

Top Sins to Avoid • Exodus 20; Proverbs 6:16-19

Sins are like diseases; the list of possibilities is virtually endless. Just as all diseases are bad, so all sins are bad. And just as all diseases are to be avoided, so all sins are to be avoided. But some diseases are higher on our avoidance list than others. Not that all diseases and sins are not bad, but some are clearly worse than others. Heart attacks and cancer make the Top Ten list of diseases to avoid while athlete's foot is not even in the top one hundred.

As Christians we want to avoid sin for Jesus' sake. Every sin is an offense against God; however, avoiding sin is good for us as well. Sins are bad for God and damaging to us.

Some people think that prohibitions against sin all come from a God who is a grouch and does not want us to have any fun. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Let's compare God's rules to a child's car safety seat. Children used to have unrestricted and unrestrained access to any passenger seat in any car. Thousands of children needlessly died in automobile accidents that ended their lives and broke their parents' hearts. Then came laws requiring safety seats facing the right direction, properly secured and in the back of the car. New moms could no longer sit in the front seat holding their babies on their laps. There is even a fine for breaking the child safety seat law. Restrictive? Yes. Is it a really good idea? Absolutely.

When it comes to making a Top Ten list of sins to avoid the Ten Commandments clearly come to mind. Let's take a look at the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20:2-5. Actually, I am going to take the liberty to leave out a couple and add a few from elsewhere in the Bible. By the way, different denominational traditions have different lists of the Ten Commandments. It is not

that the content varies but different traditions use different approaches and numbering when counting the commandments in Exodus 20:2-5.

The number one sin to avoid is idolatry. It is the sin of substituting anyone or anything for God. Exodus 20:2-5 tells us:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

"You shall have no other gods before me."

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God"

The sin of idolatry was first understood in terms of the pagan religions surrounding the Hebrew people. They depicted God in art and other images. These images became competitors of God or substitutes for God. The essence of this sin is making anything more important than God. So we are to avoid anything that triggers the jealousy of the God we love and serve.

What does this look like today? Ask yourself the simple question, "What might God think is more important in my life than God himself?" It might be a person or a possession. Idolatry can come in almost any form—whiskey bottle, fishing pole, SUV, bank account, college degree, boyfriend or a good luck charm worn on a chain around your neck.

It is a constant battle. Every one of us has a long line of applicants for "first in our lives." When we reject one applicant another shows up. There is constant pressure to push God into second or lower place on the list of importance. So, avoid anything and everything that competes with

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God for number one place in your life.

Second on the Top Ten list of sins to avoid is profanity. There is a difference between profanity and obscenity. Obscenity is a whole dictionary full of mostly four-letter words that are generally related to sex or bodily functions and parts. Most obscenity is rooted in the person's anger, frustration, limited vocabulary or other personal problems. Obscenity is common in our culture and increasingly common on television and in the movies. Obscenity is vulgar and inappropriate and, while I would certainly include obscenity on a longer list of sins to avoid, it does not make the Top Ten. Profanity does, however, make the Top Ten list at number two.

Ironically, our culture is more accepting of profanity than obscenity. If I list for you the more frequent profanities in our vocabulary they include "Oh, my God" and "Jesus Christ". But if I speak the most common obscenities or even suggest the first letters of the most obscene words you will be offended and even outraged. The Federal Communications Commission allows profanity but bans obscenity.

Profanity is misusing the name of God. It is swearing by God's name and not keeping that vow. It is invoking God's name to make a point or to get attention. Exodus 20:7 tells us, "*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*"

One new Christian struggled to break the habit of bad language. He agreed to an accountability system with a Christian friend. He kept track of how many times he swore during the week, wrote a check for \$5 per profanity and put the check in the weekly church offering.

The first week it cost him \$100. The second week he did better and it cost him less. But he just could not seem to break the habit. Then his friend unilaterally changed the contract. Instead of the guy who swore paying the weekly fine, his friend wrote the check each week. They would meet at church on Sunday morning and the mentor had the check all made out and signed. The man with the swearing problem just wrote in the amount. This helped him to understand God's grace and

forgiveness and within a few weeks his profanity stopped.

Number three is overwork. It is actually a chronic sin of many hard-driving Type-A Christians today. There are many reasons why overwork is a sin, including abusing our bodies, idolizing achievement and not trusting God. In Exodus 20:8-11 we read:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

The principle here is clear. Take time off. Take a day off. Take a vacation. Lighten up. Trust God to help you do your work in less than 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Work hard, but don't overwork!

The fourth sin to avoid is murder. Most of us breathe a sigh of relief on this one because we have not killed anyone and probably never will. But, before we overrate ourselves, take note of news reports analyzing the behavior of American prison guards in Baghdad. American soldiers, intelligence agents and contract workers accused of prisoner abuse were ordinary people who would not have predicted their own behavior. Some of them are described as committed Christians and faithful church members. Before we assume ourselves incapable of abuse and murder, let's assume that we might take another person's life if we were caught in certain circumstances.

In the Ten Commandments it is only a few words: "*You shall not murder.*" One of the ways to avoid this terrible sin is to assume that we might commit it and deeply resolve in advance that we will never take another human life. It is true that sometimes we may face a tragic moral choice

where self-defense or a just war invites life taking. If so, may such behavior be the last resort and with deep regret.

