

The Seven Deadly Sins: A Convenient Guide to Eternal Damnation

The medieval period and the early Renaissance period inherited an elaborate Christian model of sin. Over a dozen such models exist. The most popular one lists seven sins and subdivides them into three "spiritual" sins and four "corporal" (bodily) sins. All seven of the sins were deadly evils (i.e., potentially a cause of damnation), but the spiritual sins were generally acknowledged as more dangerous than sins that arose only from the weakness of the body.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Three Spiritual Sins

1. Pride (spiritual sin)
2. Envy (spiritual sin)
3. Wrath (spiritual sin affected by body)

Four Corporal Sins

4. *Accidia* or Sloth (corporal sin)
5. *Avaricia/Cupiditas* or Greed (corporal sin)
6. Gluttony (corporal sin)
7. Lust (corporal sin)

The Seven Holy Virtues

Three Spiritual (or Theological) Virtues

1. *Fides* (Faith)
2. *Spes* (Hope)
3. *Caritas* (Charity)

The Four Cardinal (or Pagan) Virtues

4. Prudence
5. Temperance
6. Fortitude
7. Justice

The Seven Virtues opposed the Seven Sins. In one scheme, the Seven Virtues are based on the three spiritual virtues listed by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13: Faith, Hope and Charity, followed by the four Cardinal or "Pagan" virtues: Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice. (The idea was that any person, whether he or she was a Christian or not, might possess the four Cardinal Virtues. Only a Christian in medieval belief would possess faith in God, hope for an afterlife, and *caritas*--the type of charity in which one does good deeds out of love for God alone.)

An alternative but equally popular version of the Seven Virtues was the "remedial" or "contrarian" model, which listed specific virtues as the "cures" or "remedies" that stand in opposition to each of the seven sins. Prudentius devised this model in 410 AD in his allegorical poem the *Psychomachia* ("The Battle for the Soul"). His scheme of virtues and vices looked something like this:

Humility	cures	Pride
Kindness	cures	Envy
Abstinence	cures	Gluttony
Chastity	cures	Lust
Patience	cures	Wrath
Liberality	cures	Greed
Diligence	cures	Sloth

Continuing the numerological mysticism of seven, the medieval church assembled a list of seven good works in the catechism as cures to the seven deadly sins: these included sheltering strangers, feeding the hungry, giving drink to those thirsting, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, ministering to the imprisoned, and burying the dead. All these traditional views, however, were objects of much intellectual tinkering in the Renaissance when Protestant Christians sought to separate themselves theologically from the older Catholic teachings, and Catholic theologians sought to distinguish themselves from the upstart Protestant groups.