

# Seven Deadly Sins and the Gym

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"Bless me father for I have sinned". Not what you would call a normal phrase you would hear in a gym but it is likely something that we should hear. In the gymnasium of today, despite the glitz and glamour, the technology, and the alleged wealth of scientific knowledge we have, the typical gym-goer does not get the training results he desires. Although a lack of knowledge of how to train correctly is a major problem, there are other, darker and more insidious forces at work keeping us from following the path of righteous training. The Seven Deadly Sins are constantly preventing us from seeing the light and continually undermine our efforts to obtain strength and mass.

**Sloth.** We live in an age of instant gratification. On-demand cable movies, the world wide web, "instant" "home-cooked" meals, drive through restaurants, plastic surgery, and more leave us waiting for nothing and leave us with the sense that we can be lazy and still get what we want and get it now. Exercise is not easy. The results we want from exercise do not come fast, at least not fast enough for instant gratification. The same slothful behavior that provides pleasure and gratification elsewhere gets us nothing in the gym. Time in the gym is hard, or at the least, transiently uncomfortable, something most Americans are not accustomed to being. And we don't understand why we need to work hard for hours in the gym when the TV tells us that we can have rock hard and perfectly sculpted abdominals with just a few easy minutes of wiggling a day. Why not get the most advanced piece of exercise equipment that makes working out easy or at least very very short in duration and call it good? For one, if working harder than your body is already accustomed to is not part of the program, the program or device won't make you more fit. Physical work, real effort, cannot be supplanted by gadgets, gizmos, and supplements.

If we are lucky enough to understand that time in the gym is valuable to health and fitness, the adage "when the going gets tough, the tough get going" is apropos. Staying the course in any exercise program is tough and requires dedication and personal effort. It is infinitely easier to miss tough workouts for conveniently contrived emergencies, work requirements, and fun than it is to stick to it and do all the work necessary to reap maximal fitness gains. Although we do not want anyone to become fanatics and miss important birthdays, dates, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, or even work in order to not miss an exercise session, we must be cautious of the slippery slope of skipping scheduled workouts. Once you miss one, the next one is easier to miss, then it's easier to miss the next. Being lazy and slothful is easy, infinitely convenient, and can be done perfectly with no effort. Being strong is damn hard.

**Greed.** Americans are by and large a moderately greedy bunch. We haven't taken vows of poverty. We don't value austere lifestyles. In fact our entire existence is based on pursuing the almighty dollar. If a little of anything is good, we want more. Frequently that attitude of wanting more faster spills over into our time in the gym. Patient and consistent effort leads to slow and steady progress in fitness, progress that is sustainable for decades. This is not attractive to the average person. We want more and we want it now. If taking a 5 pound jump in weight lifted this week will increase my fitness a little next week, why not take a 10 pound jump, 20, heck why not 50? I want to be fit and attractive right now so bigger jumps are what is needed, right? No and basic physiological necessity tells us why not. No exercise program can give overnight results and in fact as we train more months and years, results come slower and slower. Being greedy and doing too much too soon not only kills progress, it can actually cause regression in fitness (over-training).

**Lust.** OK ... this one is not directly damaging or intrusive to fitness. In fact it can serve as a motivator to get to the gym but it can serve as quite a distraction from the task at hand once we are at the gym, training. Common gym attire at many chain gyms and fitness clubs, by many standards, is scandalous. Jogbras, spandex, and thongs for women and no shirts and spandex shorts for men is a common sight in "meat-market" gyms across the US where vanity is king and queen. Gawking at the opposite sex and trying to hook-up takes away from the quality of training (but it sure is fun).

We all want to look attractive but the effort to become attractive in order to satisfy our lust can also misdirect our training. When we should be developing our body as a whole, women focus on their abdominals and gluteals, men focus on abdominals, pectorals, and biceps. The end result are cartoonish physiques with less than functional attributes. So much for being the object of lust with such a physique. Are two oversized pecs, two big biceps, and a six pack, attractive setting atop two pipe-cleaner legs? Is a taugt abdomen and rounded butt attractive under flabby arms and on top of un-sculpted legs? Lust can motivate and be a good thing but lust more likely distracts us and misdirects us from our purposes in the gym.

