

Doriani, Daniel M., ed. *The Death of the Deadly Sins: Embracing the Virtues That Transform Lives*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2025. 162pp. + 15pp. (front matter) + 22pp. (back matter).

In *The Death of the Deadly Sins*, nine contributors address the seven capital sins—pride, greed, anger, envy, sloth, gluttony, and lust—and the virtues with which the Holy Spirit replaces them. The book does not propose to break new ground theologically, but it brings a balanced, formal discussion of the necessity of virtue to bear on an audience that might otherwise treat such a discussion as a shibboleth of legalism. The basic premise of the contributors is that the gospel transforms. It always has. It always will. Therefore, pursuing virtue as directed by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures is not legalism. It is the expected growth of every child of God into the image of God.

In the introductory chapter, Daniel Doriani defines virtue as “the *reliable* disposition to *desire* what is good, to *discern* what is good, and to *practice* it faithfully, even when that is difficult” (5). By this definition, Doriani distinguishes virtue (the settled disposition) from the single act (a good deed). This leads to a clear articulation of the fact that individual failures and sins do not negate a believer’s progress in sanctification. Doriani rejects “virtue skeptics” among both the philosophers and influencers of the modern age (2)—exposing in modern culture what I call *aretaphobia* (a fear of or disgust with virtue).

In chapter 2, Doriani addresses both the reasons and paths to virtue. He surveys secular recommendations (be virtuous in order to gain pleasure, be virtuous to avoid guilt and shame, be virtuous to exhibit your superiority or good sense) and exposes them as inadequate. Secular reasons for virtue neither please God nor have staying power. Doriani discusses several ethical theories (golden mean, categorical imperative) as representative secular determinants of what is virtuous and finds them similarly lacking. The chapter concludes with an appeal to use the divinely ordained means of grace and disciplines of grace to cultivate virtue.

Robbie Griggs surveys virtue and vice through church history. He shows how biblical virtues do not match their secular Greek and Roman counterparts (28). Then he addresses the rise of the concept of deadly (capital) sins as those that lead to many other sins (30). Several early church theologians identified the ultimate virtue as love (38).

In chapter 4 Dustin Messer calls for replacing pride with humility. Vice, and especially the vice of pride, is “the natural state of mankind” (47). Fallen humanity exhibits autonomy from God (47). Apart from the reality of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, the world is about power and self-exaltation (49). Humility comes only through Scripture and its transformative work in the gospel. Finally, Messer rejects a crucial flawed understanding of humility (that humility is self-contempt) that is often mistaken as the virtue (52).

Philip Ryken moves the reader “from greed to generosity” in chapter 5. He shows how greed is a “disordered affection,” or one that warps the use of gifts God has given by turning the gifts—not the Giver—into the object of affection (58). Ryken nuances greed by showing how it appears in both the miser and the prodigal. One is so greedy that he will not let go. The other is so greedy that he lets go too quickly to grab for something even more attractive (59). In the middle of his chapter, he drops several gems: “Anger is one of the most accurate indexes to our idolatries” (61), and “Generosity grows most rapidly in the good soil of gratitude” (68). In the second half of the chapter, Ryken shows how

generosity—specifically, giving cheerfully, consistently, increasingly, and sacrificially—transforms a person’s affections and replaces vice with virtue.

In chapter 6, “From Anger to Graciousness,” Michael Kruger observes that anger is the one deadly sin that is not always sinful (77). However, the righteous use of anger is rare and nearly foreign to fallen humans. Instead, we are far too often angry for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways (78). Rather than positing secular mechanisms for stress relief or detachment, Kruger points to the grace found in Scripture as the solution (82). We must recognize the grace of God toward us. Then we must reflect God’s grace onto others.

Melissa Kruger addresses one of the most pernicious of the deadly sins in chapter 7, “From Envy to Contentment.” The chapter equates envy and covetousness (91) and does not develop the malice that seems to be inherent in *invidia*. The latter part of the chapter shows one of the primary solutions in contentment.

In chapter 8 Trent Casto covers the transformation from sloth to diligence. He faces several challenges in this chapter. First, the modern use of *sloth* is nearly equivalent to laziness, but this understanding does not pair well with the traditional deadly sin. Second, because the vice lists changed from person to person (Evagrius to John Cassian to Gregory), sloth came to include both *acedia* (torpor) and *tristitia* (melancholy) in a single word. Casto’s subsection on “the evidence of sloth” helpfully demonstrates that sloth is not merely laziness but is found in hopelessness, fear, and even restlessness. He summarizes these as “avoiding the demands of love” (117). The solution, then, is to return to the demands of love with vigilant perseverance and fervent diligence.

Doriani contributes another chapter, “From Gluttony to Thanksgiving,” in which he observes, “The connection between gluttony and a global lack of direction and self-control is so common in Scripture that theologians call gluttony a gateway vice, one that easily leads to additional sins” (121). Doriani lists “five virtues that displace gluttony: service, thanksgiving, stewardship, restraint, and beauty” (128). As presently grouped, the list is puzzling since it undermines the chapter title somewhat by blending thanksgiving into a smattering of virtues, disciplines, and practices that all correlate inversely to gluttony. The chapter concludes with practical counsel on defeating inordinate desire for self-indulgence.

Christine Gordon takes up “From Lust to Love” in chapter 10. Gordon treats lust broadly in terms of any kind of inordinate desire including a desire for power, pain avoidance, and sexual sins. This accords more with John Cassian’s *luxuria* than with Evagrius’s *porneia*—illustrating just how hard it is to nail down what the “deadly sins” really are. In either case, whether one takes a broad or narrow definition of this vice, the solution remains the same—biblical love.

A final chapter by Jen Michel urges believers to pursue an organic growth of virtue in their lives through small, repeated, biblically informed decisions. She cautions against modern pseudo-values and false virtues that crowd out the true.

While several contributors make brief reference to the connections among the deadly sins, they do not develop this point in detail.¹ Given the mutually reinforcing nature of the capital sins and their impact on other “lesser” sins, this development could be stronger. Additionally, the references to “disciplines of abstinence” in chapter 2—involving solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, and sacrifice—feel less theologically precise than the rest of the book and seem to favor (given the shoutout to Foster and Willard) the Renovaré movement, which is known for ecumenism, asceticism, and traditionalism. Finally, Ryken seems to affirm Aristotelian virtue with the statement, “The virtue of liberality walks the fine line between miserliness and ‘spendthriftiness’” (66). Defining virtue negatively as a midpoint between two vices inverts the moral order by treating vice (and the necessity of knowing it) as antecedent to virtue. While such an appeal might demonstrate ways in which a virtue may be corrupted, it must be heavily cautioned against as an actual mechanism for determining what is virtuous. Christian definitions of the moral order stem directly from what God has revealed in his Word, not from speculative philosophy that defines virtue primarily in antithesis to vice.

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¹ Significantly, the authors overlook Brian R. Hand, *Web of Iniquity: The Entangling of Sins* (Greenville, S.C.: BJU Press, 2016), which treats the capital sins in greater theological detail and would have been highly germane to their study.