

What's a vice list for?

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Fun fact: when Paul tells his readers in Colossae to

put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)

it's an example of a common ancient rhetorical device called a "vice list." (This is not actually fun, but bear with me.) There's another one later in the same passage, where Paul talks about "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language." And there are several other examples in the New Testament, sometimes with corresponding virtue lists. The idea is straightforward: don't do these things. Do these other things instead.

Further fun fact: a couple hundred years after Paul, vice lists gave rise to the seven deadly sins. In the monastic guide the Praktikos, Evagrius Ponticus writes about what he calls "evil thoughts": gluttony, impurity or lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride. Through translation and adaptation, eight evil thoughts became seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth and greed. The emphasis shifted as well--while Evagrius spends as much time on anger as anything, in the medieval world, pride became much more important.

Like Paul's lists, Evagrius's evil thoughts somehow managed to get codified into law, or the next thing unto it. Taking part in one of the deadly sins put one's immortal soul in danger; it was cause for confession before a priest and a mending of ways.

This moral pattern came along with no end of discussion over who exactly was guilty of what, and why, and how much they ought to be shamed for it. (In some cases, it became a how-to manual.)

Likewise, Paul's list of sexual transgressions has always been better remembered than the other failures he mentions. For nearly 2,000 years, it's been used to shame sexual expression and keep women in their place. I know many who reject Christianity because of Paul, or dump the apostle and keep the rest of the New Testament.

Evagrius seems to name barriers to progress in spiritual discipline, the thoughts and attitudes and attachments that would prevent desert monks from truly emptying themselves so that they could be filled entirely with the Holy Spirit. I wonder if something similar wasn't also true for Paul. By the time he wrote to the Colossians, he was an experienced church planter and pastor. He knew how little heed congregants pay to moralizing from the pulpit.

Neither Paul nor Evagrius appears to want his readers to think they will roast in hell for offenses named in these lists. Instead, the goal seems to be a fulfilled life. In Evagrius's case this means a life united with God and freed from petty sorrows and regrets. For Paul, the goal is never the straight and narrow path. It's to take part in the new creation, clothed in "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," as we were before the fall.

Yes, that's a virtue list, and it forces upon us a question. Not what are the rules?--that's too simple. It's the great question of ethics: who are you? Are you the kind of person who behaves like this, or the kind of person who behaves like that?

Our society might be moving past telling people who they can and can't sleep with. But this larger question--who are you?--remains to be wrestled with eternally.