dial?"

A.8. "Well, the folks downstairs have it."

A.9. "Downstairs?"

A.10. "Yeah. It's a lot hotter down there. They use it as a fan."

B. The joke worked pretty well provided that I picked the right person. Because what I could count on was that most people had what I'll call a junior high view of sin. Pretty simplistic. Sins were bad things you did – mostly harmless, frequently involving beer.

C. Well, I'd like to suggest that there is nothing wrong with the junior high view of sin... if you are in junior high. But that at some point we probably should bring a little more insight to the topic.

D. Today we begin a new series on the Seven Deadly Sins. It's called Seven and what I'd like to do is share five reasons why you should be a part of it – participate in the study, read the book, use the daily devotions and talk about all this in your small group.

Six Reasons Why You Should Participate in Seven

III. One: Because sin is holding you back.

A. Sin is keeping you from being who you could be and ultimately want to be. Sin robs us of joy and hurts other people. Sin has a great PR firm. It is often portrayed as harmless fun or the spice of life, something exciting. It's not really that at all.

B. Simone Weil, the early 20th century French philosopher and Christian mystic, wrote: Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.

C. Sin gets in the way of the life you want.

D. Last week I finished a series called Change, in which I argued that:

D.1. We can change. We can get better. A better version of you and me is available should we decide to go after it.

D.2. Two: In order to make improvements we need to know who we are and who we should be. What kind of better is better.

D.3. Three: Jesus is the one who defines better, both by his example and teaching.

D.4. And four: As opposed to becoming a child of God – in contrast to being adopted into the family of God, being forgiven, reconciled to God, justified, which is a one-time event that happens in a moment, when we repent (agree that we are sinner and need help and turn to Christ for that help) – in contrast to our justification (which is all about the work of Christ, we do not earn it or even contribute to it), the transformation process we are after is an ongoing work and it is a partnership with God. We are active participants in our transformation. We can't do it alone and He will not do it unless we are doing what we can.

E. In that series I made pretty heavy use of a few diagrams.

E.1. One that said we are where we are – the state of our soul is where it is – based on a handful of factors and forces.



E.1.a) Some push us one way, help shape our soul in good ways – like worship, in which we place God in the center of our life, or reading and really engaging the Bible, serving others, especially those in need.

E.1.b) Some push us one way and some push the other. They hold us back. There are spiritual forces of evil aligned against us. The effect of our sin – which we can be forgiven from, but still suffer the consequences of. God may forgive me for lying, but it's likely I will still be saddled with the reputation of being a liar. There are a number of things that hold us back.

E.2. Another held this equation:

$$\frac{\text{Truth} \times \text{Grace} \times \text{Time}}{\text{Sin}} = \text{Growth}$$

E.2.a) I spent a fair bit of time defining Truth, Grace and Time – the top half of the equation, noting that starting this week we’d turn our attention to the bottom half – the denominator. Well, sin is the great denominator, the great divider and minimizer.

E.2.b) The more sin in our life the more problems we have.

F. If we want to become more of who we could be and should be – we need to minimize sin. It undermines joy. It holds us back. It pulls us down.

IV. Two: The second reasons to participate in Seven is **because sin is tricky**.

A. It is misleading and deceptive. Chances are high that you do not understand it as well as you think.

B. This is understandable because – when it comes to morality (ethics in general) and sin in particular – there is not a lot of agreement any more.

B.1. A growing number of people deny that sin exists. You can say and do just about anything and be OK. What you can’t do is to suggest that anything is not OK. People are willing to talk about mistakes, immature actions, psychological maladies, personality disorders, class struggles, a failure to realize potential – there are terms used to imply that not everything is as it could be. But it’s, well, it’s sort of a sin to use the word sin. About twenty years ago *sin* replaced *sex* as the “S word” no one’s supposed to talk about in polite company. Consequently, our understanding of sin is not very high.

C. So what is sin?

C.1. Well, we could learn a few things by studying the different Hebrew and Greek terms found in the Bible that are all translated sin.

C.1.a) רָעָה, which is used 600 times, is most often translated as "evil" or "bad". It's something contrary to God's nature.

C.1.b) חַטָּאת is used 300 times to describe an action or "offense" deserving of punishment.

C.1.c) רָשָׁע means "wicked" – it describes something that is morally wrong.

C.1.d) פְּשָׁע is something that is perverse or twisted.

C.1.e) מַרְדָּת implies rebellion.

C.1.f) שָׁוָה means to stray or vacillate

C.1.g) hamartia is an archery term that describes falling short or missing the mark.

