

*The*  
D E A T H  
*of the*  
D E A D L Y  
S I N S

*Embracing the Virtues That  
Transform Lives*

*Edited by*  
DANIEL M. DORIANI

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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The authors of this book dedicate it to the memory of  
the men and women who modeled virtue for us:

Our parents, grandparents, siblings, and children;  
our teachers, coaches, mentors, and friends.

Whether you intended it or not, whether you used words or not, you  
manifested humanity's endurance, wisdom, justice, and courage and  
sketched the Lord's love, mercy, and compassion. Thank you.

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# FOREWORD

As a Christian and pastor, I am always looking for encouragement in sanctification. I find that believers, myself included, are encouraged by God's grace shown to us in justification but are discouraged by our seeming lack of progress in sanctification—our growth in godliness. Yet sanctification is not meant to be discouraging because, properly understood, sanctification is God's working in us, by means of the Holy Spirit, to transform us into the image of his Son. Like justification, sanctification is a benefit of Christ's saving work and a manifestation of the freedom and new life that the gospel brings. In short, sanctification is good news!

I am thankful for *The Death of the Deadly Sins*. It provides positive help to Christians by offering an opportunity to rethink our battle against sin, how to grow in godliness, and the plan and resources that the Lord has graciously provided to help us win the battles and “to grow in grace through our union with Christ.” It promotes a “sober optimism or guarded confidence” that we can and will progress in godliness. Its message is timely and important because so many Christians struggle to keep three things in proper balance: God's working in us by his Spirit to conform us to the image of his Son, our own responsibility to grow in godliness, and the ordinary means of grace available to us to achieve this growth.

Dan Doriani puts his finger on significant challenges that are hampering our preaching and teaching on sanctification. First, the fear of promoting self-righteousness, legalism, and moralism can leave us uncertain about how to foster appropriate pursuits of godliness. We do not want to become the

Prodigal Son's older brother, but how do we grow in a humble, gracious, merciful, un-self-righteous personal godliness?

Second, while we rightly resist the idea of Jesus' merely being a moral example, and while we stress that our justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not gained by following Jesus' example, how do we follow the Bible's consistent imperatives to imitate God and Christ? The gospel is not "be like Jesus," but when the gospel message comes through to us, we realize that not only are we freely justified by God, but also we have been "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29–30). And this means that we will want to have the mind of Christ, want to follow Christ, and want to be like Christ—God's very image—into whose image we are being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Third, how do we pair appropriate humility with appropriate confidence in the progress of godliness in the Christian life? Some believers emphasize the struggles, brokenness, and difficulties of the Christian life without accenting the experience and expectation of growth. But part of the good news is that real change can and will happen in our lives because God's Spirit is at work within us to transform us into the image of his Son. That's why Paul confidently asserts that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). This is a strong, hope-giving word of assurance that we need in our Christian lives.

Fourth, how do we properly relate relying on God for our sanctification with our grace-wrought efforts to grow in godliness? Passivity in the face of battling sin robs us of the energy we need to stay in the fight. Some teachers wrongly posit that "the only way we ever get better is to stop trying." Doriani and friends understand that the motives of grace and the means of grace belong together. Understanding that principle helps. God is supernaturally at work in our lives, using various means to achieve his transformative purposes for us. We are to stay engaged in the battle! There are disciplines and habits of grace.

I have often been helped by John Newton and Sinclair Ferguson in thinking through these things. Now I will add to my shelf this book by Dan Doriani and friends. It is not only a study of deadly vices and their corresponding virtues, but also a reliable guide that explains how our union with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit enable us to

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pursue conformity to the one in whom all goodness and virtue reside. As I reflect on the message of this book, I am reminded of Paul's words to the Philippians: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13). These verses capture one of the great realities of the Christian life: our call to labor in holiness is grounded in God's sovereign work in us.

As you read *The Death of the Deadly Sins*, you will be challenged to confront the vices that hinder your walk with the Lord. As that happens, may you find encouragement in the gospel's power to transform your life. And may you, by the Spirit's enabling, grow in the virtues that reflect the glory of our Savior.

