

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Degrees of Sin

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DEFINITION

Although all sin before God is serious and deserving of eternal punishment, Scripture distinguishes between degrees of sin. In this sense, not all sin is equal in terms of its effects, consequences, and degree of punishment on the person, others, the church, and society.

SUMMARY

This essay discusses whether Scripture teaches that there are degrees of sin or whether all sin should be viewed as equal. After discussing the mortal-venial sin debate in Roman Catholic and Protestant theology, the case is made that before God all sin is sin, but in terms of human relationships, Scripture distinguishes between various sins in terms their effects and consequences. The essay finishes with a discussion of the unpardonable sin.

Is all sin equal? Or, should we think of degrees of sin? Are some sins more serious than others, or does God view all sin as the same in terms of its consequences? Today, it's quite common for people to claim that all sin is the same. [James 2:10](#) is often quoted: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." Here is proof, some insist, that the Bible does not distinguish between greater and lesser sins, at least in terms of their damaging effects: all sin is the same. But is this true?



No doubt, we have to answer this question carefully, yet both Scripture and historical theology speak about degrees of sin: some sins are "greater" than others. In fact, our Lord Jesus states this fact in [John 19:11](#) when he addresses Pilate at his trial: "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." What does Jesus exactly mean? Let's look at this important question in four steps arguing that before God all sin is sin, yet Scripture also speaks of degrees of sin, and that not all sin is equal in its effects.

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Mortal vs. Venial Sins: A Protestant and Roman Catholic Divide

From the Patristic era on (e.g., Tertullian, Augustine), especially developed in Roman Catholic theology (e.g., Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas), a distinction was made between “mortal” sins (*peccata mortalia*) and “venial” sins (*peccata venialia*). On the surface this distinction seems to refer to differences between sins in terms of their consequences, but within Roman Catholic theology, the distinction is tied to their overall sacramental theology—something the Reformers rightly rejected.¹ Tradition has always talked about degrees of sin, yet, in Roman theology, the mortal-venial distinction is used in ways that go beyond simply talking about degrees of sin. What, then, is this distinction and how does it function within Catholic theology?

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Mortal sin is defined as sin that “destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is the ultimate end and his beatitude.”² In this understanding, a “grave violation” is a deliberate or intentional rejection of the Decalogue, that unless confessed and penance is done, God will not work habitual or transforming grace in the person, which ultimately results in eternal punishment. Within this theology, God applies Christ’s work to us by receiving the sacraments that he has established in the church. By the act of baptism (for infants and adults), even apart from saving faith (*ex opere operato*, “by the work performed”), the person being baptized is regenerated (washed of their original sin), infused with habitual grace that begins the transforming process of making a person righteous (thus conflating justification and sanctification), as sin is confessed and the sacraments are received. Ultimately the process of our becoming righteous is culminated in our being purged of our sin and glorified, thus allowing us to “see” God (beatific vision). Mortal sin, however, if not confessed and penance done, stops this entire process, which results in eternal condemnation.

Venial sin, on the other hand, is defined as a minor sin(s) that “allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.”³ Such sins are things like “thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter,”⁴ but they are less serious. Why? Because if committed and not confessed and repented of, they do not stop the process begun at baptism of God’s work of “justifying” grace that gradually makes the person more righteous. These sins result in temporal punishments, but do not cut off a person forever from salvation.

The Reformers did not deny degrees of sin, but they did reject the mortal-venial distinction, especially as it was worked out in Rome’s sacramental theology. For them,

¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8:59.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 454.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 455.

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all sin is “mortal” *before God*, and our only hope is that we are united to Christ in saving faith and declared justified in him. For fallen creatures to stand before God, we need Christ’s perfect righteousness imputed to us and all of our sin completely paid for by his substitutionary death. Also, for the believer who is born of the Spirit and united to Christ as our covenant head, since our justification is complete in Christ, there is no sin that removes our justification, and ultimately thwarts the sanctifying work of the Spirit by the loss of our salvation. Yet, although we should reject the mortal-venial distinction as taught by Rome, this does not entail that we should reject a distinction between all sin as equal *before God* and various degrees of sin in terms of their overall effects on the person, others, and the world.

All Sin before God Deserves and Demands Eternal Punishment

The Reformers were right to say that *all* sin before God is “mortal.” Due to Adam’s violation of God’s command ([Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-6](#)), sin results in the penalty of both spiritual and physical death ([Rom. 6:23](#)). Sin separates us from God ([Isa. 59:1-2](#)) so that apart from Christ, we stand condemned ([Rom. 8:1](#)), under God’s wrath ([Rom. 1:18-32](#)), and needing God to act in sovereign grace to provide a Redeemer for us. Sin *before God*, no matter what sin it is, leads to our status of guilty, polluted, and far from God ([Eph. 2:1-3](#)). On this point, [James 2:10](#) can now be legitimately used: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” *Before God*, breakage of any point of the law is to break all of it. Or, Paul can say: “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” ([Gal. 3:10](#); cf. [Deut. 27:26](#)). Breaking one commandment results in our condemnation before God. Why?

