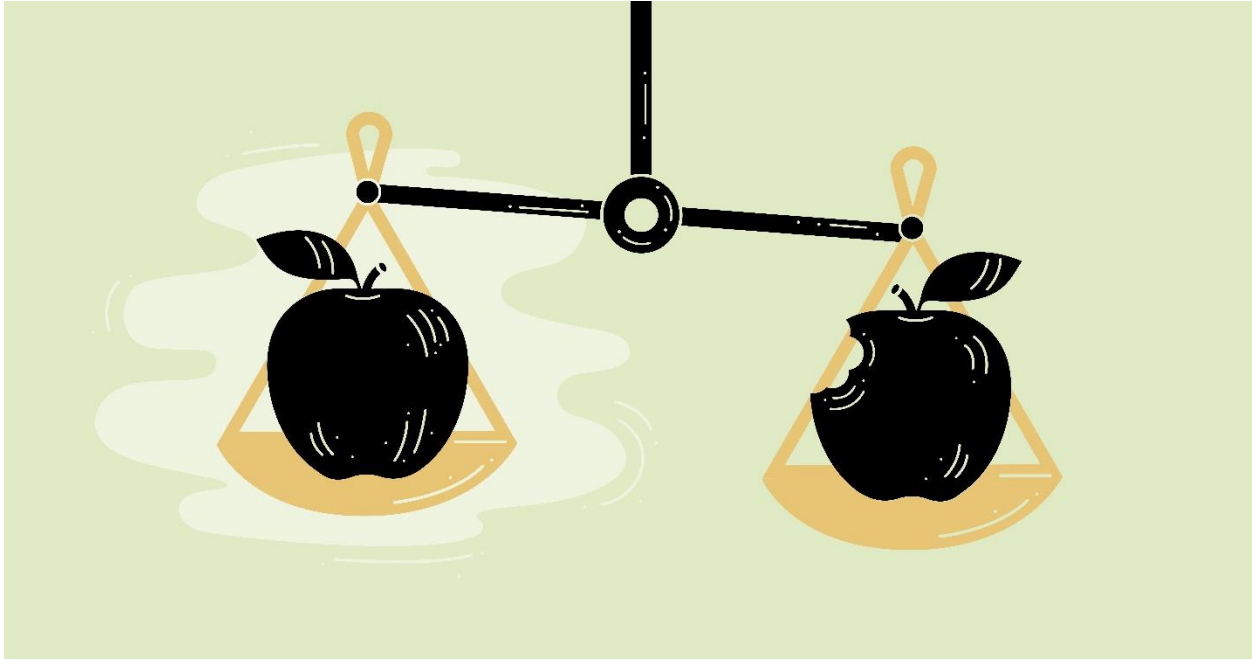


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Are Some Sins Worse Than Others?

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1

Is There a Sin Spectrum?

Are all sins the same in God's eyes, or are some sins worse than others? All sins are the same in the sense that each renders a person guilty and worthy of God's wrath. The root of all sin is autonomy and replacement of God with self. However small a sin may seem, it is an assertion that the person is acting independently of God. Eating fruit from a tree in a garden, like Adam and Eve did, might not seem immoral and may seem minor compared to other crimes, but it was an act of iniquity that had grave consequences for the human race. Breaking any command is an assault against the divine Lawgiver. James declared, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law" ([James 2:10-11](#)). Grudem is correct that "in terms of our legal standing before God, any one sin, even what may seem to be a very small one, makes us legally guilty

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

before God and therefore worthy of eternal punishment.”¹ Even one sin against an infinitely holy God demands an infinite punishment.