Ligon Duncan  
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January 2025

# PREFACE

This book has just enough footnotes that a scholar might consult it and just enough stories that a popular reader might enjoy it. But the chief audience is the church leader who seeks a God-centered, gospel-driven account of virtue and vice. We have teachers in mind, too, so we offer discussion questions and the Scriptures that guided our thinking. As teachers, we hope to stir you—mind, emotion, and will—to understand virtue both theoretically and experientially. That is why the book begins and ends with a vision of virtue and the means to it (chapters 1, 2, and 11). It is also why chapters 4 to 10 move from vice and virtue instead of dwelling on deadly sins (vices) alone.

Chapter 3 surveys vice and virtue in Christian thought, so we can learn from the wisdom—or missteps—of the fathers of the church. Historically minded people may notice that this book doesn't quite follow the most common order for the seven deadly sins. There are two reasons for this.

First, there is no established order for the vices. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas, the premier scholar of the vices, arranged them four ways in his *Summa Theologica*, in question 84, article 4. Three of his lists begin with pride. In one, he says that pride leads to envy, for the proud hate to be overshadowed; then anger, at the loss of glory; and then sloth (why bother?). The more physical sins (greed, gluttony, and lust) follow. But Aquinas also put gluttony second, since gluttony is a second gateway sin. Gluttony seems small, and food is unavoidable; we must eat, and food inescapably brings pleasure to the hungry. But the pleasures of food readily lead to gluttony and to additional physical self-indulgence—lust and greed.

## *Preface*

But second, this book aims to accent the order of the virtues. We can see that humility (chapter 4), the cure for pride, logically leads us to generosity (chapter 5). The humble know that they deserve nothing, that God has been generous to them. God's virtue shapes them, so that they are generous and gracious (chapter 6). Next, if all we have is a gift, we will be content with what we have (chapter 7). But contentment is no passive trait; believers still labor diligently (chapter 8) to fuel their generosity. We also give thanks for all of God's gifts (chapter 9), including the fruit of our labor, which we share with others (Eph. 4:28). That is an act of love (chapter 10), which cures gluttony and, in another way, lust. So virtue starts with a gospel-driven humility and love. Both lead us to honor others above ourselves, and that leads to all kinds of virtue.

Over the last six weeks, I spent ten days caring for two grandchildren and fifteen days caring for my wife following surgery, all while working long hours at my regular job. Although all three are delightful companions, a long workday followed by extra rounds of care for others often led to temptation to sinful thoughts: "I am such a noble servant" (pride), or "I am so tired of hearing 'Can you do one more thing?'" (anger). And I wanted to pretend that I did not read or hear a valid call for help (sloth). The chapters of this book helped me along, as they led me to remember virtues such as humility, generosity, love, and grace, all so perfectly manifest in our Lord Jesus. With all my coauthors, I wish the same for you.

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# 1

## THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE

DANIEL M. DORIANI

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified.” —1 Cor. 6:9–11*

### Hard Times for Virtue

Virtue has fallen on hard times. The West has apparently abandoned the idea that leaders ought to be men or women of character. In the past, leaders labored to control their appetites and impulses. Today, many extol men and women who have the resources and boldness to indulge every desire and unleash every impulse. Today, in Christopher Lasch’s oft-quoted words, people assume that “psychic health and personal liberation are synonymous with an absence of inner restraints [or] inhibitions.”

One day in 2023, the *New York Times* published two articles inviting readers to abandon the quest to be good. The first article, “I Don’t Need to Be a ‘Good Person,’” urged readers to “listen to your worst instincts and darkest desires.” In the second, “The Virtues of Being Bad,” sixteen writers confessed a range of offenses. At first, it was trivia—eating junk food and

purchasing products from allegedly pernicious corporations because *they like their stuff so much*. More ominously, they lie to strangers, deliberately giving misleading information; they practice shoplifting; and they sleep with friends at random because it's fun, *because* it's transgressive, for the hellofit.<sup>1</sup>

Judging by widely read advice columns, most Americans live by a code that has just a few rules: Don't break promises you make to your friends, don't cheat on your partner (unless you agree on polyamory), and don't exploit power differentials. People generally do what it takes to be happy—and to help family and friends find happiness, too. So they follow their heart, they cut off people who aren't "life-giving," and they seek authenticity.

