

Living with Regret, Failure, and Finitude

In my most recent column I mused on what life might be like without the seven deadly sins. I'm reasonably confident it would be much better than it is. But I'm also convinced that the seven deadly sins are not all that ails us. Truth be told, our lives fall short in all sorts of other ways.

Most Christians may seldom think about it, but the Christian notion of sin is not merely one of violation or transgression. It is as much or more the sense of falling short, of failing to realize one's full potential, or being less than one's best.

When people say they have no regrets, I wonder. Those who claim that if they had their lives to live over there's nothing they would change leave me incredulous. I've hardly lived a dissolute or misdirected life, but I have all kinds of regrets. There are quite a number of things I would change if given another opportunity. Moreover, I hope there's time to work through some changes I'd still like to make. Surely I have not always done my best. But even when I have, the outcome has often been disappointing.

The more profound understandings of sin within Christianity fully recognize that even doing our best often leaves us feeling limited, thwarted, unfulfilled. We are confronted with conditions of finitude. Christianity sees this as the tragic circumstance of inhabiting a "fallen" world. One of my favorite philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead, maintained that evil arises because it is in the nature of things that they are mutually obstructive. However one interprets or explains this fateful reality, the fact is that there is this perennial frustration, even sense of guilt or failure, that is integral to the lives of morally and spiritually sensitive people.

In short, moral and spiritual perfection always lie beyond our grasp – if not for lack of effort, then simply because the given world is not fully in harmony with our best actions and intentions. We may hope to find spiritual contentment, the grace of reconciliation, even though we cannot be content with all that happens to us, or all that we do. As theologian Paul Tillich put it, in reference to God or the Ultimate, we are by grace accepted (whether or not we find ourselves acceptable). Or as William Sloane Coffin used to put it, "I'm not OK, you're not OK, but that's OK."

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