At the same time, Scripture does speak of the reality that some sins are considered greater than others. When being shown abominations in the temple, Ezekiel was told, “You will see still greater abominations that they commit” ([Ezek. 8:13](#)). Here some abominations were “greater” than others. Jesus explained that those who delivered him to Pilate committed “the greater sin” ([John 19:11](#)). In [Matthew 11:20–24](#), Jesus said that the Jewish cities that heard the kingdom message would fare worse on judgment day than the Gentile cities that did not. Greater knowledge brings greater responsibility. In [Luke 12:47–48](#), Jesus taught that a servant who knew the Master’s will but did not do it would be treated more harshly than one who did not know the Master’s will. Also, James said that a stricter judgment awaits teachers: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” ([James 3:1](#)).

These two biblical realities are harmonized by considering that there is both a quantitative and a qualitative aspect to sin and punishment. All mankind is guilty of sinning against an infinitely holy God. Therefore, all who die without repenting and trusting in Christ face the same quantitatively eternal punishment for their sins. And yet, because God is strictly just, he will punish those who have committed qualitatively greater offenses with a qualitatively greater punishment. The character of their suffering will be exactly proportional to the crimes they’ve committed (e.g., [2 Pet. 2:17](#); [Jude 13](#)).

The Unpardonable Sin

Jesus says that there is a sin that will never be forgiven:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. ([Matt. 12:31–32](#))

What is this unforgivable or unpardonable sin? The context for Jesus’s statement is his confrontations with the contentious Pharisees in [Matthew 12](#). In [Matthew 12:1–21](#), Jesus was accused of acting unlawfully on the Sabbath, and in answering the Pharisees, he declared that he had authority over the Sabbath because he was the Lord of the Sabbath ([Matt. 12:8](#)). In [Matthew 12:22–24](#), the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 501.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

the power of Satan. Jesus responded on several levels. First, he noted that if he cast out demons by Satan, then Satan would be working against himself. Not only did this strategy make no sense, it was also doomed to failure ([Matt. 12:25–26](#)). Second, Jewish exorcists also cast out demons ([Matt. 12:27](#)). So why did the Jewish leaders accept these exorcists but not Jesus? Third, the truth was that Jesus cast out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate that the kingdom had come upon the people ([Matt. 12:28](#)). This was the correct significance of his miracles. Casting out demons by the Holy Spirit showed that God’s kingdom was at work through the Messiah.

Jesus then spoke of the unforgivable sin ([Matt. 12:30–32](#)), which involved blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This sin could not be forgiven either in the present age or in the coming age. This sin was more than making offhand, derogatory statements about Jesus or the Holy Spirit from a distance or from ignorance. It involved disparaging the clear works that the Holy Spirit was doing through the Son of God. *The unpardonable sin, therefore, is the willful and final rejection of the Holy Spirit who is working through Jesus, by attributing God’s work in Christ to Satan.* For the hostile religious leaders in [Matthew 12](#), this was a determined and final unbelief in the face of clear revelation. After seeing firsthand what the Lord had done and hearing his teaching, these leaders made the final conclusion that he was Satanic—exactly the opposite of the truth. Such terminal rejection could not be pardoned. Since the conditions necessary for committing the unpardonable sin were limited to Jesus’s earthly ministry, the sin itself was restricted to the time period of his career on earth.

But is there any parallel to the unpardonable sin beyond Jesus’s earthly ministry? The answer could be yes. The main issue with the unpardonable sin was hardened and willful unbelief in spite of the clear testimony of the Holy Spirit. [Hebrews 6:4–6](#) refers to those who have “once been enlightened” and have been made “partakers of the Holy Spirit.” Yet they are warned against falling away from the faith, since “it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.” This passage refers to people who had great knowledge of the Holy Spirit. They saw the Spirit work miracles through the apostles ([Heb. 2:3–4](#)), but they stopped short of committing to Jesus. By persisting in unbelief, they were in danger of reaching a point of no return. Even today, it is possible for people to know the gospel and continually reject it. Such people are apostates who are beyond repentance and grace ([Heb. 10:26–31](#)).