The public square has bigger doubts about virtue. Image consultants claim that it is more helpful to *seem* virtuous than to *be* virtuous.<sup>2</sup> So professionals do pro bono work to burnish their image, and drinking clubs perform public service so that they look like more than drinking clubs.

Psychologists argue that the quest for virtue is futile. Humans suffer from "virtue fatigue" if they try to do good all day, just as they undergo "decision fatigue" if they face choices all day. Various societies create carnivals as occasions for sanctioned misbehavior or suspension of social norms, allegedly because civic leaders think the people will rebel if they must behave properly every last day.

There are even full-scale virtue skeptics. They think: "How predictable that an interest in virtue should flourish in a culture consumed with achievement and self-development. For such people, virtue is a fitness program for the soul. A little sacrifice is like a little exercise; both are good for you. Worse yet, when we grow in virtue, we start to admire ourselves. But if we act generously because it confirms our self-concept as a generous person,

1. Jamieson Webster, "I Don't Need to Be a 'Good Person.' Neither Do You," *New York Times*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/25/opinion/desires-good-person.html>; "The Virtues of Being Bad" (sixteen contributors), *New York Times*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/25/opinion/bad-pleasures-virtues.html>.

2. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 84–89. Plato first articulated this concept in *The Republic*, letting Glaucon (a Sophist) articulate it while Socrates refuted it.

for whose benefit do we act generously?”<sup>3</sup> So virtue devours itself when it turns inward and forgets God and neighbor.

Meanwhile, certain philosophers view all ethical claims with suspicion because they believe that powerful people use ethical systems to entrench their privileges. Virtue skeptics propose that whenever anyone hears an ethical claim, he or she should ask: “Who is seeking power? By what strategy? How will they use their authority?”

Christians have doubts about virtue, too. Some notice that the Bible speaks of God’s law hundreds of times and barely mentions virtue. Harry Blamires observed that “the moral keynote of Christianity must be obedience.” The center of Christian morals is “submission to demands. . . . God calls and man obeys.”<sup>4</sup> If that is true, then who needs virtue? All we need is a disposition to obey the law.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther also criticized virtue, saying that the journey of the redeemed is not from vice to virtue, but “from virtue to the grace of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Luther stated that the great enemy of the faith is not the “godless sinner” but the “righteous man” who dwells on his progress and swells with pride.<sup>7</sup> A stress on disciplined steps toward virtue obscures the great leap from sin to God’s mercy. As Dom Hélder Câmara wrote:

I pray incessantly for the conversion  
of the prodigal son’s brother.  
Ever in my ear rings the dread warning:  
“This one has awoken from his life of sin.  
When will the other awaken from his virtue?”<sup>8</sup>

3. See Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 13–16.

4. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 109–10.

5. Jean Porter, “Virtue,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 205.

6. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. and trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 3–5.

7. Gerhard O. Forde, “The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today,” *Interpretation* 34, no. 1 (January 1980): 39.

8. Hélder Câmara, *A Thousand Reasons for Living* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 71.

Indeed, there is a kind of virtue that leads away from Jesus. The Pharisees suffered from it, as we see in Matthew 15:1–20. The film *Amadeus* illustrates the principle as it tells the story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart through the eyes of Antonio Salieri, a rival composer. Salieri is just perceptive enough to comprehend the magnitude of Mozart’s brilliance, just honest enough to admit how feeble his own compositions sound in comparison, and just wicked enough to hate Mozart for it. Consumed by envy, Salieri frames his misery as God’s injustice. After all, Salieri protests, Mozart is lusty and rude, but he, Salieri, is virtuous. He prays for God’s favor. He toils. He never touches a woman (although he does wound them). But Salieri’s brand of virtue is proud and harsh, and he despises God for failing to reward it.

