

# The Way of Humility

Understanding God's offer of Freedom for  
Christians who Sin

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:34-36)

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Why if I am a Christian does sin still ensnare me? How do I turn from sin? When I have a physical sickness, I pray for a miracle and also follow medical advice. When I suffer from a spiritual sickness, I likewise need the help of God and to utilize the best spiritual advice available.

Saint Mark Ji Tianxiang of China was an opium addict and died addicted to opium. His local priest, not understanding the nature of addiction denied him the Eucharist for many years because he thought that Ji Tianxiang was choosing opium over God. The priest did not understand the personal trap nor the societal pressure that created a system of addictions in snaring as much as 10 percent of china’s population [1] to be addicted to opium for the profit of the British and other European powers. Saint Mark was martyred; he was unwilling to renounce his faith even at a time when people had thought that he had already and consistently renounced it by choosing opium.

## The Addictions and Sins of the Era

Each generation has an addiction of the age. In Rome it might have been gladiator fights, in 1800 in Chinese history we find the opium epidemic. One hundred years ago in the United States you find widespread cigarette addiction. In the modern day, you find phone and social media addiction, and pornography. In other eras it might have been alcohol or another substance or activity, these addictions can be both physical addictions or situational addictions.

In Christian circles we often refer to vices, which are negative habits that snare us. Generally, when someone is caught in a habitual negative action, vice or addiction, they have lost their freedom, they are not easily able to step away from that addiction even if they want to, they might feel trapped. Yet, the focus is not the chains of sin, but the ideal of freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

If we can examine this idea, here is a holy person who personally loves God, was he trying to do evil? Was he obstinately choosing this grave sin in such a way that it had become a mortal sin? Or is something else going on? "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19)

Saint Mark Tianxiang was a holy guy and yet he didn't know how to deal with the addiction/vice, I think if he had understood a model of addiction as self-medication- as trying to drown out discomfort of feeling overwhelmed, he would have been able to pause and examine himself and say

“What’s going on? I’m angry, I’m lonely, I have some kind of trigger, I have this craving more and more because of the tolerance that I’ve built up to opium”. He would have this craving, and for him to be able to recognize the existence of the craving, and then to say, “Okay, well, in this circumstance, it’s not loneliness, it’s not stress, even though there’s a little bit of that there, but there’s this craving that arises as a physical phenomenon. I don’t have to be controlled by that phenomenon. I can be aware of it. I can experience it. I can sit with it. and (assuming) I’m not going to die from lack of opium.” He could sit with it.

Knowledge of the psychology of addiction, could have given St. Mark the tools to fight addiction, and have psychological freedom. This is like how modern knee replacements can give people the freedom of mobility.

A prankster tied a plastic snake on the end of the string to a victim’s foot. The victim sees the snake and the snake starts to move, pulled by the string. The faster the victim runs, the faster the snake runs behind him,. It’s only when the person pauses and reflects, “This isn’t what snakes do, right? Snakes don’t run after people in this way”, that they can recognize it’s a plastic snake. Only then can they start untying the knot and the plastic snake, which seemed so deadly, but isn’t.

This same method of focusing on the knot and not the plastic snake, can work when we experience a craving, loneliness or stress. The physiological or psychological craving is a response mechanism. Question ourselves, “What’s the

underlying problem and what's a better solution?" It's at this moment that we can have mercy with ourselves.

Just as the victim above might say, "Oh, yeah, I'm biologically and socially inclined to respond and react to snakes with fear; but this isn't a snake." We can say, "I'm biologically inclined to respond to this situation in this way, but I can choose to reflect before I act?" It is when we stop to reflect on a problem that we can search for a better solution, a better pill.

Moving from St. Mark to our own lives; with so many people who struggle with, for example, social media or phones, we can pause and say,

"Hey, I'm using this as a solution. I'm self medicating. I'm uncomfortable. I've built up a habit that makes me uncomfortable because I have a psychological dependency on my phone and so I want to pause and recognize that I'm not an evil person right now, this isn't some devious, fully planned desire to ruin my own life. This is a bad habit, this is a bad self-medication that I have stepped into and so I'm using it because I'm desiring it at a chemical level."

Rather than turning to shame when we fall to sin, temptation, or addiction we can say with gentleness, "Wow! I'm lonely, I'm bored, and I'm trying to protect myself by turning to my self-medication of choice." "Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.'" (John 8:11)

Have a plan. Say, "There is something that I lack, and so I can make a plan the next time that I'm in lack, in need, the next time I'm lonely, what can I do? What societal issues can I recognize? For example, the invention of televisions, smartphones and air conditioning that send people into their own little worlds. And so then, what is a pattern? A situation, a small change that I can make, to avoid these situations in the future so that when I do have to fight these battles, I can respond. I have a plan to respond, right? I have a list of 10 or 20 people, like in Alcoholics Anonymous, that I can reach out to and call and talk to. I have a place where I can go, where people are hanging out; I have a home that I can turn to, I have roommates, I have an open, vulnerable, conversational relationship with my spouse so that I can have this conversation of, 'hey, I know that you're here right now. I know that we're in bed together, but I feel alone, I feel stress.'" And then we can introduce a better pill. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." (2 Timothy 2:22)

## The Way of Humility.

There are four ways we can live. The way of death means choosing sin, the way of life is conversion, choosing God and living perfectly. Everyone lives the way of life or the way of

perfection in heaven. The way of hypocrisy, condemned so often by Jesus, is pretending to choose God in many pious activities, but rejecting God in our selfishness and sin. Jesus says, "*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you devour widows' houses and make long prayers just for show.*" (Matthew 23:14) There is a fourth way, the way of humility.

The way of humility is not the goal. The goal is to be formed unto Christ, to be justified, to be made like God, not so as to be worshiped, but so as to worship fully. The way of humility is recognizing our shortfalls.

We must be a church where we acknowledge our shortfalls, globally, locally, and personally. Be Christians who spoke openly about our weaknesses and sins, not to be salacious or to scandalize. Embrace the title we give ourselves in the Hail Mary "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death".

This way of humility is recognizing our shortfalls, which means recognizing our need not only to have been saved but also our need to still be saved and to await salvation. This way of humility is not a magic bullet, it won't make us sin less, but what it will do is it will guarantee that we respond to God's mercy and salvation. When we seek God out and run to His mercy, we are accepting Jesus invitation: "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11, 28-30). This way of humility allows us to see ourselves as we are and recognize the holiness to which God calls us. Before we can say, "My savior has perfected me," we need to say, "I am

not perfect, I need a savior," and "My savior is perfecting me." Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your Father, who is in Heaven, is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) In humility, one strives to be perfect in seeking mercy before being perfected by being conformed to Christ.

Evaluate the spiritual growth and conversion that you have already experienced, or the spiritual growth you have witnessed in someone else. "I used to sin in that way, and now I don't, thanks be to God." This is not pride, this is true self-knowledge. Humility does not mean thinking that we are the worst. Humility can be a clear identification. I am stronger in this way than this other person, I am stronger in this way than I was yesterday. Humility is a relationship to the truth. Jesus is the truth. We must embrace Him. The way of perfection and the way of humility converge in God who is perfect and yet humbled Himself (Philippians 2, 8).