The taking of life has long been an area of moral debate. This debate has been mingled with political positions and government policies at home and abroad. In some cases our nation has been deeply divided. My advice to you is to promote, defend and celebrate human life as a gift from God. As for me, I want to avoid life taking and seek to be consistently pro-life at every opportunity and on every issue. From abortion to capital punishment, I want to protect life.

Number five is adultery. Simply defined, adultery is sexual unfaithfulness to a marriage covenant. The Bible is simple and clear in Exodus 20:14, “*You shall not commit adultery.*” Adultery is a sexual sin. But it is not primarily a sexual sin. It is primarily the breaking of a marriage vow and relationship between a man and a woman and God.

Marriage is God’s design as the best and most intimate of lifelong relationships between a man and a woman. When God’s best is exchanged for an encounter with someone else it deeply wounds the souls of everyone involved. What may seem like a good idea at the time turns out to be a moral disaster. Smart Christians not only avoid adultery, they avoid anything that might lead to adultery.

We hear a strong pro-adultery message ricocheting in our culture to the point that you might think everyone is unfaithful. There is a story about a dozen married women who met for lunch. One of them asked how many had remained faithful to their husbands throughout their marriage. Only one of the twelve raised her hand. Later that day, one of the women who did not raise her hand went home and told her husband what had happened. She said she had lied because she had been faithful to him. When he asked her why she didn’t raise her hand she answered, “Because I was ashamed.”

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Never be ashamed of avoiding the sin of adultery even if it looks like everyone else is doing it! The truth is that everyone is not doing it! The National Research Center at the University of Chicago conducted five studies beginning in 1988 and reported that 15% of Americans have ever cheated on a spouse and that in any given year the range is somewhere between 3-4% of husbands and wives are unfaithful.

If you are having an affair, end it. If you have never committed adultery, don’t!!!!

Number six on the list of the Top Ten Sins to

Avoid is stealing. This sin does not need much of a definition. It is taking something that we have no right to take. Exodus 20:15 is just four words: “*You shall not steal.*”

Amazingly, some of the most famous shoplifters in America are superstars with millions of dollars. Stealing is often not about the items stolen. It is done simply for the joy of stealing. The average value of shoplifted items in America increased 53% from 2000 to 2003. Towels disappear from hotels. Church hymnals disappear. Employees pilfer. Workers come late and leave early for full pay. People lie on income tax returns and expense reports. Stealing is a common sin that we easily rationalize and justify. We tend to say the company owes us, no one will know or it will never be missed.

If it’s not yours, don’t take it.

Number seven is lying. This is such a common and easy sin that it is universal. Some people lie when they would be better off telling the truth. Exodus 20:16 tells us, “*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*”

Lying is really a form of stealing because it robs others of the truth. Lying destroys trust. Lying undermines relationships. It cheats others out of the advantages of honesty. It is extremely difficult to rebuild a relationship when lying has torn that relationship apart.

USA Today reported an analysis of 7,000 resumes that were submitted by applicants to po-

tential employers. They found that 71% lied about the number of years in a previous job; 64% exaggerated accomplishments; 60% exaggerated the size of the organization they managed; 52% reported partial education as fully completed degrees; 48% exaggerated the compensation they previously received.

Liars don't trust God. God stands for truth and when we lie we decide that truth is not good enough and that God can't take care of us unless we corrupt the truth. God loves the truth. So let's avoid the sin of lying.

Number eight of the Top Ten is coveting. This sin is very different from the rest. The other sins are mostly external but coveting is mostly internal. Exodus 20:17 says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." This is a sin of the heart. It is all about contentment—being satisfied with what we have and not lusting for what belongs to someone else. Coveting is where adultery, stealing and murder all get started. When we yearn for the power, prestige and possessions of others we light the fuse of further sins.

Another way of defining coveting is that it is envy. Envy is when I feel really good about bad things that happen to you or I feel bad about the good things that happen to you. It is a lack of contentment over the blessings God has given to me.

We can control our thoughts. We can choose to be content with what we have. We can avoid the sin of coveting.

Number nine is actually a list within a list. It is found in Proverbs 6:16-19 and it is a statement of what God hates. Since we as Christians care about what God likes and what God doesn't like God's hate list belongs on our list of sins to avoid. Some of this list-within-a-list repeats some of the Ten Commandments but some are new. Let's look at what God hates:

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Don't walk around looking proud. Don't scheme up evil in your heart. And, never sin by causing dissension between other people.

Last on the list of the Top Ten Sins to Avoid is unlike all the rest. It is not the sin of what we do; it is the sin of what we don't do. In James 4:17 we read, "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." In other words, it is a sin to passively sit by and do nothing when we know the right thing to do.

Twenty-four year old Army Specialist Jeremy Sivits pleaded guilty at a U.S. Army court martial in Baghdad. He was an army mechanic who was invited to take photographs of prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib Prison. He never kicked, punched, stripped or humiliated any Iraqi prisoner. But he did not stop those who did. He did not report the abuse to the chain of command. He could have done good and he did nothing. He was sentenced to a year in prison followed by a bad-conduct discharge.

Whenever you can do good, do it. Avoid the sin of undone good.

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