Clearly, it is time to define true virtue and to make a case for it.

## **The Case for Virtue**

The *concept* of virtue is widespread in Scripture, even if the *word* “virtue” is rare. A central passage, 2 Peter 1:3–7, does use the common Greek word for “virtue” (*aretē*) several times. Translations render *aretē* as “goodness,” “excellence” (ESV), or “virtue” (KJV, NKJV).

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence [*aretē*], by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue [*aretē*], and virtue [*aretē*] with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

We notice, above all, that God’s gift of life brings godliness, knowledge of God, and virtue. When God grants life, he bestows “his own glory and excellence.” The essence of that is to “become partakers of the divine nature.” As we claim God’s “great promises,” we “supplement [our] faith with

virtue,” and that leads to specific godly virtues—self-control, steadfastness, and brotherly affection. Slavery to passion and sin ends, and God renews us in his image (Rom. 6; Col. 3).

God’s character is the essence of virtue. The heart of virtue is to know the Lord and to become like him, as a child resembles her father. That is the goal, privilege, and destiny of the redeemed. Romans 8:29 informs us that those whom God “foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Believers should gradually resemble Jesus more and more.

A student who disciplined my daughter described the day they met this way: “She was ten years old and she used *non sequitur* correctly. I could tell that she loves words—just like you.” That warms a father’s heart, but hear the principle: When we spend time with people we love, it changes us. The Lord is pleased when we spend time with him and become more like him.

To be like Jesus is both our destiny and God’s command. Paul told the Ephesians that they should imitate God: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 4:32–5:2). Philippians 2 tells disciples to empty themselves of selfish ambition and self-interest because Jesus did so. From his incarnation to his crucifixion, Jesus “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7) and humbled himself. We should do the same.<sup>9</sup> In a word, a virtuous person is a lot like Jesus.

With this in mind, we define *virtue* as the *reliable* disposition to *desire* what is good, to *discern* what is good, and to *practice* it faithfully, even when that is difficult.<sup>10</sup> The virtuous person has a *capacity to do good and practices* the good with discernible consistency.<sup>11</sup>

9. J. de Waal Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 56–62; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 317–41.

10. This definition draws on Nikki Coffey Tousley and Brad Kallenberg, “Virtue Ethics,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 814, and Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 59–60.

11. This borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and the exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us

Greeks or Romans defined *virtue* differently. They thought virtues were quite distinct, so that one man could be both generous and a coward (despite the problem that a coward is *not* generous to the people around him). Aristotle suggested that people gain virtue by finding the middle ground or golden mean between extreme behaviors. Thus, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. Take two soldiers. The coward fears everything, flees a battlefield, and reaps shame. The rash man fears nothing, rushes toward danger, and dies.<sup>12</sup> The courageous soldier is realistic about war and yet remains steadfast. Similarly, generosity stands between stinginess and extravagance. If virtue is merely the space between two errors, a secular person can possess one or more virtues, and be proud of them.

Let's illustrate virtue by revisiting an old moral puzzle. In the 1940s, people who lived in Nazi-occupied lands faced unprecedented decisions. Would they collaborate with the Nazis, ignore them, or resist them? Would they turn in Jews, ignore them, or help them? Would they hide Jews until they had a viable exit plan? If so, what would they do if a Nazi officer arrived at the door, asking, "Are there Jews in the house?"

Imagine that a group of Dutch Christians has hidden Jews in their homes and now debates this question. Liam sees a narrowly *moral* decision: "God's law requires us to tell the truth. We must obey and leave the results to him. He can still deliver a Jew if he wills it." Maria replies: "If we admit that we are hiding Jews, we hand them to murderers, so we can't simply 'tell the truth.' I would evade the question and say, 'Do I look like a hero to you?'"