## Better Pill

When we look back at medicine of old, we often make fun of it. We say "Look how silly they were. Look how limited their understanding was", but we forget to realize that they were often doing the best they could with the knowledge that they had available. And so if we can acknowledge that, as well as see the limits of our medications, both pharmaceutical or metaphorical, we find ourselves in a place of being able to pursue better medicine. Today, for example, we look at someone who has a gangrenous foot, maybe from diabetes



or something else (I'm not a doctor, so don't quote me on the medical facts) and they have to have their foot amputated, we recognize that this is the best current practice, even while we recognize that if we had better medicine, we would be able to save the foot, whether through some hypothetical regrowth or some targeted healing and intervention, or some much smaller and advanced surgery than which we're currently able to perform.

If we're able to recognize this idea, we can see the cultural and the spiritual implications, and we're able to diagnose and deal with ourselves with a mercy that we often don't extend to doctors of 100, 200, or 1000 years ago.

Many times we see our addictions or sins as problems, illnesses, or moral failings, rather than being able to recognize them as bad medicine, as bad self-medication. I am stressed, lonely, tired, bored, angry, sad, feel overwhelmed, have a loss of control, or some other uncomfortable emotional state, and my body or some part of my brain revolves or devolves to a cure that has kind of worked in the past. I go to alcoholism, smoking, drugs or anger, taking it out on violence on others, or through some other kind of vice or moral failing.

But if I can stop at that moment and realize that I'm opening up a bottle of pills, that I'm prescribing myself some medicinal treatment, because I've done it before, and it's had some success. I can be gentle with myself, I can see that I was trying at the moment to protect myself, to help myself, and then I can

go and I can rediagnose the underlying issue. We can get a clarification.

Not every time I'm sick do I take the same pill. I need to know what the sickness is, to know which pill to take, and I have to have an idea of health that I am aiming toward. I have to be able to recognize and understand what is the good life, what is health, and then I can work towards that goal.

Jesus modeled both the mercy for sinners and the ideal of health. He is the model for us to follow, His is the love and mercy for us to accept and share.

In general, in moral faults, the correct response, the good medicine, the better pill, is one of these six: **R**elationship with God, **R**elationship with others, **R**est, **R**eflection, **R**ecreation and **W**o**R**k.

We can also apply this concept culturally. We can see systems of oppression and recognize that those systems of oppression are often others trying to solve a problem that maybe they do not have the tools to solve. We can have mercy and grace with our ancestors, who in seeing a problem solved it incorrectly, while also having grace and mercy on ourselves and seeing that we fall short in the solution to our own society's problems.

So for example, in an international conflict, a bad solution would be to massacre the entire population of the enemy, right? It's not precise enough. A more practical solution would be to bomb just the military targets, and yet, still, we would have collateral damage, a better pill, a better solution would be if we could target militarily, maybe through a SEAL team or special forces, just the leaders of the aggressors, and an ideal solution would be that we would be able to restore to peace and mercy those with whom we are fighting, so that we could bring the aggressors to repentance.

If we were a superior military force, for example, a parent negotiating with a hostile child, we would be able to come down to the level of the child and without violence, through love and mercy, raise the hostile child into a child who's at peace, who's in love, who's a healthy member of society. If we're able to recognize this issue of the better pill by diagnosing the problem that the child is having and be able to show them how to achieve the good that they are seeking, or oftentimes even a better good, we can see how this could be applied to international conflicts as well. Even if this is unlikely we should still recognize it as ideal.

This book will be about stopping, diagnosing, planning, and implementing the better pill. We will strive towards Christ's ideal in both solution and treatment.

## The Six Better Pills

I often suggest Six 'better solutions' that I call 'better pills': (1) Relationship with God, (2) Relationship with others, (3) Rest, (4) Reflection, (5) Recreation, and (6) Work. Rest, Recreation, and Reflection are more interior and Relationship with God, Relationship with others, and work involve others.

Sometimes when I am tempted or struggle, I need **rest**. Sleep and my executive functions are waning. Problems seem larger than life. I need what's essentially a reset button like a computer. I go to sleep. Whether it's a nap of 20 minutes or a night's **rest** of eight hours, I wake up and realize, "The world has not ended, and I didn't die. The problems that were consuming me have left my body un nibbled. I didn't need the bad solutions that I have turned to before." Fresh perspective and new mental energy allow me able to handle the issue if it's important or discard it if never was. Amazingly, rest can solve problems.

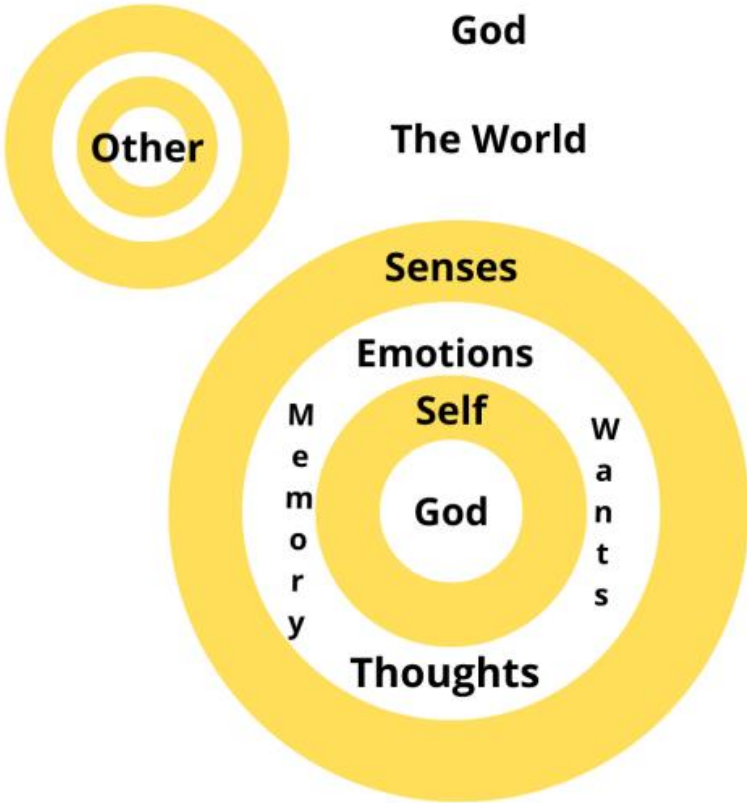
Sometimes what we can then do with the new mental energy is turn to **reflection**. I find that reflection is best done with pen and paper, or some digital format. I think more clearly when I materialize the words. I can notice if I'm starting to write the same word over and over again much quicker than if I ruminate on an idea in my head by itself.

There is also a framework that can be used either in writing or mentally. Imagine two bullseyes, one is you and one is someone else, God is present both outside the bullseyes. Within each bullseye starting from the outside of the bullseye

I encounter first the senses, and I talk through my senses in a way that some mental health professionals call grounding.

What do I see? What do I hear? What do I smell? What do I taste? What do I feel with my hands? And what other sensations am I feeling? For example, pain in the neck. These senses are what is most visible to others, the easiest for others to guess.

