

*The Seven Deadly Virtues:  
Temptations in Our Pursuit of  
Goodness*

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*"Todd immediately turns the reader upside down. Don't expect old clichés and language of faith. This is about, in his words, 'living out faith instead of sharing a set of beliefs' – yes, a warning about virtues! It is compelling in style, rich in personal examples, informative in research, and creates desire to become more like Jesus in the twenty-first century."*

–Jo Anne Lyon, ambassador, general superintendent emerita, The Wesleyan Church

## The Deadly Virtue of Power

The exploration of deadly virtues would not be complete without delving into the corruption of power so prevalent in our time. Without careful consideration we often find ourselves embracing power that does not come from God but from our sense of entitlement, position, or desires. At first blush it might seem that corrupted power would be easily recognizable, but this often is not the case. Power has a tendency to hold us captive in its spell or make us act on our worst fears and impulses toward the goal of self-preservation.

From the outset it would also be helpful to consider how power – and our conception of it – is frequently attached to our theology or our understanding of God. For example, Christians and Jews alike have always associated the creation with God's power. While we speak of being caretakers or stewards of God's creation, we also affirm that God alone can create stars and planets and living things. Many of the psalms speak of God's power – the big picture type of power – that awakens our sense of awe: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps 19:1 NIV).

In other words, we often associate the greatest power with God. We might even say that this creative power *produces awe*, especially as we consider what God has done and can do. But this sense of power not only fills us with wonder, it also provokes questions of much deeper variety, questions about good and evil and suffering, and God's intentions for us. And yet people of faith always draw back to the idea that God is good, that God's creation is good, and that this ultimate power resides with God alone.

Yes, we associate power with God's creative work, but we also associate power with what God has accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a different type of power, however. The Gospels and the apostle Paul's epistles have much to say about this powerful redemptive work that was accomplished through seemingly weak methods – suffering, death, sacrificial love. We often overlook this power, but it is nevertheless the power of God. It is also the type of power that we can easily corrupt, especially in the church.

Consider, for example, how easy it is for well-meaning people to be seduced by powerful people or by those who tout various forms of power through financial blessings, position, or fame. In our current political and social situation, we might conclude that the Christian faith is about having the loudest voice, holding the highest position, getting the most votes, or having the largest budget or bank account. We could conclude that the best Christians are those who have the most power or prestige. We want the representatives of Christ to be articulate, good looking, electable, and wealthy. In short, we want exemplars of power.

Strength and power have always been seductive for people of faith, especially in times when fear or trepidation is on the rise. And whether it be political or personal, there is always the

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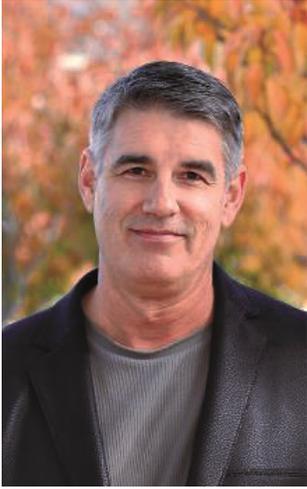


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temptation to place our strength in ourselves or others ahead of God. Likewise, strength – which can be associated with other virtues, such as strength of character or strength of faith – can also become myopic or self-centered without the counterbalance of being aware of our weaknesses and sins (our need).

It seems this has always been the struggle in the church. We struggle with the same lust for power and prestige as the first disciples did. Mark's Gospel, especially, makes a point of recording these struggles.

[Jesus and the disciples] came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mk 9:33-35)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking." (Mk 10:35-38)

These episodes – found in all four Gospels in various forms – reveal a power struggle Jesus addressed many times and in various ways. We too have a strong desire to be first, to be the person with the most influence, to lead by virtue of position rather than by virtue of service and humility. We would much rather be in a position of power than behind the scenes. We would prefer to be the boss.

– Adapted from chapter four, "The Power of One or the Power of the One"