The reality is that all who reject the Lord Jesus in this life, never embracing him in saving faith, cannot be pardoned, since forgiveness is only offered to those who believe in him. Though the unpardonable sin described in [Matthew 12](#) involved final hardness of heart against Jesus when he was on earth, the unrepentant rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ is always a sin that remains unforgiven, since forgiveness is found only through repentant

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

faith in Christ. Conversely, anyone who comes to Christ in true repentance and genuine faith will be forgiven (cf. [John 6:37](#); [Rom. 10:9](#)).

Sin Leading to Death

In [1 John 5:16](#), the apostle mentions two types of sin concerning a fellow Christian (“brother”). First, he says that there is a sin that does not lead to death. And second, he speaks of a sin that does lead to death:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

Of particular interest is the “sin that leads to death.” What sin is this? One answer offered is that John is referring to a professing believer who demonstrates through habitual sin that he is not an authentic Christian ([1 John 3:6](#)). So the sin in question concerns an unbeliever’s sin that leads to eternal death. Such a rejection of Jesus has the same consequence as that committed by the Jewish leaders who attributed Jesus’s miracles to the power of Satan ([Matt. 12:31–32](#)). Apostasy is unforgivable. Praying for restoration in this case is futile because God has already set the rejecter’s future ([Heb. 6:6](#)).

The biblical view is that at the moment of saving faith, the Christian is declared righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Another view is that the sin leading to death could refer to a true believer whose life, like that of some at Corinth ([1 Cor. 11:29–30](#)), brought shame to Christ, and thus God’s discipline resulted in premature death. The Christian’s sin is so serious that God takes the person’s life. For example, Ananias and Sapphira died on the spot when they lied to the Holy Spirit in front of the church ([Acts 5:1–11](#)). Similarly, in [1 Corinthians 5:5](#), Paul mandated discipline for a sinning church member involved in immorality: “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” If a Christian is under church discipline, believers in the church should not pray for the consequences of such discipline to be removed until the sinner repents. With the goal that this person will repent, the church delivers him or her to

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Satan's realm. The sin that leads to death in [1 John 5:16](#), then, is not one particular sin but any sin that the Lord determines is serious enough for drastic chastisement.

Both of these views reflect biblical truth, and it is difficult to know with certainty which one John intended. In both cases, John concludes that prayer for those committing a sin leading to death will not end as one might anticipate because the prayer is not in accord with God's will ([1 John 5:14–15](#)).

5

Are There Mortal and Venial Sins?

The Roman Catholic Church promotes the concepts of mortal sins and venial sins. Allegedly, mortal sins result in the spiritual death of the soul. They are intentional and grave sins such as murder, adultery, and fornication. If a person dies with a mortal sin on his soul, he is lost forever. The remedy for a mortal sin is the sacrament of penance, which brings a person back into relationship with God. A venial sin is a lesser or forgivable sin that does not break fellowship with God or result in the soul being eternally separated from God. For example, while intentional slander is a mortal sin, a person who says something unkind in a moment without much reflection could be guilty of a venial sin.

The Bible does not affirm the Roman Catholic ideas of mortal and venial sins—or the sacramental, penitential context in which they are understood. All sins establish legal guilt, and without faith in Christ sinners are worthy of eternal separation from God. The two categories of mortal and venial sins operate within a faulty view of salvation, in which justification is viewed as a process during which a person can commit certain sins that remove him from a relationship with God, while other sins do not sever that fellowship. The biblical view is that at the moment of saving faith, the Christian is declared righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ ([Rom. 4:3–5](#)). All sins are forgiven so that nothing can separate the Christian from fellowship with God ([Rom. 8:1, 38–39](#)). Furthermore, the Roman Catholic idea of meritorious penance as necessary for the removal of a mortal sin is an error that strikes at the sufficiency of Jesus's atoning sacrifice for sin. Rather than looking to his own acts of penance, the Christian looks to Christ's sacrifice as the full payment for all his sin ([Heb. 10:10–18](#)).

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'



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