The next level is memories, desires, thoughts and emotions. We can go through them, what do I remember right now? What am I thinking about? What am I feeling? What do I want? The next level is the self, "here I am", then we find deeper than our very self, the God who loves us, made us, and sustains us, then I can have a conversation with God, bringing to Him any relevant sensations, emotions, wants, memories or thoughts, asking, what do I want to say to God? Or, what do I want to bring to God? And, what do I think God wants to say to me? Listening in the midst for God to speak, to speak beyond merely what I think he wants to say.



Self-Reflection

I see/ recently saw...

I hear/ recently heard...

I smell/ recently smelled...

I taste/ recently tasted...

I touch with my fingers/ recently touched...

I feel with the rest of my bodies/ recently felt...

My current emotions/ recent emotions...

My current thoughts/ recent thoughts...

My current wants or passions/ recent wants...

I am remembering/ recently remembered...

Self- Here I am

What do I want to say/bring to God...

What is God saying to me...

The third interior better pill is **Recreation**. While there are many good kinds of recreation, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre talks about a specific kind of recreation he calls a practice. A practice is something creative we can get better at through effort that we're doing for itself. Examples of practices are art, sports, music, and skilled games like chess. This is different than watching television.

## Three More Better Pills

**Relationship with others.** Going outside of ourselves we encounter other people, who can give us love and perspective. Friends can help me see the meaning in our life

and help cure me of my selfishness. Having deep and intimate relationships and friendships, whether with a spouse, a relative, or someone else, are near essential for a healthy life.

I have friends with whom I can speak and share my hopes and dreams, my fears and worries, or just chat. Sometimes I'll bring them a situation that is of inflated importance to me, and they are able to give me a perspective. If they love me and they don't think an issue is important, then very often they are correct. I can be overwhelmed with what kind of hairstyle to get, or what phone to buy, and my friend can be, a sounding board. "You know, I don't think that's very important."

Sometimes a friend has deep insight. A friend might say, "this doesn't seem very important", what is it that's actually important to you? Do you want to be valued by others? Do you want to be cared for? To be chosen? Selected? Do you want to be praised? Do you want to avoid pain?" The insight itself is not the value of a friend. Love and empathy give meaning to friendship.

In a friend, we can know that we are loved, and to have someone who loves you is so, so important. I remember in the movie "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" there's a line where the bumbling fool character played by John Candy is getting criticized and insulted, and he replies "My friends like me, my wife likes me, I like me". When a friend likes us or loves us, it makes it easier for us to love ourselves. Self-love is important to our psyche, but so often it only comes about because we



have the experience of being loved. There is great benefit in knowing that you are loved. Friends also give us someone to love. We cannot show love on our own. Being able to love a friend and care for someone outside of oneself has great power in unveiling one's identity and purpose.

The next better pill is **Relationship with God**. In the modern world, it can seem that God adds no value, people can say "I have a system of morality", maybe even "the same system of morality (apart from worshipping God) as the best Christian". We can dissect and extract the particulars of meditation, prayer or communal worship that we think of as "psychologically beneficial" and remove them from their relationship to God. The skeptic can say that worship of God or thoughts of the next life can even bring people away from the reality and necessities of this life. Karl Marx famously said that religion is the opiate of the masses, with the general meaning that because people had hope for some future heaven, they ignore the present problems.

## Why God Matters

Rather than taking a minimalist approach of saying that God matters not at all or only a little, I take the opposite approach. Relationship with God is the most important thing. It is the difference between life being a play, a farce, or a reality. Love is not merely a complex chemical reaction that could be reproduced by drugs or pharmaceutical means. Love, sacrifice, and loss, to be objective, must matter infinitely. If

they are only chemicals and neurological pathways that can be bypassed, reproduced or simulated, then it is only our inability to think rationally that keeps us from apathy. When I play video games or watch a movie, I know that the emotional effect is artificial, so I can pause and go about my day and come back only when nothing is urgent.

I wish I could more clearly articulate a model of reality that demonstrates the necessity and importance of God. Maybe I could put it in this way: you get a Christmas card from the person that you love, maybe you have never spoken about this love and the card has a beautiful note professing love and deep concern, and you see all at once that this card is a print, a facsimile, one of dozens or hundreds, with the sentiment not even written by the one that you admire. Maybe in more modern terms, you discover that what you thought was a deep and meaningful relationship was a scam, and that the scammer was using a program, bot or artificial intelligence to interact with you. What you thought was a deep conversation was manipulation- chemical warfare.

If love is merely happenstance, then although it is the best there is, it is not much. But if God has revealed Himself, in the deepest recesses of our heart, in clear and apparent revelation, and in creation, then we have the freedom to be ourselves. Not in some superficial way, like in our clothing style, but rather to be loved. This is our identity! God reveals Himself, "I am, Who I am" in the Old Testament and the New Testament reveals that God is love, and we are made in the image of God! The scriptures reveal that my identity is that I

am loved and regardless of what I do, regardless of my failures or successes, even when I am unfaithful, God is faithful. (2 Timothy 2:13) This is a declaration of God's steadfast love for us. Not an abstract love, but a personal love. That is love that endures forever. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 8:5)

Now there's a complexity to a relationship with God that goes beyond just being loved and loving in return. And this is the vulnerability to be honest. But if you have confidence that you are loved, you do not consider it an imposition or a burden to make requests, to ask, to question. God knows our limitations, and it is not a theological knowledge that he demands but rather love.

Children who are confident that they are loved will ask their parents ridiculous things, not because they are ridiculous, but because they seem perfectly reasonable to the child. The child questions because the child doesn't know. And so for us, in a relationship of love, standing before our Father, it is good and holy to ask why, to question.

One more good habit

**Real work** does not limit itself to work of secular importance. Some of the jobs considered important are not meaningful. Rather meaningful work is work done with love for those being served. We share in the command of God to till

and keep the earth (Cf. Genesis 2:15) by ordering some small part of creation towards God at a higher order. I take something that is in disarray and make it better through utility and through beauty. The measure of the meaning of work is not, “what profit can I make through exploitation”, but “who can I serve?”

Mother Teresa once said, “Wash a dish not because it's dirty, but because you love the ones who will use it.” Work can double in our enjoyment of it when we not only see the value in the work but also love God and others for whom we are working. As I write this book, it orders my thoughts about Christian living and that is good, and I think of those whom I serve by writing this book and I love them. (I could love them more of course and that would increase my zeal for this work.) St. Therese, called The Little Flower, is known for this idea saying, “Do small things with great love”.

## Deyim Deyim

There's a Syriac phrase, “deyim deyim” that means forever and forever and emphasizes the length and vastness of eternity. This phrase challenges me to evaluate my experience by stretching it out to eternity. What happens? How elastic is the good that I am pursuing? Or the false good?

Imagine entering into the brink of eternity and death, and God invites me, “Welcome into my love” and the devil tempts us,

“Eternity is long, go to heaven tomorrow; today, have that last binge, if you go to heaven you'll never be able to use that drug again, you'll never be able to participate in that juicy gossip, you will not be able to show pride, you can't over indulge ever again, and so just for today, have one last hurrah, and tomorrow, see how you're feeling and if you want to, go to eternity”.

