

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## THE SEVENTH DEADLY SIN

**Mortimer Adler**

**A sermon given at Grace Episcopal Church  
May 8, 1988**

**W**ith Father Casady's courtesy, and also with his cooperation, I will continue to take advantage of a privilege accorded a once-a-year guest preacher by choosing a scriptural text not in the readings for this Sunday.

I must confess that I greatly appreciate the privilege I am allowed to exercise. On many Sundays when I am in attendance at church, I do not know what I would do if I were compelled to preach on the scriptural text assigned for that day.

I hope you grasp the magnitude of the task that the pastor discharges when he does his duty and preaches Sunday after Sunday on a text not of his own choice.

There are, of course, ways of getting around the difficulties involved. One is picking a small passage that is only a part of the reading, not the whole of it.

Another is referring briefly to the words of the text, or at least to some of them, and then managing to talk about something else by stretching the relevance a little thin.

Enough of this by way of preamble. The text I have chosen is one I listened to last autumn, on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost. It perplexed me greatly. The sermon I heard that day did not set my mind to rest. I have been thinking about it ever since -- for at least six months. At that rate, I would not be able to deliver more than two sermons a year.

Here is the Gospel reading -- Matthew 25 - the parable of the talents. Let me read it to you.

(The Parable of the Talents)

<sup>14</sup>“For *the kingdom of heaven is* like a man traveling to a far country, *whocalled* his own servants and delivered his goods to them. <sup>15</sup> And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. <sup>16</sup> Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. <sup>17</sup> And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also. <sup>18</sup> But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

<sup>20</sup>“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ <sup>21</sup> His lord said to him, ‘Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ <sup>22</sup> He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ <sup>23</sup> His lord said to him, ‘Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

<sup>24</sup>“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup> And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is* yours.’

<sup>26</sup>“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. <sup>27</sup>So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.<sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents.

<sup>29</sup>‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.<sup>30</sup>

## II.

Let us for the moment ignore the opening and the closing passages and consider only the parable of the talents itself.

The terms of the parable are units of money. In addition there is on the surface talk about investing the money and getting interest by banking it. That is perplexing enough, but even more perplexing is the fact that the third servant tells the Master that he is a hard man, one who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he does not winnow.

Furthermore, the Master acknowledges that he truly is a hard man who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he does not winnow.

So far it would appear that the parable teaches us an economic lesson but, on the economic level, the lesson is very disturbing, for it is downright immoral.

The first great modern economist, Adam Smith, in the opening chapters of The Wealth of Nations, borrows phrases from this parable to condemn the increase of wealth by unproductive means, and gives as a prime example of this the landlord who reaps where he never sows and who gathers where he does not winnow.

Karl Marx uses the term "unearned increment" for those, who increase their wealth without themselves producing wealth; and, for him, unearned increment is simply stealing.

Aristotle condemned as usury all interest derived from the lending of money; and in all the centuries of Christendom before the Protestant Reformation, the church endorsed that condemnation. Jews were the only money lenders in Christian communities.

Fortunately, three things in the reading rescue us from the horrors of a merely economic interpretation of the parable.

One is what the Master says to the servant who did not invest the one talent that had been given him, returning it unused. The Master reproves him by saying: "You are a wicked and slothful servant!"

Fortunately, three things in the reading rescue us from the horrors of a merely economic interpretation of the parable.

One is what the Master says to the servant who did not invest the one talent that had been given him, returning it unused. The Master reproves him by saying: "You are a wicked and slothful servant!" From that statement we know at once that the parable is about a very serious sin, the sin of sloth, one of the seven deadly or mortal sins.

Secondly, we are confirmed in this interpretation by going back to the opening passage of the reading from Matthew 25.

We are told that the parable we are about to hear should be interpreted with reference to the kingdom of God. The Master in the parable is God; and we are the servants.

Only those of us who are without sin or have been forgiven for sins that we have confessed and repented can enter into the kingdom of God.

Not every sin damns us and excludes us from Heaven, because many sins are venial, and only some are mortal and deadly.

The third clue to the spiritual meaning of the parable is to be found in the closing passage of the reading. This much is clear about it.

Referring back to the opening passage about the kingdom of God, we are led to interpret the closing passage as dividing those to whom salvation is given and these who are damned.

But this closing passage is not entirely clear, for it leaves us wondering what those are given salvation have, to which more is added; and what those have from whom salvation is taken away, though they are also referred to as those who have not.

I have not solved this problem, but that does not prevent me from going on now to explain what I think I do understand. Let me

begin by a short digression on sin; then deal with the seven mortal sins; and, finally, discuss the seventh sin, which is sloth.

### **SIN AND THE SEVEN MORTAL SINS**

Sins differ from crimes and from vices, in terms of the kinds of law that they respectively violate.

Crimes consist in acts that violate the man-made laws of the state and that are punished by the agency of the state.

Vices consist in firm habits that issue in actions which violate the natural moral law and that are punished by the consequences we suffer from such habitual misconduct.

Sins consist in acts that violate the divine law, the law of God, and, if the sins are mortal or deadly; and if they are unconfessed, unrepented, and unforgiven, are punished by damnation.

