

## Seven Deadly Sins, Seven Heavenly Virtues

*Rev. Victoria Ingram  
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(In my best “hellfire and damnation” voice...) Sin, brothers and sisters, today I’m talking about sin! My sin, your sin – all the world’s sin! For we are sinned and shamed, sisters and brothers, and we must repent. Can I get an “amen”?

And now you know why I didn’t become a revival preacher. It’s hard for me to get a head of steam up for that kind of thinking – it’s not my theology. And, frankly, most Unitarian Universalists don’t take it seriously, either – sin, that is. Preaching the UU “gospel” of the inherent worth and dignity of all, we sometimes focus so much on the positive aspects of human nature that we forget that we, as well as others, have the potential to choose bad behavior as well as good. To sin, if you will.

While our UU theology may not lead us to consider the Seven Deadly Sins, or any sin, for that matter, as tickets to eternal damnation, I think we do need to give them some level of thought and consideration. Not only because each of us must confront our own lapses of good judgment and behavior in this life, but also because we witness so many examples of bad choices, or sinful behavior, in everyday life.

From simple lapses of good manners to truly horrific, evil deeds, we humans make mistakes. On a regular basis. With devastating results for ourselves and for the rest of the human community, the environment, our fellow creatures, and the universe. As a faith community, we must have an answer for why this happens, why we make the choices we make to behave in ways we know don’t support our highest values and hopes for ourselves and others.

Then, too, when we make mistakes, we need to have a strategy for acknowledgement and forgiveness. This is one place where, theologically, I think the Catholics come close to getting it right. By offering a venue for confession and absolution, Catholic doctrine addresses head-on a very human need to be witnessed in our humanity and assured that we can be forgiven and start over again.

It is, of course, the Catholics who defined the roster of the Seven Deadly Sins, although they were certainly not the first to identify human foibles and transgressions. Pope Gregory the Great, in 590 AD who constituted the list we know today – sloth, envy, lust, gluttony, greed, anger, and pride.

These concepts of wrong behavior have framed our thinking for thousands of years, even before they were constellated into the “gang of seven.” The Seven Deadly Sins are referenced in theological writings and the work of churches, no doubt, but they are also a part of our popular culture – the inspiration for both fiction and non-fiction writing, song lyrics, poetry, and art, movies and television, video games, and comic books.

Reference Val Ramsey’s art piece of Seven Deadly Sin prints.

We have no lack of examples of people behaving badly. News stories are created by our fellow humans – by us - choosing bad behavior. What part does greed play in mine disasters or in oil spills? What role does anger, or pride, play in the relationships between countries? What toll have lust and envy taken on the indigenous people of the world, as they were confronted by the power of colonizing nations who wanted their land, their resources, their treasures? We humans are capable of great good, but we are also capable of great evil.

So, let's take a moment with each of these "sins," to gain a richer picture of what aspects of our human behavior they include. The definitions I'm using came from a search of the "sins" on Wikipedia.

Sloth – including laziness and indifference, sloth includes the failure to fully utilize one's gifts and talents. The virtue which addresses sloth is diligence – a careful attendance to one's actions, work, and activities.

Envy – like, greed, characterized by an insatiable desire, but different in that envy isn't about material goods, but about the perception that another person has something which we believe we are lacking, and wishing that they were deprived of it. Aquinas described envy as "sorrow for another's good." Kindness, compassion, and empathy help us tame our tendency to envy.

Lust – is generally associated with excessive thoughts or desires of a sexual nature. It's counter is the virtue of chastity – embracing a moral wholesomeness and purity of thought.

Gluttony – is the over-indulgence or over-consumption of anything to the point of waste. To counter gluttony we turn to the virtue of temperance, a constant mindfulness of one's surroundings and a practice of self-control and moderation.

Greed – another sin of excess, greed applies to the excessive desire or pursuit of temporal wealth, status, and power. It is countered by charity, generosity, and a willingness to give of one's self.