Next, Hans speaks. "I have searched Scripture and think a believer *may* say something misleading, even false, to save a life. In Exodus 1, God favored the midwives who deceived Pharaoh to save the lives of Israel's infants.<sup>13</sup> The preservation of life outranked the call to submit to authorities

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from achieving any such goods." Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 191.

12. Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross (New York: Random House, 1941), 953–54, 975–80 (2.2, 3.6–9). Of course, Aristotle knew that adultery, theft, and murder are always wrong. See Aristotle, 959 (2.6).

13. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 836–37. Frame lists sixteen cases of deception of an enemy, including Rahab's deception of the leaders of Jericho and the deception of the army of Ai that God himself authorized (Josh. 2, 8).

and tell the truth. God is the Author and Sustainer of life, so we should preserve life, too.”

Hans adds: “In this case, when Nazis ask if there are Jews in my house, the *location* of the Jews is the superficial question. Their *real* question is, ‘Will you deliver Jews to us so that we can kill them?’ They mean, ‘Are you harboring people who should die because they belong to a despised ethnic group?’ The answer is, ‘We are harboring no one who deserves to die due to their ethnicity.’ We can’t deliver people to their death because Nazis hate their ethnic group.”

Still, the group hesitates to lie, even to save a life. Maria notes that Jesus often sidestepped the questions people asked and addressed the issue that people *should* have raised (Matt. 21:18–22; John 9:1ff.). We should do the same, she says. Aline adds: “There is a practical issue, too. We don’t lie much. If we try to lie to the Nazis, we will be nervous and inept, and they will sense that.”

Hans summarizes, “We must help the Jews in a way that fits Scripture *and* our way of life, so that we can act naturally, even as we redirect the Nazis.” At length, they settle on an answer that fits them, follows Scripture, and saves lives:

Nazi: “Are you hiding any Jews?”

Hans: “You know you are free to search the house whenever you wish. But it is cold, and you must be tired. Would you like to sit down first? And may I offer you a cup of tea?”

This answer is lawful *and* likely to work. It will save lives if the Nazis don’t search so thoroughly after receiving unexpected kindness. And poor liars are not required to lie in this scenario.

The way that the group operates shows their virtue. They *desire* the good, they labor to *discern* it, and they seek to *practice* it realistically, even if that proves costly. This case study suggests that people grow in virtue both individually and corporately. The group collaborated in their effort to follow the Lord by preserving lives as he does. A sensible Jew would want to hide with them.

David Jones said that a virtuous person loves the right and hates evil “and can be counted on, under stress, to do the right thing.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps you,

14. David Jones, Lectures for the Faculty on Ethics, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1999. See also Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village*

O reader, long to stand and shout: “Yes, I love the right! I want people to count on me, even under duress.”

Yet we vacillate. We say, “You can count on me under stress,” but we melt when tested. We keep quiet when we hear falsehoods. We do what we are told because we fear that authorities will punish us. We follow foolish leaders and join their tribes because we hope for acceptance. We grow weary of controlling ourselves and get drunk or high because it feels good and no one gets hurt (much).

There are sources of strength when we falter. We can pray, consult friends, and seek the Spirit’s direction. God’s law reins in sin because in the law we hear him say no to sin. But the law also fits sound doctrine as it reveals God’s moral glory (1 Tim. 1:8–11). That is, the law reveals and expresses God’s character. That provides a fresh perspective on virtue.

### **God’s Law Teaches Disciples to Be like Him**

The Lord wants his people to conform to him in both thought and action. This is clear in the moral law of the Ten Commandments, which reflect God’s character. His commands reveal his moral nature, and that shapes us:

- We labor six days and then rest (#4) *because God labored six days and then rested*. There is more to God than his work product, and there is more to us, too.
- We preserve life because God gives life (#6). We protect life because he protects it. He tells farmers that they must slaughter a dangerous bull and tells builders to make their rooftops safe (Ex. 21:28–29; Deut. 22:8).
- We are faithful to our vows and promises—we don’t commit adultery—because God is faithful to his promises, even when we are unfaithful (#7).
- We don’t steal (#8) because God gives what we need, including

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*of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), as he describes villagers who did what is right under great duress in World War II.

the talents and abilities that allow us to work effectively. He gives freely, so we give instead of coveting and taking.

