

The Vice Lists

In about ten places in the New Testament are lists of vices. It must therefore be important. So, although it's not very uplifting to discuss these, it's probably necessary to do that.

We need first to understand why these are in our Scriptures. If we're in Christ, we are a new creature. We're "born again" or, in theology, regenerated. We're not any longer the old man who lived enslaved to sin. Instead, we live in the Spirit, expressing the life of the Spirit. (Or, at least, that's how we're supposed to live.) So these vice lists are there not only to contrast the new life in Christ with the old life, but to warn believers not to practice these. Paul is saying something like, "It's for these vices that the unsaved are condemned, so someone who's a child of God ought NEVER be doing these. Do not be partakers with unbelievers who naturally live this way, but be imitators of God."

But more importantly, these contrasting features highlight the spiritual fact (never, unfortunately, elevated to the status of a Church doctrine) that the old and the new lives are *characterized by how we live*. It's how we live that reveals whether we have genuine faith and we're in Christ—or not. Look what Paul writes, "**The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love**" (Gal 5:6b). Not simply "faith" as in most Gospel presentations, but a faith that expresses itself in our lives, lives of love. Faith that works righteousness is genuine faith. Paul is deeply concerned that our lives reveal the righteous life of the risen Christ who indwells us, and not at all, *not ever*, the life of the sinful nature. So, vice lists. Now let's look at the characteristics of the "old man," the "natural man," as Paul lists them in Galatians 5:19-21.

Sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery can be lumped together as sexual sins. The first word, *porneia*, translated as "**sexual immorality**," refers to every kind of sexual sin. God allows only marital sexual unions, and no other kind of sexual expression. That's because union in marriage reflects a profound truth that we've discussed often in previous Sunday School lessons, and all other expressions of sex grotesquely violate that truth. Non-marital sex, adultery, and homosexuality are what's mainly included in sexual immorality, and incest and bigamy, but the list is long and we don't need to mention them all. **Impurity** probably refers to moral uncleanness in our thoughts and words as well as overt acts. So it probably would include illicit sexual fantasies, use of coarse, lewd speech and telling lewd jokes, immodest attire, watching pornography, and indecent touching of women. **Debauchery** is open or public display or practice of the above sins. The word could be translated "promiscuous." The celebration of homosexuality in today's modern world, so-called "gay pride," is an example of debauchery. Celebrity actresses in revealing dress, lewd rap concerts, and porn websites would also be debauchery in today's world.

Idolatry and witchcraft also can be lumped together as religious sins. **Idolatry** is complicated. It can mean the worship of created, evil gods; the worship of human-created forms of those gods (statues, etc); and the involvement or participation in false religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. But it's more than just devotion to something other than Israel's God. It also can refer to filling one's mind and heart with anything that interferes with or substitutes for the love of God. Refusing to live a righteous life, refusing to believe the truth of the Gospel, refusing to love others as Christ commanded – all these also are forms of idolatry (see 1 John). We today in the Western world worship the State, we worship Science, we worship Marxism, we worship Earth, we worship money and prosperity, and more. These are modern examples of idolatry. Environmentalists are idolaters. So-called "woke" is really idolatry. Our modern world is saturated with idolatry. The N.T. repeatedly warns, No idolater will enter the Kingdom. **Witchcraft** (or "sorcery") refers to a deliberate opening to demonic influence. Current extensive drug abuse is a modern expression of witchcraft.

Hatred and the next few are personal sins with societal consequences. Hate naturally and spontaneously flows from the sin nature. We love ourselves so fiercely that anything or anyone posing a threat to us becomes the object of hate. Hate is contagious; like a virus it spreads rapidly among other narcissists. At the core of "woke" is hatred. Likewise Islam. Satan hates humanity, so he diffuses hate widely wherever he holds dominion. Hatred is worse than disliking someone or something: hatred wants to harm the object of hate. It creates conflict and enemies. It's malicious. It's ugly.

Discord can be what results from hatred. When a quarrel or something controversial isn't resolved, discord results. Ill will, antagonisms and hostility are typically associated. Love of others is absent; excessive love of self is the problem.

Jealousy comes from not being content with what one has. It sees someone else, perhaps as a rival, as gaining or having an advantage in some way. An attitude of hostility is usually implicit. Again, the problem is love of self.