In this situation someone who has been ensnared by a vice, might consider the terms and say “Yeah, just one more day, and then I'll choose heaven”, and they go to their sin, for just a day. The next morning, I hear the call of God “come into everlasting joy” and the temptation of the devil, “Yesterday was great, look, let's just try it one more time”. Rather than entering into an eternity of joy and love, we daily choose what we have known, and it decays us and diminishes us forever.

If I look at my day and say “Well, let me multiply this out by eternity” I no longer spend five minutes wasting time, I spend an accumulated eternity away from my God, away from my friends, away from myself, from freedom.

We can also hypothetically magnify out sin and see what the effect would be. Some sins are more apparent as they stray further and further from love. If I had infinite money to gamble, what would the point be? If I won infinite money, I would just want to gamble again. If I lost it all, there would be despair, but so would winning, and so would endless play. If I had infinite heroin there would be relatively little pleasure in it, only death. If I had infinite money to gamble, then what, what would

be the point? If I had an infinity of sexual partners, an infinity of people to gossip about, or an endless line of things to steal, where would happiness be? Where would freedom be?

If there is no eternity and love is merely a chemical and nothing more, then the well-manicured addict might seem to live a fun life. There are several arrangements in which one could string together a lifetime of sin in which the consequences don't reveal themselves like a happy smoker, killed by an asteroid before the full effects of cancer ravage their lungs. A person trapped in a vice of sin can appear as if he were not in one. This is the best hope for the sinner, that if they pretend a false reality, they can appear to have the happiness of the person not ensnared by sin.

## Mercy and Repentance

Statistically, there are others who are further along the path of sin than ourselves. So take your sin of choice and find a person who has been more fully ensnared. What we see is somebody who is worthy of love, someone who is worthy of mercy and reverence, not because of their sin, but in spite of it. Now perform metaphorical surgery on the person worthy of love removing them from the chains that bind them.

There is a special place of empathy there, because you can see one possible future for yourself. Identify the future effects of the sin you struggle with. It can be hard to see the negative

effects of sins at the level we struggle with. If we steal we might think we are free, but when we see someone who steals things of no value, who steals when he knows he'll get caught, who steals things that he doesn't even want, we can see the snare of sin.

Look as well at the example of unforgiveness. If there is one person who I can't forgive, maybe I can pretend there is no negative to that. However, if I imagine a man who never forgives, who keeps record of every slight or supposed slight, then I see that only misery awaits. I can look with love at someone ensnared in the extremes of sin and examine our own life, my sin of choice is binding me. This can be a more practical exercise for people who have trouble imagining out into eternity. What is a risk, not a guarantee of your sin.

## Pray Without Ceasing

Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

You may have heard of the Jesus Prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner". This is a prayer which is connected to breath, so that when you breathe in, you say, "Lord Jesus Christ", hold your breath and say, "Son of God," breathe out say "have mercy on me", pause again and say "a sinner", and repeat. Every breath becomes a prayer, no matter what we are doing, and is made with prayer.

In the book *The Way of the Pilgrim*, we find a man who is learning about the Jesus Prayer, and runs into another man,

a soldier, who had struggled for many years with alcoholism. The soldier says that he hasn't drunk in many years because he was given this advice: "Anytime you want to take a drink, read a chapter of the Gospels, and upon finishing if you still want to take a drink, read another chapter of the Gospels". And this man had memorized all four gospels and would recite them throughout the day.

It is a fine practice to pray in this way, either through a recitation of scripture or some short aspirational prayer, but I believe that there is a more universal application of praying without ceasing. This is the call of relationship. We see Jesus pray at specific times, and we see him do other things, for example, preach, heal, walk, or eat at other times. Yet, Jesus is always in relationship with his Father. Prayer without ceasing means for most people, the call to a perpetual relationship with God. Live your life with God.

Emmanuel means God is with us. Not only when we are reciting prayers or reading scripture or in liturgy. In life walk with Christ. This is mature relationships work. Imagine if you spoke with your spouse every waking moment of every hour. What an unhealthy relationship. For many of us, would be overwhelming, but living your life with your spouse or living life with a friend is good and beautiful, and many times that means standing next to each other, or sitting next to each other, doing the same or sometimes different activities, but just being together, having the calming presence of hearing the breath of your spouse with all the annoyances that this entails because of the overwhelming joy and love.



Praying without ceasing does not mean that we are always conversing, and yet, for a healthy relationship, there will be times of deep and intimate conversation. For most people, that needs to be scheduled and planned for. We are limited. We need to be prepared and awake for those deep and difficult conversations. Similarly, with God, we will have times of deep, intimate conversation, and other times we will be just living with God which is not a *just*.

Why do I say this? Some people will look for magic pills or magic buttons, as if any of these things are the same as conversion.

Love is different than a set of actions. If a man makes breakfast for a woman, plays piano in the evening while she drinks wine, makes the bed each morning, and always brings her the car when she is ready to leave, it is possible that he is just a hotel staff. No set of prayers can replace a relationship. Persevering relationship which hopefully accompany popular piety are the means by which we allow Jesus to perfect us. Not the actions themselves away from God. It is our openness to God and not the particular means of our openness that allows us to receive the gift of God.

We are saved by being conformed to Christ, by cooperating with his grace. Salvation and justification are transformation in Christ. This is known as deification or theosis, which is becoming like God, or shining forth into the image of God for

which we were created. This is to warn against the notion that the words of our piety have power outside of God and outside of our response to God.

Prayer without ceasing and walking with God have some profound implications for someone who is not yet perfect. Even in the moments of temptation and sin and the moments after, we call on the Lord, this is the way of humility.

On the way of humility in the moment of temptation we are aware of Christ and crying out, even if we fail. Peter was aware of Christ and saw Christ while walking on water and then looking away. (Matthew 14:22-33) There is a struggle here.

Look at the reality of human experience as mixed with the divine grace given by Christ. Recognizing that we are free to reject sin, and that God is offering us the grace, and yet, in those moments we reject Christ in a small way. This is a difficult reality and a struggle.

Jesus talks about this when he says “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26: 41) Paul likewise discusses this topic, “I do not understand what I am doing, for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate. However, if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the law, that the law is good, but now no longer am I the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that good does not dwell in me that is in my flesh, for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not for the good that I want, I

do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I do the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me.” (Romans 7: 15-20)

This is a complicated passage, but it is recognizing not our lack of responsibility for our actions, but God's faithfulness even while we are sinning. For many of us, the struggle will be to choose God with our hearts, even in those moments when we are rejecting him with our actions. A man who was dying from lung cancer and his wife tells him to quit smoking, and he embraces a cigarette, while at the same time telling her “I wish I could stop. I'm so sorry. I love you.” This is a reality for many.