The mortal or deadly sins are also called "cardinal" because from them many other serious sins follow. We are, therefore, to understand that the deadly sins are not the only sins that can stand in our way and prevent us from entering the kingdom of God.

The sixth-century catalogue of the seven deadly and cardinal sins, we owe to St. Gregory the Great. That catalogue soon became traditional. We can find a discussion of these sins in the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas, and also in Dante's Divine Comedy -- in Purgatory, among the souls who are transient there on their way to Paradise.

What divine law do the seven deadly sins violate? As I see it, it is easier to understand them as violations of Christ's two precepts of charity rather than as breaching the ten commandments.

Thus understood, these seven sins are all grave excesses or defects in the sphere of love. All are, therefore, in some way or another, a turning away from the good, for it is the good of our souls to which love directs us

Most of us make the mistake of thinking that moral evil consists mainly in injuring others or in acting unjustly toward them. But none of the seven deadly sins concerns our action toward others. In every case, the moral fault lies in turning away from the good of our own souls.

This is confirmed by the fact that the first principle of the natural moral law is: Seek the good. It is only in the second principle that we are told to harm no one.

In the traditional enumeration, the seven deadly sins are pride, avarice or covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

**Pride** is an excessive love of honor, loving the glorification of one's self instead of loving the glory of God.

**Avarice** or covetousness is an excessive love of external and worldly goods instead of loving God, one's own spiritual good, and the good of one's neighbor.

**Lust** and **gluttony** are excessive love of bodily pleasures -- the pleasures of sex and of food and drink

**Envy** like avarice is an excessive love of worldly goods -- goods possessed by others, goods we lack.

**Anger** toward others is the very opposite of love's benevolence. It consists in an excessive reaction to injury and insult.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask to be forgiven for our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Anger prevents us from following in the footsteps of Christ and turning the other cheek.

Finally, I come to sloth, which is the one sin that is named in the parable of the talents.

#### IV. SLOTH

I thought I understood sloth as remarkably different from the other six mortal sins. Clearly, they are all acquisitive desires in excess. One might say they are all excesses of love in the wrong direction. But sloth is a sin of defect, not of excess. It is a sin that consists in a failure to love that which we are commanded to love by the second precept of charity -- ourselves.

To get help in understanding this more deeply, I turned to Thomas Aquinas. There, in the best and the most recent translation, I found, not the word "sloth," but the word "acedia," and that led me to look it up in the big Webster International.

I found the meaning of "acedia."

The first definition of the word is: "the deadly sin of sloth."

The second definition is: "spiritual torpor or lethargy and apathy."

The stress is on the word "spiritual." Sloth does not consist in being physically lazy, indolent, or sluggish. The torpor or lethargy is spiritual.

With this in mind, let us now turn back to the parable. A play on words may help to enlighten you.

The word "talent" in the parable refers, of course, to an ancient monetary denomination.

But in English we also use that word to signify the gifts with which we are endowed at birth -- the gifts that God gives us, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are intellectual gifts that come with faith.

Those who commit the sin of sloth do not use well the gifts of God with which they are endowed; and, as God in the parable says of Himself, he is a hard master who punishes those who do not put the gifts he has given us to good use

Our spiritual state is one of lethargy. Nothing in the world of the intellect interests us. We are apathetic with regard to ideas. We do not persistently engage in the pursuit of truth.

Sloth is the one sin that those commit who may be sinless in all other respects. They may love God with all their hearts and souls. They may also love their neighbors. But they do not love themselves well enough to seek their own perfection in the one respect that makes them human -- their intellects, by virtue of which man and man alone is the image of God.

The intellect is our only spiritual faculty. It is only with respect to our intellect that we can suffer spiritual torpor and apathy.

## V.

I come finally to the closing passage of the reading from Matthew 25.

Let me repeat the question to which I am not sure of the answer. What is it that is possessed by those to whom something greater than what they already have is given?

Can it be that they have hope for their salvation, and strive to be sinless in order to deserve it or, at least, to confess and repent their sins with the hope of being forgiven? if hope is what they have, then what they are given is the object of their hope, which is forgiveness of sin and salvation.

If that is the correct answer, then we may be able to answer what is taken away from those who have-not, yet who also are said to have.

What they have-not is sinlessness, or at least repentance. And what is taken away from them is hope for salvation as well as salvation itself.

If that, in sum, is the ultimate lesson to be learned from Christ's parable of the talents, then it is of great significance that the parable stresses one, and only one, sin -- the sin of sloth.

Why? Most of us think that other sins are much more serious. Many of us, too many in fact, never even think of sloth when they are concerned with sins they must avoid if they hope to enter the kingdom of God

My answer is that sloth is the sin that all of us are most likely to commit -- a sin we seldom confess or pray to be forgiven for.

As pride is the first of the mortal sins, the sin of Lucifer, the sin of seeking vain glory instead of serving the glory of God, so sloth -- spiritual torpor and apathy -- is the seventh of the mortal sins, the sin which most human beings are most likely to commit. It is the sin of not loving God in one's self, or not making good use of the intellect that God has given us by creating us in His image.

In my judgment, pride and sloth are the two worst of the seven deadly sins and each is likely to be the cause of the other; pride, which is loving one's self the wrong way, and sloth, which is not loving one's self the right way.

THE END





*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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