Fits of rage can also be translated as ill-tempered, or easily angered. Such a person not only has no self-control, there's also underlying pride. There's no peace in this person's soul.

Selfish ambition refers to trying to get ahead at the expense of others. Motivated by pride, this desire to aggrandize oneself blurs into lust for power, fame or wealth. The problem? Excessive love of self.

Dissensions and **factions** result when people organize into cliques or splinter-groups with their own ideas about what's right, motivated usually by pride. There's invariably quarrelling over issues or personalities. Divisions and hurt result.

Envy is the wicked desire to have what someone else possesses. It doesn't have to be property. It's the result of being malcontent. Envy, by the way, differs from jealousy in that jealousy seeks to be as well off as another, whereas envy seeks to deprive another of what he has.

Drunkenness and **orgies** have to do with the indiscriminate use of alcohol. The orgies referred to here were probably carousings associated with the worship of Bacchus, the god of wine.

And the like. This list is not exhaustive and isn't meant to be. In many other places (Romans 1 and 13, 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, 2 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 5, Colossians 3, Titus 3:3, 1 Peter 4, Revelation 22), other vices are mentioned, describing the pagan's degeneracy before becoming a believer. These include **sloth, greed, hypocrisy, murder, theft, gossip, lovers of lies, slander, deceptiveness, conceit, bitterness, vindictiveness, being critical of others**, and more.

Moreover, we moderns practice vices that are not mentioned in the Bible. Abortion and euthanasia come to mind, for example, though they could be included as murders. The lust for power is another. And self-indulgence; today's America is essentially a carnival of self-indulgence.

By the way, there's an interesting vice list in 2 Timothy 3:2-4. I suspect that Paul here is simply listing a bunch of standard vices associated with the wicked to make the point that the end of the Church Age will find people not only ungodly but outright opposed to the knowledge of God, rejecting truth. (So much for post-millennialism! Paul evidently doesn't think the Church will make the world a more godly place.) There are also lists for elders and deacons, which really should be for every believer, not just certain special ones.

The above-discussed vices in part characterize the world. "World" however has a more extensive meaning. There are evil values, activities, and beliefs, unregenerate patterns of thinking, and *innumerable* lies and deceptions in the world, so that it comprises an entire system that is opposed to God. As we're in the world, a knowledgeable and determined effort must continually be made to avoid its influence. We need to know what sin is to be able to loathe it.

None of the above vices are merely moral failings. They are heinous offenses to a holy God. It's because of these vices that people will be judged and cast into hell for an eternity. Professing Christians can express any (or all) of the above. Some of the vice lists in Paul's letters are what Christians he was writing to were doing! We have a sin nature and it automatically takes control if we allow it. And so we can't help but express these vices. That's why the greatest and the most important part of the Gospel is the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22) is what should characterize the "new man" in Christ. This list includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In Colossians 3, Paul adds compassion, humility, and forgiveness of others. The vice lists are alongside the virtues that are ours in the Spirit for a good reason. We have to obey God's commands to put to death ("mortify") the sin nature, and instead yield to the Spirit (be "sanctified"). And obedience flows from belief. (Disobedience means refusing to trust God, ie, unbelief. Disobedience, as with unbelief, is defiance of God!) It's a matter of what we want to do, how we want to live. Knowing the vices we're to avoid and the virtues we're to express make it possible for us to live the life of Christ. The transformation God wills for us is accomplished by knowing what we're to avoid, then avoiding it, and knowing what we are to be or do, and pursuing that. In the future, when we're in heaven, glorified, we'll be holy; what we're to be doing in this life, in the here and now, is living according to what we'll be in the future. For believers, the future is now.

What if a believer commits these sins? Salvation is by faith in Christ. Sin results in forgiveness, which is available by grace thanks to the atoning work of Christ. But fellowship with a holy God is broken. And discipline may result, which can be unpleasant (Hebrews 12). Believers who habitually practice these sins may lose the privilege of participating in the future millennial kingdom when Christ rules over all the earth, although if they had genuine faith they wouldn't lose their eternal salvation. Or, habitual practitioners of these vices simply may not be true believers. Lesson: Don't sin!