**Gluttony.** Americans eat food. A lot of it. Many people cannot understand that while exercise is a healthy and beneficial undertaking, three hours a week in the gym cannot compensate for three hours a day spent eating, drinking, and snacking. There are these things called "Laws of Thermodynamics", immutable laws that govern life, that tell us that eating a ton of food can only result in a bad thing happening, we get fat. Whether its fat, carbohydrate, or protein, the calories we eat have to be either; (1) expended during basic metabolic survival, occupational effort, and exercise or (2) stored in the body. So, if we eat a ton, we have to exercise a ton, in order so we do not weigh a ton. While it is absolutely more permanent to increase the amount of exercise we do to control bodyweight, it is more convenient and seems to be less effort to eat less (thus the popularity of fad diets). Diets are only temporary suppressions of gluttony since the average American going on a diet only stays on the diet for a matter of weeks. To defeat gluttony, lift more, eat a little less, and enjoy both while you do them.

**Envy.** In the gym there is always someone who is stronger or more fit looking. This sets up, whether we like it or not, a competitive environment. It also sets up the desire to be like or better than someone else. How many times have you heard "I'd like to have her abs", "his arms", or the like. We envy that which we do not have and that we desire to have. Frequently, in their quest to model themselves after a Hollywood celebrity or a famous athlete, trainees will copy what their ideal or idol does in the gym. After all, if they do it just like the celebrity, surely the trainee will also develop the exact same appearance. Copying someone else's training program without individualizing it to fit the trainee's circumstances is a bad idea that can lead to poor training and poor results. It is much better to consult with a trained and experienced coach or trainer and let them design a program, individualized for the trainee, that will get them the results they desire.

A second barbell envy problem that is commonly seen is that of "keeping up with the Samson's". Especially relevant to males of all ages, there is an underlying alpha-male thing that occurs in the gym. The guy on the rack next to you is using three 45s on each side of the bar and doing 5 sets of 5 repetitions in the squat. This looks pretty impressive. Instead of doing your planned squat work with 150 pounds for 3 sets of 10, you decide to load as much weight on the bar as you can and do as many reps as you can to look strong to him and others in the gym. So you end up working up to 235 for a set of 1 repetition. What you have let envy do is to defeat the purpose of your training for that day. You have given away progress and have placed yourself in a position where over-training is a possibility, and you still do not look as strong as the other guy. Don't worry about the other guy, worry about your program and your results. He doesn't worry about yours. One day, after patient and progressive training, you will be that guy.

**Pride.** For a trainee to admit that they do not know everything about how to exercise, that they could use the assistance of a trained and experienced professional, to concede that they likely will not be an Olympian or even a Mr. Olympia requires a degree of humility and perspective. In the gym, everyone can achieve great things. Things beyond what they imagined themselves capable. But pride can keep people out of the gym. No one starts strong. No one starts as an expert. Everyone is weak when they start. Everyone is an uncoordinated and unknowing rookie when they start. Too much pride and ego can stop an otherwise capable person from going to the gym. Not everyone in the gym will occupy the pinnacle of strength, muscularity, or fitness. Instead of accepting this and trying to be the best that they can be, some individuals will accept pre-emptive failure and quit rather than risk having a blow dealt to their pride if they are not immediately an expert or an elite trainee the first day they are in the gym. Don't quit if you don't know how to train and don't want anyone to know that you don't. Find someone who does (and has the credentials and experience to prove it). Don't risk doing it wrong just because you are too prideful to ask. Get over yourself, that grizzled old powerlifting or Olympic lifting coach that you see hanging around any good gym has lots of things to teach. And guess what? All you need to do is ask.

**Anger.** Nothing looks as silly and pathetic as a teenager or grown adult throwing a tantrum in the gym after missing a lift or failing a skill. It is normal to feel disappointment if the miss was from something controllable or a silly mistake. But anger, just because gravity beat you today? An anger induced episode of a large, loud, explicative filled, tirade accompanying miscellaneous stomping, jumping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth is useless. A miss is an opportunity, a learning experience. A level head can walk away with knowledge of how to avoid such a miss next time. Technique can be refined in a reserved trainee but not in an anger-charged hot head. A level-headed trainee has also learned something about his physical limitations that day. An anger addled trainee learns nothing and appears infantile to others.

These seven sins threaten the sanctity of our gyms. They threaten our path to strength and health. We will all be better devotees of the iron if we consider them, confess to them, then say three "Hail Mary's" and get back under the bar.