

Deadly Sins

by C. S. Lewis

Through our lives thy meshes run
Deft as spiders' catenation,
Crossed and crossed again and spun
Finer than the fiend's temptation.

Greed into herself would turn [5]
All that's sweet: but let her follow
Still that path, and greed would learn
How the whole world is hers to swallow.

Sloth that would find out a bed
Blind to morning, deaf to waking, [10]
Shuffling shall at last be led
To the peace that knows no breaking.

Lechery, that feels sharp lust
Sharper from each promised staying,
Goes at long last—go she must— [15]
Where alone is sure allaying.

Anger, postulating still
Inexcusables to shatter
From the shelter of thy will
Finds herself the proper matter. [20]

Envy had rather die than see
Other's course her own outflying;
She will pay with death to be
Where her Best brooks no denying.

Pride, that from each step, anew [25]
Mounts again with mad aspiring,
Must find all at last, save you,
Set too low for her desiring.

Avarice, while she finds an end,
Counts but small the largest treasure. [30]
Whimperingly at last she'll bend
To take free what has no measure.

So inexorably thou
On thy shattered foes pursuing,
Never a respite does allow [35]
Save what works their own undoing.¹

An inspection of the theological craft in this poem reveals the following triadic pattern (distinguished by the letters "a," "b," and "c" in parenthesis so that they can be pointed out in the poem): the (a) desire as perceived by the one tempted; and (b) the work of grace which, if received by the tempted one, grants in overflowing measure (c) that to which the heart really aspires. This pattern emerges from Lewis's profound understanding of St. Augustine's definition of evil as "privatio boni" ("the lack of the good")². At the end of paragraph two of Letter IX of *The Screwtape Letters*, the tempter laments, "All we can do is to encourage them humans to take the pleasures which [God] has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which he has forbidden."³

Line six announces the discernment principle at work in Lewis's discussion of each deadly sin: "Let her follow still that path," that is, follow with the mind in prayer, the "prayer of penitential petition" as it might be called.⁴

Thus, the desire of greed or gluttony (a) is for everything sweet; she must be taught (b) that God has it in mind to give her everything (c). Sloth is really looking for peace (c) when it looks for the kind of bed described in lines nine and ten (a) and grace would like to lead her there (b). Lechery knows the "law of diminishing returns" (a) but God would "force" ("go she must") her (b) to receive the certain satisfaction of what she is seeking (c). With God protecting and directing her (b), anger finds that what is really inexcusable (a) is sin (c).⁵ Envy is mortified (line twenty-one) when she sees anyone better in or at anything than she (a); when this tendency to compare is put to death (b), then she will experience the superlative, that is, the incomparable self that she is (c). Closely related to envy in its spiritual dynamic is Pride who will be (b) forced (line twenty-seven: "must") to discover that God is the soul's only true desirable (c). And when Avarice is (b) humbled (line thirty-one: "whimperingly . . . bend"), she will have at her disposal an endless treasure (c). Thus, God, pursuing like the Hound of Heaven and already victorious (line thirty-four: "shattered foes"), is undoing the seven deadly sins from within.

In summary, Lewis is saying here that, if the sinner would *look along*, or perhaps better *look through*, the sin and see what was really the object desired, the temptation process would become an opportunity for deeper growth in the Spirit.

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² *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*, 11.

³ The source of this definition of moral evil is Augustine's *De Natura Boni* 4 (Migne, PL, 42, 533).

⁴ See Letter IV of *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964).

⁵ See Lewis's discussion of forgiving and excusing in "On Forgiveness," *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 121–125.

¹ *Poems* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), pp. 91–92.