C.1.h) פְּגַמָּה is an error – either unintentional or deliberate

C.1.i) אָנוּמוֹס is lawless

C.2. We could unpack the different types or categories of sins people create:

C.2.a) Sins of omission refer to the things we should do but don't, as opposed to sins of commission, things we shouldn't do but do.

C.2.b) Some talk about mortal and venial sins – the first being capital B A D bad, the latter not quite so much.

C.3. When the conversation heads down these paths I am always trying to make three points:

C.3.a) Sin is more of a condition than an action –we are not called sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. We are broken. The problems run very deep.

C.3.b) Two: Sin is always ultimately stupid. It always hurts us. We are never expected to act against our own best interest. We simply often do not understand what's best for us.

C.3.c) And third, I also want to argue that ultimately sin is rebellion against a good, gracious and holy God. It's less the act of a criminal than a traitor – we act against God.

D. There is a lot that could be said on this front. There is a lot of theological insight we might gain. But for today's purposes I'm going to keep it simple. Let me make six basic observations about sin.

D.1. First: Sin is easy.

D.1.a) Doing the right thing is almost always harder than doing the wrong thing. Sinning is easy, consequently it's not very impressive. Anybody can do it. Every sin is within your reach! Sin is mass produced by amateurs.

D.2. Second: Sin is attractive.

D.2.a) Sin is often lots of fun, at least for a while. It has to be or it wouldn't be tempting. If Mocha Almond Fudge ice cream tasted like bran cereal we wouldn't eat it and a lot more of us have wash board abs!

D.3. Third: Sin is deceptive.

D.3.a) Sin has perfected the art of bait and switch. It's initially quite appealing, but it cannot deliver as promised - at least not for long. Over time sin takes more and more and returns less and less. It demands more from us and gives less joy back.

D.3.b) We'd never buy if we understood the true cost. It's just that it has a great PR firm. It presents itself as being much better than it is.

D.4. Fourth: Sin is defective.

D.4.a) Sin is imperfect good. It's the corruption of something God created.

D.4.b) As C.S. Lewis explains in *The Screwtape Letters*, virtually all sin is the distortion of something originally created by God to be good – such as lust being the corruption of love

D.4.c) J.R.R. Tolkein leveraged this in - Orcs

D.4.d) This is why we need more and more but find it less and less joyful.

D.5. Five: Sin is destructive.

D.5.a) It destroys us. As noted earlier, sin breaks us down.¹ It holds us back. It deforms us and makes us small. It hardens our hearts.

D.5.b) And it's not a move towards freedom but towards slavery. There is so much misunderstanding here. A train may long to be free from the tracks so it can go where it wants, but that's not how trains were designed to work.

¹ Be killing sin or it will be killing you. John Owen, 17th century Puritan theologian.

D.5.c) Sin is always a move against our best interest. Some think that if they cheat on their taxes God may strike them with cancer. It's much more likely that if they cheat on their taxes you will get caught and have to pay a large fine or maybe even go to prison. Sin ruins us.

D.6. **Six: Sin is progressive**

D.6.a) What begins as an excuse, soon becomes a habit and then a cage. It not only gets easier, but like a junkie, we need a bigger fix. Our hearts become more and more calloused. What thrilled yesterday isn't enough for today.

D.6.b) Remember, sin is broken good. It is unable to ultimately satisfy so you can count on the fact that it will not keep working. What I'm trying to highlight here is that as a result we will wrongly seek more and more hoping that it will bring the joy we are after.

E. As noted, sinning is stupid. It defaces and deforms. It makes us small. We are simply too short-sighted to see where sin leads and too weak and already broken to keep from going there.

V. Three: The third reason to study Seven is **because many of us are stalled**.

A. Many of you – not all, but many – have made decisions to follow Christ. You've stepped over the line, but you haven't moved forward in a long, long time.

B. You may have gotten better in other ways. You may have been promoted or lowered your golf handicap. You may have gotten in shape or taken ground in a variety of ways. But if you are honest, you plateaued spiritually.

C. The same things hold you back. You are caught in a pretty predictable cycle.

D. It doesn't have to be that way. We can get better but not if we do the same things. Some part of the equation needs to change.

E. We need to go after the underlying issues.

F. We have to do some different kind of work. More of the same will yield more of the same.

VI. Four: **Because the Seven Deadly Sins are proven**.

A. Please listen carefully, because I do not want to overpromise here. I am not saying easy. I am not saying quick. You will not get three easy steps towards overnight transformation. Many make promises like that. We hear them all the time.