## Better Pill, Not Magic Pill

You may be asking, what is the point of this book? If I don't have an immediate solution, but rather an awareness of my sin, my relationship to it, and my relationship to God without radical immediate conversion, what's the point? So often we look at self-help books, blogs or life hacks to find shortcut solutions that work for us and will continue to work for us forever. I have listed the six habits or better pills, which are general guidelines for a healthy life. As well as the expectation that many times life changes piece by piece and step by step.

In older lives of the saints, we often see idealized versions and conversions of a saint. If we dig deeper, we see that the lives of saints were messy. Paul has a conversion on the road to Damascus, and yet we continue to see his struggles and sins and “thorn in the flesh”, (2 Corinthians 12:7) Peter has years of encounter with Christ, and yet we see him falling short. Moses stumbles. David falls and gets back up. Abraham spends years and years growing to trust in God. We see in the Christian era, St. Anthony, who, after having a radical conversion, gives his money to the poor and goes to the desert, then spends several years in prayer fighting temptation. Their sanctification was a process.

Sanctification takes time, because we are slow. “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise as some understand slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9)

Sanctification is difficult. “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” (Hebrews 12:4) Similarly Jesus says, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out”. (Matthew 18:9)

At the same time becoming a saint is easy. Jesus says “Come to me all you are weary of heavy burden, for I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light”. (Matthew 11:28) The goal is to Recognize the paradox of the life of faith, that conversion is both easy and difficult.

I believe that understanding the paradox of the spiritual life; that it is both difficult and easy, lifelong and immediate, can be helpful so that we don't fall into shame or despair, but rather that we persevere. "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1 NIV) And also, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:12)

Perseverance would not be necessary if this paradox did not exist. Take for example a marriage: the habits of mature love are difficult to develop, and intimacy can grow decade after decade. Yet, some struggles or breakthroughs can happen in a moment. There's a beauty in being able to recognize that growth takes time.

One time a young child told me he wants to be a professional athlete. If this child is serious about becoming a professional soccer player, what must he do? *Without a genetic miracle* he must practice for *years and years, multiple hours each day*. He will need *the right coaches and the right contacts and likely invested parents willing to relocate where the best skills can be taught* to have the chance to *play professionally*. *After all this, he will likely play for a year or two*. This isn't harsh, this isn't crushing a child's dreams, this is telling a child both how easy and how difficult it is to become a professional athlete. Choose the right sport for your body type, have parents who support you, find the right coach, and practice non-stop. If we

are to tell a child and his parents this, rather than destroying the dream of this child, it is essentially the only way to make this child's dream possible. It is humility to understand the process of becoming an athlete or becoming a saint.

When Paul talks about competing, not for a perishable crown but for an eternal crown, he's referencing the same ideal. (1 Corinthians 9:25) Compared to the pathway to become a professional athlete, Christianity is far easier for there is no genetic lottery necessary. There is also no necessity that you begin at a certain age. The struggle will take time, manage your expectation that certain sins might not go away in a day. Some virtues might take decades. There is a freedom in understanding what the Christian life entails.

## Sin is a Bad Solution

Sin is a bad solution. We struggle with some other underlying issue. I'm tired, stress, bored, angry, sad, overwhelmed, or am experiencing a lack of control and I think sin will allow me to drown out this discomfort. Rather sin creates a withdrawal symptom. When I stay under water for a long time holding my breath, I start to experience carbon dioxide induced anxiety. When I pop out of the water, I feel relief. Turning to sin, is like drowning yourself, to feel the relief of breathing. It is better to keep breathing. Withdrawal pain is the desire to drown oneself, so you can experience the relief of breathing.

For us to choose a sin when we are fighting against sin and

living for Christ two system failures must occur. I must be in a distressed state and I must have the withdrawal symptoms for a particular sin. I must be stressed and have a past addiction to opium or I won't turn to opium. If I can create resiliency in either or both systems, then sin won't be a temptation. If I have a habit of turning to God when I am stressed, or if I have the fruit of the spirit of peace in stressful situations, then sin will no longer be attractive. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

## The Seven Deadly Sins - Pride

Early Christian theologians compiled a list of sins which particularly ensnare us called the seven deadly sins. They are obstacles to freedom and can kill the life of grace in our souls. These early Christian theologians were discussing some sins as deadly similar to how we find it in the first letter of John, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death." (1 John 5:16-17)

Pride is considered to be the deepest rooted deadly sin. It is seen by Christians as the number one obstacle to our own freedom and happiness. It is the main obstacle to relationships with God, others, and ourselves. Yet, if we see it merely as some non-beneficial evil or as some problem that

offers no solution, then it is difficult for us to fight against it. If we can recognize that it seems to solve problems for us, and sometimes does solve discomforts for us, then we can acknowledge that while it is a self-medication, it is a bad pill. Then we can look to see what is the better pill.

The opposite of pride is self-abnegation or worthlessness, to think that we are of no value. Occasionally, people stumble into this worthlessness or valuelessness, again as a self-medication to run from responsibility or to cope with mockery and persecution. Self-abnegation, saying that I am worthless can seem to drown out the discomfort of being mocked and persecuted.

For most people who struggle with pride it is seen as a better alternative to self-abnegation. Pride correctly identifies that I am not worthless. Pride incorrectly claims I have this value from myself and therefore I am god. All the evidence to the contrary, the opinions of others, none of it matters, because only my opinion matters. Now this can protect us from insults, it can protect us from a lack of self-confidence, it can protect us from feelings of worthlessness, feelings of loneliness, and feelings of inadequacy.

Yet, there is a better pill, there is a better solution, and that is humility; to know that God is God and I am not, but that I am made in the image and likeness of God worthy of love and reverence. "For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:3-4)



## The Second Deadly Sin - Greed

We see greed as a love of money and things, of always seeking more. We need to see how greed can be not only a problem, but also a solution, but a bad one. Greed can help protect us from future struggles, "If I have money today, then I won't have to work tomorrow. If I have a financial safety net, then I don't have to listen to a foolish boss. I have freedom. If I have a lot of money, then people will respect me and maybe even admire me or look up to me or love me. I can have value and power and security because of greed." "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:20-21)

The opposite of greed would be a hate of all things, total austerity. "Everything in the created world is evil." This isn't the Christian ideal, but it could be a solution when things have let me down, or I've lost things important to me. If I protect myself from fear of loss by not having things around. In the middle between greed and hate for the things of this world, we would find two virtues, charity and gratitude. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do

all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13 NIV)

Gratitude is better than both greed and austerity because gratitude allows us to love the giver of those things that we have. We recognize things as gifts that were freely received and could freely be taken away. Living a life of gratitude, we can enjoy the things of this world, we can have possessions and use them, rather than being owned by things or money or love of money.

In charity, we recognize that having received everything by gift, we have the great privilege and opportunity of being able to pass those gifts on to others. It is just to give and share those things that we cannot use, our abundance; and is a great virtue to be able to share even those things that we need when we see that they are needed more by someone else. In addition to this idea of generosity and charity, we see again the role of humility, in having to trust, not on our own wealth, but trust both God and our community. If I have nothing of monetary value, but I have relationships and friendships, then I have a place to stay and food to eat because of the bonds of love shared with my family and friends. “Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing leftover, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” (2 Corinthians 8:14-15)

## The Third Deadly Sin - Envy.

Related to the sin of greed is the sin of envy. In envy, we long for what others have, oftentimes desiring them not to have it. Greed can be neutral in regard to other persons- merely wanting more money or finding gold. Envy is antagonistic to others, we are upset at something that someone else has, which could be a particular wealth or virtue, and this is a problem. But again, we also want to look at how we turn to envy as a solution.

