

We carry on today through the purgation cycle of our discussion of the seven deadly sins. But first, where does this list come from? The number 7, and sometimes 8, has a biblical basis. Seven is the number of completeness – God rested on the seventh day when the days of creation had ended, and the number seven defines the week – and always has – in the human consciousness. The eighth day is therefore the beginning of a new week. It is the day of resurrection, the sign of new beginnings. It is the number of overflowing abundance. However, we could flip the positive sense of the numbers on their heads, and then we see that seven might be the sign of complete depravity, and eight is the number of complete extravagance of sins. Seven was the number of demons that Christ cast out of Mary Magdalene in Mark 16. Also think of Christ’s parable where He describes a person liberated from a single demon only to become oppressed once again by that demon who brings with him seven other demons worse than the first (Matt 12, Luke 11). Here we see this idea of seven plus one.

So the traditional number of deadly sins is significant, but how we name those sins varies a little from author to author in the early church and within the monastic tradition. Today we are discussing a sin which does not have a common name in modernity, but which the ancients called *acedia* or *accidie*. Our modern word which comes closest to this concept is “dejection.” Now some writers group together *accidie* with sloth, but really the spiritual stem of each of these is different. Sloth comes from a laziness of spirit – not wanting to do something because we don’t like it or because it would require effort. Dejection or discouragement comes from failures of effort, or a sense that our efforts do not produce lasting results – that our work doesn’t make a difference. We have tried something and failed and therefore we get stuck in a mindset of failure.

The book of Ecclesiastes is characterized by this sense of *acedia*. It begins, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Our reading today from chapter 2 included verses 11 and 17 which read, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun. ... Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” This is the core sentiment of the soul troubled by *acedia*. I have worked hard and all of my dreams about my work, either completed or frustrated, amount to nothing. My work doesn’t matter: therefore I don’t matter. I am not a doing and thinking subject with agency to make things better, but I am simply an object tossed about. I am not an actor. I am merely acted upon.

Perhaps it is odd for us to think that this would be a sin. We have all struggled with the awful feelings of failure before. Why should this be a sin? That is a good question. Having

feelings is not, in itself, a sin. But having feelings isn't the sum total of the experience. We generally *do* something with those feelings. We have a choice; we have agency regarding how we move forward in life. We can dwell upon our failures and allow our dejection to rule us and drag us down into the morass of self-pity and even self-loathing, or we can put our failures behind us and go on.

Scripture is full of people who failed. We just celebrated the Feast of St. Peter yesterday, and we all know that he failed spectacularly at times. Peter was the one, who on the Mount of Transfiguration, blurted out, "It is good for us to be here ... ." Bad timing, Peter. God scolded him pretty bluntly. It was Peter who, after he confessed the truth about Jesus being the Christ, the Son of the Living God, after Christ Himself commended Peter for this confession revealed to him by God, this same Peter who then presumed to contradict Christ when Jesus predicted His upcoming death. "Blessed are you Simon Bar-jonah." was followed rather quickly by, "Get behind me Satan." And of course we also know of Peter's thrice denial of Jesus. Peter is prominent in the gospel narratives precisely because Peter was a great failure.

Yet we must give him credit. He was not one to let past failure keep him from making future failures! He kept trying. He would pick himself up, stumble forward again, perhaps have some success, but then fail miserably again. Peter was the Cool-hand Luke of the disciples. He kept getting up and refused to stay down.

We see in the Gospel lesson this morning another story of Peter. Along with James and John, all fishermen on the sea of Galilee, all who would become part of Christ's inner circle, he was introduced to just who this man Jesus was. Notice the dejection with which Peter is struggling in the story. They had fished all night and caught nothing. And these were not novice fishermen. This was their trade, and we know that the father of James and John was also a fisherman who apparently had done well, for he owned multiple boats and seems to have run multiple crews. These men knew how to fish, and so it was very disheartening to return empty handed.

You can imagine Peter's incredulity when Jesus tells him to turn around, go back to the boat, and let the nets down again. They were trying to clean up and go home for a rest before trying again the next night. And who was this stranger who thought He knew more about fishing than they did? They had grown up fishing and knew where the best spots were and knew that morning was not the time to fish.

At that moment, Peter had a choice to make. Would he humor this Man? Or would he tell

Him to jump in the lake, to get his own boat, that he didn't know what he was talking about and they weren't going to do it? Failure, dejection, disheartened discouragement—it is so easy for us to live there. Yet here we read that Peter obeyed the master. Did this make sense? Not from a fishing standpoint. We can only speculate about the reason for his obedience. It could have been from not wanting to upset Jesus, or from not wanting to contradict the great teacher around whom such a large crowd had gathered, or from the quiet promptings of God, or from some combination of reasons of which we can only guess. Yet we do know the result of his obedience. “They inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink.”

