

A Life-Giving Look at the Seven Deadly Sins: An Essay Review of *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins*



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

In the multitude of counselors, we expect to find wisdom. But sometimes conflicting voices just leave you more confused. You might hear this from one person: “We don’t need some strategy and plan of self-discipline. We just need heart change, plain and simple.” Then from another: “It doesn’t really matter what we feel or what we want. We just need to start *doing* the right thing.” It seems we’re all drawn to reduce the Christian life to a *just*.¹ But the hope in considering both the focus on the heart and the focus on behavior is that we gain perspective on our imbalances and blind spots, and are then able to synthesize the ideas into a framework that affirms both in their proper places. Dennis Okholm looks to ancient Christian history to find a framework that offers this type of balance in his book *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*.²

Okholm sees a special need for helping Christian counselors to gain a renewed perspective on their work, and he even invites an overhaul of their orienting frameworks of practice. He illustrates this need by sharing his story of receiving a psychological evaluation during his ordination process.

¹ David Powlison, “How Does Sanctification Work? Part 1,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27:1(2013): 49-66.

² Dennis Okholm, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 230 pages.

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He had the chance to talk with the assessor—a psychologist, who was also a Christian. As a seminary teacher, he was curious about her education. Although she had attended an evangelical institution, he was surprised to discover that she didn't know about many major ancient Christian writers who, he thought, had a lot to say about psychologically assessing a candidate for ministry (p.7). This psychologist is not a special case. Across the board, Christians who serve in counseling roles are often unaware of the Christian history of understanding human psychology. Okholm's book invites us to start learning about it.

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Okholm's central argument is that modern Christian counseling would be enriched, and even transformed, through a deeper knowledge of our roots. He believes there are important resources semi-buried in the early medieval church, when the framework of the seven deadly sins helped the church to care for people. Specifically, he contends that Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian, and Gregory the Great “provide the church with a psychology which is not only specifically Christian in its orientation, but relevant to modern people if taken seriously” (p.8). These writers offer a whole framework for viewing the person and the Christian life—a “Christian psychology.”

This provocative thesis targets an audience of Christians who counsel in formal contexts. Specifically, he speaks to counselors who emphasize best practices in clinical psychology, while implicitly or explicitly integrating their Christian faith into what they do. These modern practitioners might ask, “Does the medieval church really add anything of value for us?” Pastoral and lay counselors might ask a similar question, “Since the Bible is sufficient for life, doctrine, and ministry, what do these ancient writers really have to offer?” Okholm argues that these ancient writers do have something to offer, and it's not just a few incidentals. In theory and conceptualization,

in methodology and manner, they offer a powerful vision of Christian growth and change. Although Okholm's book is geared toward counselors, if you are a person who talks with people about complex problems, about struggles against sin, and about efforts to grow in grace (in other words, all of us!), then you will find it helpful.

What follows is not a typical book review, but a series of reflections on *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins*. I'll summarize its main points and strengths, and close with reflections on how to build on Okholm's work.

Overview and Key Insights

Okholm assigns one chapter to each of the seven deadly sins: gluttony, lust, greed, anger, envy, sloth, and vainglory. He brings in key biblical and theological themes as he explains how ancient Christian writers understood these sins, and what they saw as the remedy for each. Throughout, he compares these conceptualizations and solutions to those of modern clinical psychology, and explores similarities and differences.

These chapters place the vices within the broader framework of how Christian virtue is formed.³ The terms *virtue* and *vice* describe the Christian life by emphasizing practice. So virtues and vices are not just individual good or bad deeds, but well-practiced, habitual patterns of behavior. Straying from God involves action—repeated, habit-forming movement toward anything other than him. And repentance and Christian growth in virtue require action, too—constant effort, in community, dependent on God. Anything less doesn't stand a chance against vices.

Okholm observes that part of what makes vices so powerful is that they do not exist in isolation. They are interrelated and linked, with one vice creating the conditions for the others to thrive. But this is actually hope-giving. If sins are interrelated, then the most persistent sins (the “hard” ones) share a root with other ostensibly surface ones (the “easy” ones). Just as a rising tide raises all ships, so victory in one area will bring victory in others.

Here is an example he relates from Cassian:

Because [lust] is related to all the other vices, Cassian

³ Passages such as 2 Peter 1:5–9 underlie this discussion: “Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge....”

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