One of the sins of the fallen angels is envy. Devils are envious of people because God becoming man rather than an angel like them. The devils hate us because of the incarnation. They did not recognize that this benefit was not only for mankind, but for angels and all of creation. "But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world." (Wisdom 2:24 NAB)

Envy is used as a solution, when there is this feeling of discomfort or this feeling of uncertainty at the idea of someone else receiving gifts or having a blessing, and it's the feeling of **inadequacy** in oneself, that says, "Well, what didn't I do that they have it and I don't. Am I less than? Am I worse? Am I ignored? Am I not worthy of love?" And so envy is one response to that. "No, I will take from them their reward, because I am worthy, and they are not".

There is a great blessing which can be found in not having to be the best, in not having to be the chosen one, in not having the weight of the world on our own shoulders. I like soccer, but I am not the best soccer player. I can rejoice in the soccer abilities of those who are better than me. I can marvel at the amount of time and energy that they and the team surrounding them have put into sharing in this aspect of creation, and so I can look at excellence and rejoice. I can rejoice in something that I did not have to be responsible for or in some beauty that I did not have to work for.

The alternative to envy is perhaps rest, wonder, and awe. In rest, I can be satisfied that there are painters who are better than me, that there are scientists who are better than me, that there are singers who are better than me, etc. If I get down to a particular enough activity or wide enough category, there are people that beat me, that outperform me, that have things that I don't have. Not having to take on the burden of being simultaneously the best soccer player and the best singer and the best mathematician, is a great freedom. It is a liberation that I can be mediocre at most things, and that God's love for me is not based on my achievement and accolades, but rather is because he chose to love me. He chose these other people for me to love and to be moved by them to wonder and awe at God who gives so many different gifts. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." (Romans 12:8 NIV) "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 NIV)

There is a freedom in mediocrity! Not in the traditional sense, as in saying I'm not trying my best or not giving my all, but in the universal sense. There is no way that I can be the best at everything and that numerically, it's impossible for everyone to be the best at even one thing. I'm able to rest with wonder and awe at the accomplishments that others make. This is an incredible gift, an incredible freedom to be able to go and say, "Hey, somebody else got the part that I wanted in the play"; "What a blessing that I am not the best singer in the world", "What a blessing that as good of a singer as I am, I can still go out and strive for something more. I can still hear a voice more beautiful and purer, what a blessing".

## The Fourth Deadly Sin - Wrath.

Wrath is not anger. Wrath responds with violence. Wrath escalates violence in response to some stimulus. We see wrath as a problem, but we often use it as a good solution. Sometimes wrath helps us get what we want at least short term. Someone annoys me. I turn to wrath. They leave me alone.

Ultimately, wrath leads to isolation, and that isolation is a cage. We push others away, and they put up bars to protect themselves from us. As our wrath increases, our cells shrink. Prisoners who regularly choose violence illustrate this point. Violence sends them to prison. Violence sends them from general population, to maximum security, to solitary

confinement with no human interaction. Both the jailer and the wrathful person build the bars and shrink the prison.

We read in the Scriptures “Be angry, but do not sin.” (Ephesians 4, 26) In anger, we find a better pill than wrath. Anger is like a smoke alarm; the smoke alarm is meant to excite us to fight a fire or to get to safety. Anger is meant to motivate us to take something evil, ugly, or false and make it good, true, or beautiful. Anger involves a discernment of knowing what is good and what is evil, of what is beautiful and what is ugly, of what is false and what is true. And then being able to move from the broken state to the fixed state. If someone were throwing eggs at our house, anger would motivate us, to go outside and chase the vandals away, if we think the situation is safe, and then clean up the mess.

Fixing the problem through cooperation is the ideal solution, and by it we can heal the relationship and the individual who is so trying to break it. But many times, the best that we can do is move away. When we hear about the anger of God, we must distinguish that from the wrath of God. God is not looking to escalate wrongs and violence. We wrongly assume that the drownings mentioned in the story of Noah, the drownings at the Red Sea, and the killing of the firstborn sons at Passover are about God wrathfully escalating violence. Rather, we should see anger as a movement of God recognizing something that is evil, and drawing it towards something that is good. Our understanding of these situations is opened wide, when we look through the lens of God’s love and mercy and that we exist after death. All we can do is entrust to God’s

goodness those who died, and see in the stories the call to conversion.

We can only see half of the situation in the above Bible stories. Execution should never be a solution for us, but God, in his wisdom, moved someone into the next life for their good, out of love for them, in a way which we cannot understand. Whether some of these scriptural accounts are meant to be verifiable historical events, symbolic or constructive metaphors we may never be able to know in this life.

God acts out of love, not only for the Israelites, but also for the Egyptians. We can pursue this idea, even if that's difficult for us to understand, and even if the best we can do is to say to God "I don't understand, I think you should have done something different".

This leads us to the next point, that anger can even be justly had towards God, because if our conscience tells us that something is right, even when we are wrong, even when we are ignorant, we must follow our conscience. The natural response to reading the scriptures or experiencing some affliction might be anger even an anger toward God.

Anger toward God can be expressed in a holy way, "God, I know that you are love, but all I feel is anger because of this situation." This is good prayer, we see it in the Psalms, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) "How long O Lord, will you leave me in distress?" (Psalm 13:1).

Anger is supposed to move us from ugliness to beauty, so we can ask ourselves, am I responding to something ugly? And am I making it good? And then we can walk through that situation in our head. "Is this a bad situation? The person stole my wallet, yeah, that's a bad situation. Did I respond in a way that made the situation better?" We want to be effective in our actions, and so this self-reflection is very important. "I responded to something bad, my kid was being very annoying, intentionally trying to aggravate me, and I responded in a bad way, I yelled at him, and I was overly harsh rather than being able to bring the child to reflection and to identify in the child what did he need, did he need attention? He needs love, he doesn't have confidence in love." "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

One of the biggest changes that can be seen in our life is this movement from wrath to anger. People will be astounded by this radical change from isolation to peace. Diagnose that an annoying situation is not evil, and find peace. Successfully diagnose what is wrong with a situation, then bring peace into that situation.

## The Fifth Deadly Sin - Gluttony.



Gluttony is an interesting sin, because there is an air of publicity to it. Gluttony is closely related to overeating and overeating is closely related to being overweight or obese. We see people (myself included), who eat too much and are overweight, even when they are not eating. It is important to recognize how common being overweight is and seeing not only the moral implications, but also the societal causes. "Their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body." (Philippians 3:19-21)

At its root, gluttony is desiring pleasure without the good that the pleasure is meant to signify, which is the health that comes with eating. Biologically we enjoy eating, so we eat. We benefit from the medicinal properties of drugs and alcohol, but we use excessively even if we are not ill. There is a lot of cultural acceptance. When we see someone who is at a healthy weight, we often think of them as underweight, just because of how many people we see who are overweight.