The answer is because of *who* we have sinned against, which takes us back to theology proper. The triune Creator-covenant God is holy ([Exod. 3:5-6; 15:11; 19:23ff; Lev. 11:44; 19:1; 1Sam. 2:2; Psa. 99:3, 5, 9; Isa. 6:1ff; 57:15; Ezek. 1-3; Heb. 12:28; 1Pet. 1:15-16; 1Jn. 1:5; Rev. 4](#)). Given that *all* sin is against *him*, and given that God’s will and nature is the moral standard of the universe, he cannot and does not overlook our sin—no matter what our sin is. His eyes are too pure to look on evil; he cannot tolerate wrong ([Exod. 34:7; Rom. 1:32; 2:8-16](#)). Our sins separate us from him, so that his face is hidden from us. In God’s holy reaction to sin and evil ([Rom. 1:18-32; John 3:36](#)), God stands against and punishes *all* sin. Where there is sin, the holy God confronts his creatures in their rebellion, otherwise God is not the holy God he claims to be.

Alongside God’s holiness is his justice, which like all of his attributes, is *essential* to him. For this reason, God’s justice is strongly retributive. God is *not* like a human judge who adjudicates a law external to him; instead, the triune God *is* the law ([Gen. 18:25](#)). When God judges he remains true to his own perfect, moral demand, which means that he

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remains true to himself. Sin, then, is not against an abstract principle or impersonal law; instead sin is against the personal God who is holy and just, which entails that *all sin before God* is worthy of eternal death, and that for sinners to be declared just, our justification before God requires that our sin is fully paid and that we have a perfect righteousness by imputation. David, in his famous confession acknowledges this point. Although David in his adultery with Bathsheba, and subsequent sin, has sinned against many people, indeed the entire nation, David rightly confesses: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” ([Psa. 51:4](#)).

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All Sin is not Equal in relation to Ourselves and Others

On this point, we have to think carefully about what Scripture teaches without minimizing the serious reality of human sin and all of its disastrous consequences. *All sin* before God, given who God is, deserves and demands eternal punishment, hence our need for a Redeemer. Yet, Scripture also speaks of degrees of sin depending on the context, intention, the person committing the sin, and the sin’s overall effects.

In our everyday lives, we know this to be true. For example, speaking obscenities at someone, or harboring hatred in our hearts towards others is a serious sin ([James 3:8-10](#)). Yet, to hate someone in such a way that one plans and executes their death is “greater” in terms of its intention, result, and punishment. Or think of lying. To lie to someone is wrong. However, to lie as a government official and to act in deceitful ways could result in treason. Again, the person doing it, the intention, context, and consequences result in a more “serious” offense. Or, think of sexual sin. All sexual activity outside of the marriage covenant between a man and a woman is sinful. Yet, we view sexual sin of an adult with a child, or sexual sin that is a distortion of God’s created order, whether homosexuality or bestiality, as more serious in terms of its consequences and effects on the people involved and its larger impact on society.

Scripture confirms what we know to be true in our everyday experience. Due to our creation as image-bearers and God’s common grace, we cannot eradicate the truth of God from our lives, conscience, and establishment of moral laws and demands. Let’s think of five truths that teach that Scripture speaks of degrees of sin without trivializing any sin.

First, [Genesis 9:6](#) is an important text. Under the Noahic covenant, which remains in effect until Christ returns, the sin of premeditated murder is mentioned as a sin that demands the death penalty for the perpetrator, carried out by proper governmental officials (cf. [Rom. 13:1-7](#)). Not all sin demands this serious punishment, which highlights the fact that specific sin such as anger and gossip are not treated in the same category as intentional murder. This truth is further underscored in the old covenant by the distinction between intentional and unintentional sins.

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Second, as we turn to Israel's covenant and laws, we see various distinctions that confirm that Scripture makes a distinction between sins. For example, distinctions are made between different levels of clean and uncleanness requiring different sacrifices ([Lev. 11-15](#), cf. [chs. 1-8](#)), and especially between "unintentional" and "intentional" sins ([Num. 15:22-30](#)). Unintentional sin can be atoned for (e.g., [Lev. 4](#)), but certain intentional sins, specifically "high handed" sins are so grievous that they cannot be atoned for and they require the death penalty ([Num. 15:30](#)). This kind of distinction makes no sense unless we think in terms of degrees of sin. It also reveals the God-given limitations built into the old covenant that anticipate the need for a new covenant that results in a full and complete atonement in Christ ([Jer. 31:34](#); cf. [Heb. 9:1-10:18](#)).

Third, Scripture also speaks of "sins that cry out" that God himself will execute judgment because humans and government officials have acted unjustly towards others (e.g., [Gen. 4:10; 18:20; 19:13](#); [Ex. 3:7-10](#); [Deut. 24:14-15](#)). Again, not all sins are put in this category, and these sins are highlighted as more grievous than other sins.

Fourth, Scripture teaches that there are different degrees of punishment, tied to a person's knowledge of God's revelation that are more "serious" than those who have acted in ignorance, and thus demand greater punishment (e.g., [Matt. 11:21-24](#); [Luke 12:47-48](#); [John 19:11](#)).