Anger – wrath, rage – inordinate and/or uncontrolled feelings of hatred, impatience, revenge, or spite. Developing our ability to live with patience and forbearance counters anger. Here we are challenged to show mercy, to resolve conflicts peacefully without resorting to violence, and to show mercy to one another.

Pride – is defined as a desire to be more important or attractive than others, failing to acknowledge the good work of others, and an excessive love of self. Pride is sometimes considered the original and most serious of the deadly sins and, ultimately, the source from which the others arise. When we engage and develop our humility, we are countering our pride. By giving respect and credit where it is due, we keep our own ego in check.

Now, if those definitions leave you squirming a bit in your seat in recognition of your own shortcomings, you'll be happy to know that I won't be asking for a show of hands today for who's indulged in what. Suffice it say that I think, I know, that as humans living a very real life, it is probable that all of us have engaged in all of these, and perhaps more, at one point or another in our lives. We could choose to be wracked by guilt. We could choose to just ignore our guilt or shame and continue to behave badly, in service to our own wants and desires.

The point is not to deny our humanity, to pretend that sin doesn't happen, or to inhabit a Pollyanna world where all things are happy, bright, and sunny.

The point is to develop a strategy for being human, for living successfully with our very human natures. We must have a way to acknowledge and understand all of the aspects of our nature – the good impulses and the not-so-good ones – and to be able to encourage ourselves and each other to not only pursue the good, but to get back on track when we have fallen short.

This process seems to be particularly challenging for Unitarian Universalists. The late Rev. Forrest Church put it this way: “Liberal theology doesn't take evil seriously enough, and we seem to have lost our doctrine of sin sometime in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Religious fundamentalism takes evil seriously, to be sure, and would certainly seem to have a doctrine of sin. But, by trivializing sin into a moralistic catalogue of personal foibles, fundamentalists reserve the badge of real evil for others. With sin, however, there are no others.”

When we choose to see the evil, the bad, the sinfulness – if you will – in others, but look away from our own, we move from living in reality to life in a fantasy world of “us” and “them.” When it comes to human behavior, there is no “us” and “them” – there's only “we.” All of us are capable of great harm and great good; we must choose wisely every moment of our lives.

I'm not encouraging us to look the other way in the face of evil, or to gloss over bad behavior. I am encouraging us to make sure we are constantly engaged in a reflective and personal process of looking at and acknowledging our own behavior, of making confession – at least to ourselves – of where we fall short of our values and aspirations, and sincerely attempting to restructure our lives to reflect more of who we long to be and less of who we can be at our worst moments.

I've heard that there is a popular saying in the American South – “Oh Lord, please help me be the person my dog thinks I am.” Sometimes, it seems that our appearance of civility and good manners is only a rather thin shell, under which lurks our ability to be mean, petty, cruel, or brutal. Our values as Unitarian Universalists call us to be more than our least common denominator as a human family. But we shouldn't let our focus on the ideal mislead us to think that we are not capable of evil, of hurting one another, of creating a hell on earth for our fellow travelers.

Whether there are seven deadly sins – or seven hundred – issues of good and evil surround us and impact our lives. If I were a priest, I might say, “Te absolvo.” But, in our faith tradition, it's not in my power to say that. I'm aware of my own, and others', very human natures. Even if we repent and forgo one form of sin or another, it's pretty certain we will transgress again, at least in some small way or another. The power of absolution resides in each of us, as we consider our lives, our actions, and find our own ways to rectify the wrongs we have created and forgive ourselves and others for those transgressions.

Our hope comes from our belief in the basic goodness of all people, of our conviction that we can and will choose to do the right thing, if we give ourselves the chance. Our faith does not require us to be infallible. Our hope comes from being in a community where we honor and celebrate our common humanity, where hold each other accountable, where we encourage each other to live a life according to our values, where we model for each other what it means to live in right relationship to our Principles. Our hope is in finding the best in each other and encouraging that goodness to be the place from which we lead our lives. We are blessed to have this community of faith and hope, not only when we are joyful and life is on track, but when we have let ourselves be led astray and we need help to get back on the path of what we know has truth and meaning for us.

Go and sin a little less. Blessed be.