Now being overweight doesn't necessarily mean that the person is currently practicing gluttony, and even in a smaller subset, that they've ever practiced gluttony. We don't want to condemn any group of people. Rather, what joy that the Church welcomes people like myself who struggle with overeating in a visible form. Regarding overeating we witness the idea of the church as a hospital for sinners or a hospital for people who sin.

Gluttony is the desire of pleasure without the good that it signifies, and so there's often a discomfort, a loneliness, a boredom, a stress that gluttony can drown out. To be able to see gluttony as self-medication is a good first step. To be able to look at myself and say, "I am not unredeemable I just struggle to solve my problems my own way." We find here somebody trying to help themselves, to protect themselves. People often overeat to avoid discomfort, which is at least a minor good. In recognizing that I think we can look at ourselves with some dignity, rather than shame or despair. "I have a self-preservation instinct. I'm trying to protect myself, and what I need is a better solution."

So what is the better pill? From a psychological standpoint, eating excessively is largely about anticipation. I anticipate, I desire something; but once that thing is achieved, I am left wanting and lacking. With gluttony we never have enough food, alcohol, drugs, or whatever the temptation is.

And so if we can recognize this need, and take a moment to reflect, asking ourselves "Do I need this?" And even just saying out loud "I am being tempted to eat food that I don't need to eat. I'm free to eat it. I have the food. It's here." If we name the solution and then seek out the problem, we can have this ability to stop. Pausing is so, so important. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

But then we need to find other solutions that are good and healthy for us. Building these better solutions and these better plans, which can be very particular from person to person, can help us.

For me, the better solution often involves going and visiting people, it involves staying in touch with friends and enjoying their company, sharing with them some of these discomforts that I have. But this needs discernment and prudence, for pause and then zeal. Being able not just to run away from something, but to run towards something better. “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3:7-8)

If we just think of something as bad, we're not strong enough to stop doing it, but if we recognize what good we're trying to have it serve, we can replace it with a better one that actually helps us achieve our goals.

## The Sixth Deadly Sin - Lust.

Lust might be the sin that people (or at least Catholics) are most aware of, and yet, in lists of sins, it's considered lesser than some of these others that we've dealt with, like pride and envy. Lust is a sin that is very visible to us because it takes concrete forms. Lust uses another person for our gratification. Lust objectifies

a person, seeing someone as an object for use, rather than a person worthy of love and reverence.

Many people (many Catholics at least) see it as a major problem, a major struggle, and yet fail to see how we use it as a solution. Lust seems to solve our desire to be loved, and fights our fear of vulnerability. If we love someone, they can hurt us, and they can hurt us more than someone who doesn't love us. Recognize this and discover why we look for an alternative to love that prevents any possibility of being hurt.

"If I use someone or use myself and my own fantasies, I can't be rejected." If I have a fear of rejection, lust seems to be the answer. If I have a fear of loneliness, and I'm afraid of this rejection, lust seems to solve my problem, and yet there is no peace in the lustful person, there is a next quest, conquest, next fantasy, and yet it feels like trying to fill an endless void that becomes emptier the more we try to fill it.

The opposite of lust is love, courage, and confidence. Love starts with an encounter of a love that never fails, whether that's the love of our parents, love of a spouse or a child, or the love of God, which those are meant to point to. How beautiful, how incredibly beautiful when a child can know that their parents love them, when a child can experience their parents' love after falling short, to be loved despite our sin. This child knows that both we and them recognize that what was done was sin and yet are motivated and transformed because of not being condemned.

There are some people and of course God, who we can trust with our vulnerabilities and our weakness. This brings great freedom and peace. Pity the man who is worried about being honest with his wife because he has sinned. To think or know that your spouse will stop loving you if you fail is anguish. This relationship falls short of the call of God on two accounts, one who failed the natural call of fidelity, and the other who cannot bear the heroic call of love which never fails. "If we are faithless, God remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself." (2 Timothy 2:13)

There is a confidence of just being loved, and so often in confession, the penance that I give is for people to reflect on how deeply God loves them. I desire that they discover their identity as beloved.

## The Seventh Deadly Sin - Sloth.

Sloth is an often overlooked deadly sin. It is the tendency or habit, not to put forth effort. We see Jesus talk about this deadly sin when he talks about the servants who are given various talents or coins, and how one doesn't even invest his money in the bank, but rather buries it. ( cf. Matthew 25, 14-30) This slothful man saw sloth, not as a problem, but as a solution. He saw it as a way of hiding from failure, a way of avoiding fear, and as a decision to not fulfill and participate in the creative work of humanity.

We often see medical conditions such as depression that might get conflated with sloth, depression is treated not merely by moral endeavors or hard work, but rather with external therapy or pharmaceutical intervention. There is a level of intervention that must take place. Even in those cases, there can be a tendency toward sloth, because you must go to the doctor or take your medicine to overcome depression. For those struggling with depression do the best you can, and trust in God's mercy.

The opposite of sloth might be something like workaholicism, which can also be negative. "I, and only I, can do any good work. No one else is able to do anything of value." We see again the influence of pride and the desire for control. In both workaholicism and sloth, we see a similar fear of failure. "The project will fail if I don't do it." Or "the project will fail if I try to do it, so I might as well do nothing."

Humility and diligence counteract sloth and is a better solution. Humility reminds us, "I can't do everything, but there is something I can do." Diligence reminds us, "I can't do everything right now, but I can begin or continue the work."

When thinking about sloth, I find it helpful to imagine not some hypothetical 'tomorrow', but rather 'today' or even 'right now', repeated forever: is the day that we're living, the work that we're doing or the rest/repose that we're taking, worthy of eternity?

When we know what we must do it is easy to say, “Tomorrow I will do 10 minutes of study”, but it’s harder to say, “even though I have resolved to study I’ve decided to take no minutes of study for the rest of eternity.” This puts us in the right perspective for what it is that we want to achieve.

## **Political and Systematic Systems of Sin and Oppression**

If we can face our own failings with gentleness and mercy, then we can face political and social systems of sin with love and mercy. For example, capitalism can be said to be a pretty good solution to many of society's problems, while recognizing the excesses within it. Not all value creation is the same as value capture; there are people such as stock brokers, and hedge fund managers who are good at value capture without value creation. We can see as well, the tragedy of the commons and the mercenary problem, violence for hire, which is both possible and encouraged in a capitalist system. We can recognize these negative side effects and still be able to see some limited benefits. Likewise, we can look at communal systems such as communism or socialism, which theoretically avoid the problem of unfair value capture, while occasionally failing to motivate value creation.

Look at political systems and political issues, and see how someone could use even something that is very broken and wicked as a solution. We can see how countries can go to war

when peace is a better option and we how profiteers can market abortion as a solution to pain, to the risk of death, to fear, or even to inconvenience. If we are unable to see how these underlying issues can be problems and that the better solutions are often much more work and involve radical change in society, for instance, trying to value the value of creation in parenthood, rather than the value capture in capitalists and/or prison systems, there is room for mercy and for seeing the system of sin that manifests itself in particular sins.