A.1. You can eat whatever you want and lose weight

- A.2. You can get better grades by learning in your sleep
 - A.3. You can triple your income working just a few hours a week out of your own home
 - B. And these plans seldom work. There is always a catch. Consequently, they don't last.
 - C. There are other plans that say: this will be hard and it will take a while, but you will see improvement. In Seven I'm going to introduce you to a framework – a construct, an approach – that has been around a long time. It's proven. It will take hard work, it will make some demands, it will require that you change some things. But it will help.
 - D. It will not deliver you to some point of perfection. But it will help you move forward. It is based on the Bible. It is based on insights into the human condition that are true. And if you want some wins – if you want to take ground, make progress – then this series is as good as any other.
 - E. If you know if you read the first chapter or, if you've heard me reference this before, the list of Seven Deadly Sins is not a list we find in the Bible. All seven of the sins are in the Bible – and there are lists of sins in the Bible – but this grew out of the reflection of some early Christian leaders.
 - F. The initial group was mostly men who really wanted to get better – they were really focused on it. And they went to the desert to work on this.
 - F.1. Some went there to follow Jesus's example – just before his ministry he spent 40 days in the Judean wilderness.
 - F.2. Others went there hoping to escape the corruption of the city and the church.
 - F.3. They all quickly realized that the real challenges were inside them. They didn't need any help doing the wrong thing. A corrupt culture might make sin easier, but moving out of a corrupt culture didn't mean they left all sin behind.
 - F.4. The list of the Seven Deadly Sins was initially drafted by one of these Desert Fathers. It was modified a handful of times after that. But it was based on a desire to identify the root cause of sin – to trace bad thoughts and actions back to their root cause – and then find ways to minimize its power and hold on them.
 - G. The Seven Deadly Sins predate the movie Seven, and predate Dante's Inferno. They go back to the third century.
- VII. The fifth reason you should be a part of Seven is **because the stakes are high.**

- A. Look, I know that most of you are busy. Crazy busy. It's hard not to be. But some things are more important than others, and the state of your soul – your relationship with God – is a lot more important than many of the things you are giving time and attention to.
- B. Sometimes we get that and sometimes we don't. This week it was pretty clear for me. As some of you may know, last Thursday night I got a call from my parents informing me that my Dad – who is 80 – had been diagnosed with AML Leukemia, the worst kind.
- C. The initial reports led them to say, treatment wasn't really an option. He probably had 6 – 8 weeks to live and no real viable treatment options.
- D. Let me pause right here and say that in subsequent lab work the doctor has become more optimistic. He said he was thinking more six months than six weeks and thinks there is good reason to try to knock it into remission. And my Dad agreed to head down that path.
- E. But, I raced out of here last Sunday to fly down to see him. Three of my siblings had already flown in and we had a wonderful 48 hours that included some great conversations and reflection. There was laughter and tears. There was love. And one of the things that is making this easier is that my Dad has really grown as a person over the last fifteen years. Not perfect. Not close – he'd be the first to say that.
- F. But there has been some real attention to things that matter and that has lead us to a very different spot.
- G. He's willing to fight this for a while and see if there are some bonus years. But he's also ready to go and looking forward to what comes next.
- H. Some things matter. Lots of things don't. Your relationship with God, the state of your soul, matters.
- I. Seven is hardly the only way forward, but it's a way forward.
- VIII. And, the sixth reason you should participate in Seven is **because we've made it easy.**
- A. We are tying together:
- A.1. The sermons
 - A.2. Daily readings – which come online
 - A.3. Readings
 - A.4. Small group discussion

B. We're trying to make it as easy as we can for you to take some next steps. You have to do your part. You have to show up and read and find some friends to discuss things with.

C. And you have to be honest with yourself. You have to be open with God. I can't do this for you. No one can. But we've tried to make it as easy as we can for you to take a next step.

D. And while I'm here let me say that I saw again the importance of small groups. Both of my parents are in small groups – Bible study / support groups. Every Monday morning at 7 my Dad meets with 8 men. My Mom's group is Tuesday morning. They've got other support, but you could tell that these groups were ramping up to be front line care as they head into this next set of challenges will very likely end with my Father's death. I'm not promising lifelong friends to emerge out of the small groups that meet for Seven – but you might be surprised. Or, you might decide to take some existing friendships to the next level.

IX. Men and Women, it's time to be a bit more intentional about things that matter

A. I encourage you to jump into this series.

B. You can get books – which everyone going through this needs – and sign up for daily devotionals in the lobby. You can sign up to be in a group. You can get the material to host a group with some friends.

C. You can take steps towards a closer relationship with the God who loves you, and you can take steps towards becoming a better person. None of this will happen by accident. You don't casually move in the right direction any more than you casually or accidentally fall into shape. If you want to do this you have to make it happen. I hope and pray you will.

X. Announcement

A. Concert for Messiaen

B. Financial Status

C. Need your books for Seven, Daily Devotions start tomorrow