- We tell the truth—we don't lie or deceive (#9)—because God is true, his Word is truth, and he lovingly tells us both hard and comforting things (John 17:17).
- Finally, God is generous and gives us all we need; therefore, we have a generous spirit even toward people to whom God has given abilities or wealth that is greater than ours (#10).

### **Godly Character Uproots the Deadly Sins**

Clearly, God's law expresses his character. Beyond that, his law and character uproot the deadly sins. Let's consider them one by one.

The first deadly sin is pride, which feeds every other vice. When we think too much of ourselves, we typically think less of God and neighbor. Second Timothy 3:1–4 points out that evildoers are “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” The cure for pride is to believe that the Lord deserves our love, thanks, obedience, and imitation. If we sincerely tell God, “*Your* will be done,” we cripple every vice.

The second and fourth deadly sins, greed and envy, go together. The greedy think, “I want more for myself”; the envious think, “I want *what you have*.” Generosity eradicates both greed and envy. God is so generous that he gave his Son. He also gives sun, rain, “life and breath and everything” we need (Acts 17:25; see also Matt. 6:32). God's generosity impels us to give (Deut. 16:10), and our hearts follow the funds (Matt. 6:21). When we see what our wealth can do for others, envy withers. Confidence in God's providence helps, too. If we believe that God grants all we need, if we believe that he distributes abilities and provisions wisely, the reasons for greed and envy disappear. Why long for more when God bestows what we need?

The third deadly sin is wrath, which travels with condemnation, punishment, even murder. But God is Judge; we are not. And if anyone becomes angry enough to kill, let that person remember that the Lord, speaking as the Author and Protector of life, commands, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). More importantly, his love drives out hate.

The fifth deadly sin is lust. It pairs with the sixth, gluttony. Both say, “Let us indulge our desires and take whatever pleases us.” Again, knowledge of God expels this deadly sin. As Creator, he knows how this world works best, and he reveals that for our benefit (Deut. 10:12–13). Beyond that, “Christ did not please himself,” and neither should we. Instead, we please the Lord and our neighbors (Rom. 15:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:1). One way to please God and family is to be faithful as he is faithful. So instead of lusting, we keep our marital vows.

The seventh deadly sin is sloth. Sluggards will not *labor* for six days; they work as rarely and halfheartedly as possible. Or they are busy-but-feckless. Gregg Allison calls sloth “psychological indifference and physical weariness toward the work that God has provided for us to accomplish.”<sup>15</sup> God, by contrast, *works* as Creator, Architect, King, and Shepherd. Jesus was a carpenter, Teacher, Healer, Prophet, Priest, and King. Early in his ministry, Jesus declared, “My *food* is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). At the end, on the cross, he exulted, “It is *finished*” (19:30). Love of our God-given tasks drives out sloth and fosters virtues such as diligence, steadfastness, and endurance.

To summarize, every deadly sin violates the first great command, to love and worship God, and the second, to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40). After that, pride especially violates commandments 1, 2, and 3; greed and envy both violate 8 and 10; wrath breaks 8; lust and gluttony desecrate 7; and sloth violates 4.

## **The Essence of Virtue**

In every thought about law and virtue, we should agree that Jesus’ life is the perfect picture of virtue. Jesus teaches, “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matt. 5:4), and the Gospels show him weeping over sin and death. He asserts, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (v. 9), and he tenderly grants peace to forlorn, sorrowful sinners. Yet he also shows that peacemakers are strong, for he fearlessly confronts sinners (23:13–36).

15. Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 134.