Most mothers are not wicked enough to invent killing her child in her womb as a solution to her problems. It is a solution that must be marketed, sold obfuscated, like snake oil. Oftentimes, ethical decisions devolve into the solution that resolves the most emotional distress or creates the most emotional pleasure, and we are unable or unwilling to investigate better solutions.

Many charities start with good intentions, but bad solutions. Yet they fail to dissolve or change when they solve the problem, they set out to solve or when they discover that the way in which they hope to solve the problem does not prove effective. We should look at these charities not as failures, but as first tries with incomplete knowledge that we can now learn from and move past. We have seen such a movement in the orphanage systems, where many modern countries have found that while orphanages were the best that they thought of at the time. Better organizational systems,



increased budgets and clinical research have pushed newer models. Still broken and imperfect, these new models generally seek the good of the children, if not by every individual, at least by the system.

Reform is not as a mere rejection, but is a stepping up, an improvement, a renovation. This sometimes involves tearing out walls or digging new foundations.

Divorce is another example of a bad solution rather than a problem. The underlying problem is abuse, infidelity, lack of compatibility, or interest. Even if we don't know what that better solution is, we can begin to research and search for it. Bad solutions warp reality and skew our vision. Divorce as the primary tool in freedom from domestic abuse, presupposes the acceptability of domestic violence. If we had the presupposition and expectation of virtue domestic violence would be punished swiftly without the need for a divorce. If I am assaulted on the street, I do not need to file for divorce before I can expect protection from the assaulter. Justice can begin without this intermediary step. Spouses do not deserve abuse and should not be stuck in it. We have the right to live in peace, not in violence, whether or not we are married. In cases of infidelity, we likewise see divorce as a solution to the hurt, the pain, and the scars, but if adultery immediately ends a marriage, would this not deprive the offended spouse of being able to choose forgiveness. Rather, adultery presupposes the permanence of the marriage, that the marriage was there before the adultery, during the adultery,

and after the adultery. Here again we have a difficult issue, but can we not at least imagine a better solution?

The US and Germany, France and Germany, and the US and Japan became bold allies after WWII. Eventual reconciliation and alliance are now both the expectation and necessity of the post war world. Rehabilitation and reconciliation are the ideals for marriages in trouble because marriage are covenants.

In the Catholic Church, when discussing annulment, the church looks only at the moment of marriage. Was a covenant made? Was it made competently? Was it made freely with both having the intention of fidelity, fruitfulness, and in love? When we encounter a divorcee, we must recognize in mercy both their individual search for a solution and society's incorrect exaltation up of divorce as an ideal. They too are beloved.

Regarding frustrating or simulating the sexual reproductive act (procreation); do we recognize that our humanity is both our body and our soul? I exist as me, even when older, even if I lose a limb, even if an infant increases in size 40 times. I am both my soul and my body. In the simulation or frustration of the sexually reproductive act one finds disunity between body and soul. Our bodies think one thing is happening, and our souls and minds another.

In mercy we can see how people can turn to this disunity as a solution: "I'm stressed, lonely, tired or angry, sad, feel overwhelmed or lacking control. I want to avoid the discomfort of children because I do not see them as a blessing, or because I fear for my own life, my own sanity, and so I look to use this solution."

Do I at least recognize: "That something is lacking there? That this simulation or frustration is not ideal? That ideally I could unite my body in its purpose, to my soul and mind in their purposes, and that the procreative act in love, in knowledge, in unity in marriage is better than its imitators?" We are able to act in unity between our body, mind and soul and able to recognize the goodness of sex. This is instrumental to maturity and wholeness.

## Non-Ethical Applications

There are many things in life that are not directly or immediately ethical decisions. For example, which shirt to wear, how to prepare a recipe, and many business decisions.

I'm from Louisiana and I have a tendency to condemn a bad inauthentic jambalaya recipe. National chain restaurant jambalaya is not merely a problem, but is a solution to appeal to a blander northern palate with available ingredients approximating some small aspects of the gravitas of a Louisiana specialty.

Many times, while there can be a better solution, companies will decide that the solution in use is good enough. Many companies use legacy software and while it possesses inefficiencies, the costs of those inefficiencies have not yet compounded to where the future costs would be more than the replacement downtime and training costs. When we find small problems and we recognize the solution that has been implemented, we can appreciate that sometimes no change is necessary.

A married couple can have different preferences for how coffee mugs are put away, inventions are available, rearrangement of the whole kitchen is possible, but oftentimes, rather than focusing on the disagreement, we can very well benefit by acknowledging that the issue isn't big enough to pursue an ideal solution. The current solution is sufficient. Is your wife's insistence that the coffee cups go upside down worth a lack of peace or an argument? Is your husband's insistence that the coffee cups be hung on hooks in the back of the cabinet worth the lack of peace and the argument or worth the lengthy research of some ideal system?

As Christians, we want to pursue excellence in things that matter. We want to do even our unimportant work well and with great love. Yet, sometimes just keeping the existing system is enough. This plays itself out in both situations of obedience and situations of family life. If a religious superior says to pray hymn two before hymn one, why worry? Why debate?

If your family prefers to use the side door to the front door, who cares? Identify both the underlying issue “I need to get outside” and the solution “use the side door, which takes an extra five steps versus the front door, which lets a little more draft in.” Recognize the reasonableness in both positions and be able to go with the flow. Is the underlying problem being solved? Are coffee cups accessible? Are you successfully moving from inside to outside? Great, don't worry about the details in those cases.

### **A few books that informed this booklet**

Atomic Habits by James Clear speaks of identifying and implementing small changes that will have a profound impact on your habits including designing an environment where you are likely to succeed and creating systems that will help you succeed.

Good Reasons for Bad Feelings by Rudolph Nesse presents a new way at understanding negative emotions which identify aspects of modern living that mismatch with evolutionary responses and invites us to respond with gratitude and mindfulness to shift our conscious response to the unconscious.

Cravings and Addictions by Maria Karekla presents Acceptance and Commitment Therapy which is about pausing in the midst of temptation or decision. This pause allows me to distinguish between the thought and myself and invites me

to choose the action which aligns with my positive vision of myself.

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzero invites vulnerability and emotional awareness while challenging us to take steps to emotional maturity as a precursor to spiritual maturity.

Being Human a lecture by Robert Sapolsky presents new research on modern psychological stress and its profound impact on our physical health (which has implications for our spiritual health as well. Sapolsky also presents dopamine in the context of the anticipation of a pleasure.

Change Your Brain Change Your Life by Daniel Amen presents the concept of Automatic Negative Thoughts that we can identify and challenge including using always or never or trying to guess what other people are thinking.

The Easy Peasy Way by Allen Carr is a series of books that look at different addictive behaviors including smoking, technology, overeating, and pornography. The book examines the psychology of withdrawal, that addiction does not relieve pain, but rather creates future pain of withdrawal. Addiction does nothing for us.

This booklet started when I was exploring evidence-based addiction recovery and seeing that much of the practice and much of the literature did not align.

[1] "A Century of International Drug Control," 177.