Fifth, within the church we also see a distinction between sins worked out in our life together. When it comes to church discipline, certain sins between one another can be dealt with at the personal level, yet if sin is not repented of, others need to be brought in, and ultimately the entire church must deal with unrepentant sin ([Matt. 18:15-20](#)). However, not every sin is dealt with in terms of excommunication. As God's people live together, we have to learn how to demonstrate grace to others in our pettiness and sin, yet there are certain sins that must be dealt with immediately, even publicly. For example, in [1 Corinthians 5](#), the sexual sin of incest is occurring in the church—something that pagans do not even tolerate—that demands an immediate response. Not all sin is dealt with in this manner. Or, think of how the sin of elders is to be dealt with publicly ([1Tim. 5:20](#)), which is not always true of other members of the church, due to their position of authority in the church.

More examples could be cited, but these five points demonstrate that Scripture makes a distinction between degrees of sin depending on context, intention, the person involved, and the sin's overall effects on families, churches, and the society at large.

From this data, we can draw three broad reasons why Scripture distinguishes between sins and why some sins are viewed as more serious than other sins in our lives and relationships with one another.

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First, Scripture holds people more responsible for their sin depending on their knowledge of God's truth and their obedience to it. This is why Jesus can speak of a "greater" sin ([John 19:11](#)), or say that it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the religious leaders who have rejected him ([Matt. 11:21-24](#); [Luke 10:11-13](#); [12:47-48](#)). With greater knowledge of God's will, greater responsibility is assumed, and sin is more "serious" when it's against knowledge.

Second, and related to the knowledge of God's will, is that our degree of guilt is also tied to our intention in our actions. For example, premeditated murder is different than unintentional killing ([Gen. 9:6](#)). Or, unintentional sin is sin, but it's not in the same category as intentional or "high-handed" sin ([Num. 15:27-30](#); cf. [Jer. 7:16, 24, 26](#)). Acts of sin done in full knowledge and defiance of God's law are viewed as "greater" than sin done unintentionally or out of ignorance.

Third, specific sins that are a denial of God's created order are viewed as more "serious" in terms of their effects on the person, families, and the entire society. This is what Paul highlights in [Romans 1:18-32](#). Although all sin before God is sin and worthy of death, certain sins such as the destruction of human life, sexual activity outside of God's creation of heterosexual marriage, even disobedience to parents are highlighted as "greater" because all of them are a denial of God's created order. Today, this is important to remember today since many attempt to argue, for example, that all sexual sin is equal in terms of its effects and consequences, which is not true. All sexual sin is wrong, but some sexual sin has more far reaching effects. These sins are "greater" than other sexual sins in their effects, and when endorsed by the society at large, is evidence of a greater spiritual bankruptcy and decay. This does not mean that those who practice such activities have committed the unpardonable sin. In Christ, there is forgiveness, new life, and change, but the consequences of such sin is more "serious" ([1Cor. 6:9-11](#)).

The Unpardonable Sin

One last issue needs mention: the serious nature of the unpardonable sin. In the Gospels, this sin is linked to the "blasphemy against the Spirit" (e.g., [Matt. 12:32-32](#); [Luke 12:10](#)); in the epistles to various warnings of rejecting Christ and committing apostasy ([Heb. 6:4-6](#); [10:26-31](#)); and the "sin that leads to death" ([1 Jn. 5:16](#)). Although each context is different, there is something they have in common tied to the knowledge the person has and their acceptance or rejection of Christ. In the case of the Gospels, the religious leaders are attributing the work of God to Satan, and thus rejecting what they know from the Old Testament. They are deliberately sinning against what they know to be true. In the epistles, this gets picked up in terms of the sin of apostasy. Apostasy is best viewed as a deliberate rejection of the truth. People who have formally identified with Christ,

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deliberately turn from the truth, and evidence that although they may have identified with God's people, they were never truly regenerate and believers in Christ ([1Jn. 2:19](#)). Why is this sin viewed as unpardonable? For the reason that once one rejects Christ in a complete and total way, there is no salvation outside of him, and thus the person stands forever condemned in their sin.

How does one know if someone has committed this sin? Probably we can never know for sure, since there are many examples such as Paul who persecuted the church but was brought to salvation by God's sovereign grace ([1Cor. 15:9](#); cf. [1Tim. 1:13-16](#)). Only by viewing a person's entire life, can any assessment be made whether such a person who once identified with Christ has committed apostasy by turning away from him. A person who thinks they may have committed this sin has certainly not, since people who have committed apostasy are not concerned about their salvation and relationship to Christ. However, Scripture warns people severely who have known the truth, yet now persist in open defiance of the Gospel.

So, does Scripture teach there are degrees of sin? The answer is, yes, but in making such an affirmation one can never relativize the serious nature of *all* sin. Sin is destructive of our relationship to God, one another, ourselves, and the entire created order. Our only hope is found in Christ Jesus, whom the Father has sent, to redeem, justify, and transform us from our sins.

FURTHER READING

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd, rev. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000).
- G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).
- Robert Gonzales, "[The Greater Sin: Are There Degrees of Sin?](#)"
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).
- Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

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