Seeing this miracle, Peter then realizes that he is not dealing with any ordinary teacher or rabbi. He is dealing with someone much greater; though at this point, Peter probably does not really understand much except that this man works miracles and therefore could be the Messiah. Perhaps faith hasn't taken hold completely, but Peter knows enough to realize that Jesus' authoritative teaching is matched by the power of God in Him. Peter knows that Jesus is holy and that he is not, and so falls upon His face, declaring, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

In the story we just reviewed, we see that Peter had an advantage in that his obedience to Christ was rewarded immediately and manifestly. For us, we are called to faithful obedience without any guarantee of such an express reward for our conformity to God's will. Do not doubt that there is a reward; there is a benefit to the Kingdom of God. Yet we will not always be aware of what God is doing, and in this, we must be content. We must do what is good and right, what is pleasing to God, only for the love of God. Perhaps God's grace in our lives will be immediately evident to all. If so, praise be to God. But perhaps, God's pleasure with us will only be known by us, in the depths of our hearts. If so, praise be to God, praise be to God. Love is not transactional. It is ever giving, every hopeful, and ever faithful.

We find here in this story about Peter, the response that we should have when faced with *acedia*. We have known what it is like to have worked diligently and with competence and care, and yet to have had no return for our efforts. Will we give up in the face of such failures?

As Christians this is not an option. When Peter says to Christ, “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord,” Jesus does not respond by doing what Peter suggests. No, Jesus looks at Peter and says, “Peter, I know you better than you know yourself. I am testing you. I am causing you to grow in holiness. I need to purge all of the selfishness and arrogance away.

You must be broken. You must die to yourself so that I can make you anew. You are a fisherman, but I will make you a fisher of men. You cannot make this transition on your own. You must follow me. You must obey me. In this way, I will remake you into a glorious son of God. Obey me. Follow me.”

In the last couple of weeks, we talked first about pride and then about envy. These were sins of the mind. Dejection is a sin of the heart. It hits us by attacking not our thoughts about God, but our feelings about God. Dejection attacks us at our emotional core, making us feel hopeless and unwilling to risk obedience. The cost is too great. There is too great of a chance that we will fail and our self-conception will be wrecked. Sometimes in life we receive criticism for our best efforts. Sometimes our finest work is rewarded by punishment. Failure is a part of life. It is a painful experience, and we can take only so much of that pain.

But there is another side of the coin. What happens when our efforts succeed, and yet we find no lasting pleasure in them? This is the story of the preacher from Ecclesiastes. He accomplished everything he set out to do, and yet, at the end of his efforts, he found that it was all for nothing. We all have an vision in our minds of a full and fulfilling life. We picture a spouse, a decent job, time for vacation, a respectable house. Maybe we are building a business – or a church. What happens when those images are realized? What then? We know that some of the most unhappy people in the world are the most successful and famous. Why is that?

We all know the reason – the things of this world can never really and permanently satisfy the longing in our souls. Do not place your hope in the American dream. Put your hope in Christ. That hope will not disappoint. It remains even when everything else fails. This morning in Psalm 62 verses 5-10, we read,

Nevertheless, my soul, wait thou still upon God; for my hope is in him.

He truly is my strength and my salvation; he is my defence, so that I shall not fall.

In God is my health and my glory; the rock of my might; and in God is my trust.

O put your trust in him alway, ye people; pour out your hearts before him, for God is our hope.

As for the children of men, they are but vanity; the children of men are deceitful; upon the weights they are altogether lighter than vanity itself.

O trust not in wrong and robbery; give not yourselves unto vanity: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them.

Acedia then, is not a strict function of success or failure. It is the problem of misplaced hope.

If your entire life fell apart right now, how would you respond? Could you press on in the faith? Peter fell on his knees before the Lord. And Jesus said unto Simon, "Fear not, from henceforth thou shalt catch men." The gospel continues, "And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him." We too claim to follow Christ, but I think we also must ask ourselves, have we forsaken all of the things in this world? Or are we still placing our ultimate hope in realizing our dreams in this world?

Let us understand that Christ will make us into what He desires us to be. He will make us into fishers of men, whatever that looks like for each of us individually. We will have seasons of dejection and despair, but these show us that we do not yet value Jesus as the most important thing. This morning we are called to examine our values and purge away all of our false hopes, focused upon the things of this world that cannot satisfy. God grant us the grace to honestly examine our hearts, and may we learn to steadfastly fix our loves upon God, in Jesus Christ, by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.