Jesus also blessed the merciful (Matt. 5:7; Luke 6:36), and we may linger there. Mercy has two aspects: it *helps* the needy and it *forgives* sins. Jesus does both perfectly. Needy people often approached Jesus, crying out, “Have mercy on me.” He came through every time. Parents, whether Jews or Gentiles, begged Jesus to heal their children, and he did (Matt. 15:22; 17:15). The blind of Israel shouted for mercy, and he restored their sight (9:27; 20:30–31). He also offered mercy to Gentile women in his amazing conversations with them (Matt. 15:21–28; John 4:7–26).

Jesus also grants the mercy of forgiveness. Above all, he offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin. He also showed mercy to Jewish bystanders who mocked and Roman soldiers who tortured him, praying, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus also forgave Peter after he denied that he even knew Jesus (John 21:15–17). At every step, Jesus models mercy for every human need, for people who are just like us or utterly different.

So Jesus embodies virtue. If anyone wants to know virtue and grow in godliness, let that person begin by meditating on Jesus and imitating him.

## **Godly Character Is the Starting Point for a Blessed Life**

Finally, the imitation of Jesus is foundational for every major role in life. God’s moral beauty directs us in marriage, parenthood, friendship, and work.

*Marriage:* Paul told husbands, “Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her” (Eph. 5:25–26). The man who wants to be a good husband loves and cherishes his wife, as Jesus loves his people. He aims for her holiness, not just her happiness.<sup>16</sup> And he knows how to be merciful when she falters.

*Parenthood:* Good parents have the character of God the Father. Take Exodus 34:6–7: “The LORD [is] merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and

16. The biblical concept is superior to Darwinism, which asserts, first, that human males once had lethal competitions for mates. However marriage *started*, it spread because tribes that practiced it stopped decimating themselves in battles for mates. Second, the big brains (and skulls) that let humans dominate other species also entail offspring with such an extended period of helplessness that the odds of survival are increased if two adults commit to childcare.

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, [and] will by no means clear the guilty.” Like God, good parents are merciful and slow to anger; they don’t punish every infraction. They provide unmerited favors to whiny toddlers and grumpy teens. They forgive, yet they hold the guilty accountable. Parents make many mistakes in sleep schedules, potty training, nutrition, and management of the tension between “My child needs me” and “I need to let go.” But if we love our children and show them mercy and justice, we overcome a host of procedural errors.

*Friendship:* To be a true friend, we start with Jesus. He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). So friends help each other, even if it’s costly. Jesus also noted, “I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (v. 15). So friends also reveal their convictions and their concerns to each other. Jesus also stayed with his disciples, even when they disappointed him (Mark 3:15; 9:14–19), so loyalty is a mark of friendship as well.

*Work:* Noble laborers work as God did. We work *because* God works. He is the Designer, Creator, and Sustainer of all things. The Bible calls God King, Warrior, and Shepherd; these are jobs. Scripture also compares God to a farmer, potter, counselor, and healer. Jesus worked with his hands, and that dignifies physical labor. He also worked with his mind, and that dignifies mental labor. Because God is the Creator, we love to create. We can’t create *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—as God did, but we can reshape existing materials to promote life and beauty. Finally, when we make plans, fulfill them, and celebrate their completion, we imitate God again. The Father planned our redemption, and Jesus completed that plan in his death and resurrection, so he could shout, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Therefore, we like to complete our work. We do that, in part, by knowing *his* character and living it out, as his Spirit enables us.

The next segment of this book explores the two themes of that sentence. First, we will explain how God enables his children to grow in virtue. Then we will name the many virtues that root out and replace the deadly sins.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Do you know any “virtue skeptics”? How do they think and live? Among the several ways to doubt the possibility of virtue, which one could discourage you in your desire for godly virtue?
2. Drawing on this chapter and other studies, describe several of the Lord’s virtues. Which do you admire and imitate the most? The least?
3. Of the seven deadly sins, which is most likely to tempt you? Which of the countervailing virtues do you most desire?
4. Think of concrete steps you can take to imitate the Lord as a friend. As a worker. As a spouse.
5. Spend some time listing the resources that the Lord has provided for his people as they hope to become more like him in his comprehensive goodness or virtue.