

Here are some articles and thoughts that I hope will add to our discussion of this past week...Enjoy!

“Are all sins equal in the sight of God?” It is very common within popular evangelicalism to answer this question in the affirmative. This was one of the main assumptions in a book that I just recommended last week. Most find this theological concept very appealing and accept it readily.

This tendency to assume that all sins are equal in the sight of God comes by means of three influences.

1) A reaction by Protestants against the Roman Catholic distinction between mortal sins (sins that kill justifying grace) and venial sin (sins of a lesser nature that do not kill justifying grace).

2) A tendency within our evangelistic church culture to express common ground with unbelievers—i.e., if all sins are equal in God’s sight, then your sin is not worse than any other. This way we are not coming across as judgmental or condescending.

3) Some biblical passages that have been interpreted in such a way (discussed below).

I think that it is biblical and necessary to say that some sins are more grievous in the sight of God than others. This also translates into the non-politically correct assumption that some people are sinners to a greater degree than others. Even though Protestants may not agree with the theology behind the Roman Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins, there are many instances in the Scriptures where degrees of sin are distinguished.

1. Christ tells Pilate that the Jewish leaders have committed a worse sin than him, saying, “He who has handed me over to you has committed the *greater* sin” ([Jn. 19:11](#), emphasis mine).

2. Certain sins in the law are distinguished in a particular context as an abomination to God, implying that others are not as severe (e.g. [Lev. 18:22](#); [Deut. 7:25](#), [Deut. 23:18](#), [Isa. 41:24](#)).

3. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is set apart as a more severe sin than blasphemy of the Son ([Matt. 12:31](#))

4. [Proverbs 6:16-19](#) lists particular sins in such a way as to single them out because of their depraved nature, separating them from others.

5. There are degrees of punishment in Hell depending on the severity of the offense ([Lk. 12:47-48](#)).

6. Christ often evaluates the sin of the Pharisees as greater than the sins of others. You strain out a gnat while you swallow a camel ([Matt. 23:24](#)). If all sins are equal, Christ's rebuke does not make any sense. (See also [Lk. 20:46-47](#))

7. Similarly, Christ also talked about the "weightier things of the law" ([Matt. 23:23](#)). If all sins are equal, there is no law (or violation of that law) that is "weightier than others." They are all the same weight.

8. Unforgiveness is continually referred to as a *particularly* heinous sin ([Matt. 6:14-15](#); [18:23-35](#)).

So where does this folk theology come from? Most people would refer to Christ's comments in the Sermon on the Mount. Most particularly, reference is made to [Matt. 5:27-28](#) as justification for this way of thinking.

"You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery'" but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart ([Matt. 5:27-28 27](#)).

Is there a difference in the eyes of God between thinking about adultery and actually doing it? Absolutely. If we say anything other than this, I believe we do damage to God's character and encourage the act based upon its premonition. The point Christ makes in [Matt. 5:28](#) is not that lust and the actual act are equal, but that they both violate the *same* commandment, even if the degrees of this violation differ. Thus, Christ was telling people – and particularly the religious establishment of the day that thought they were safe because they had fulfilled the letter of the law – that the law runs much deeper. The spirit of the law is what matters. Therefore, if you have ever lusted, you have broken the sixth commandment. If you have ever hated your brother, you have broken the fifth commandment ([Matt. 5:22](#)). But, again, the breaking of the principles of the commandment is the issue, not the *degree* to which it is broken.

This is the same argument that James makes in [Jam. 2:10](#) when he says "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." He is not equating all sin, but showing how any violation of the law, no matter how small, is still breaking the whole of the law because the law is connected to such a degree.

Think about this (another *reductio*): if you believe that adultery and lust are equal in the sight of God, then here are the consequences: any man or woman can justify divorce based upon the fact that in [Matt. 5:32](#) Christ condemns divorce except for marital infidelity. All they need to do is make the safe assumption that their spouse has lusted to some degree during their marriage. This will make their divorce justified and biblical. In the same way, if a man were to lust after a woman on the internet, he might as well commit the actual act since in God's eyes he already has. Or (I am rolling), if you have ever lusted after a girl, then you are under God's mandate to marry her since in God's eyes you are one with her ([1 Cor. 6:16](#)).

I think that this way of thinking is not only wrong biblically, but it also has repercussions that lead to a distorted worldview and to discrediting the integrity of God and the Gospel of Christ.

It is true. All people are sinners ([Rom. 3:23](#)). All people are sinners from birth. But not all sin is equal.

I think this is a safe way to stay humble and accurately represent the biblical witness:

While not all people sin to the same degree, we all share in an equally depraved nature.

In other words, no one is less of a sinner because of an innate righteousness about which they can boast. All people have equal potential for depravity because we are all sons of Adam and share in the same depravity, even if we don't, due to God's grace, act out our sinfulness to the same degree.

If you disagree with this, just think—*really* think—about what you are saying about God. You are saying to an unbelieving world that your God is just as angry about the act of going 56 in a 55 as he is about the act of one who rapes and murders a six-year-old girl. Do you really want to go there? Do you really think this position is sufficiently supported to justify such a belief? Can *you* really defend it? If the Bible teaches it, fine: we go with the Bible and not with our emotions or palatability decoder. But I don't believe that a viable case can be made for letting our theology argue for such a belief. I can't think of many more things in Evangelical pop-theology that is more wrong, more damaging, or more misrepresentative of God's character and the nature of sin.

I believe that “super-sized” sin, compared to tiny sins, only breeds a sense of self righteousness, or some thinking of themselves as better than the next. (I am glad that I am not as bad as that guy!) it also starts leading us into a “works based” faith. What happens next, is that we get side-tracked from what the definitions of sin are, (one being the falling short of God's standards)...The penalty of sin...death. The payment of sin...Jesus. The beauty of it all, is that Jesus died for both the tiniest of sins, and the most horrific. He gave up His life, even for the “lesser” sins. Those believing that they are not “really bad sinners”, should give thanks to the Lord for paying such a high price for such a tiny sin. Like Paul, I put no confidence in the flesh...(please read Philippians ch 3). In closing, it is always going to come back to the condition of the heart, and what comes from it. Also, not all sins will have the same physical consequences as others.

Are All Sins Equal?

This is a biblical and theological question which may not be as easily answered as might be expected. The short reply is this: Yes, on the one hand they all are, but on the other hand, no, not necessarily. So let me unpack that a bit further in this article.

In one sense of course the Bible makes it quite clear that all sins are equal, since every sin separates us from God and every sin is an assault on the holiness and majesty of God. Every sin is an act of self will against our creator and judge.

We are all sinners, and we all stand equally condemned before a just and righteous God. And in God's eyes, to commit one sin is really no different than to commit a million sins. That is why we read in James 2:10, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

Thus any one sin is enough to result in our separation from God, and any one sin is enough to require Jesus to come and die on our behalf in order to obtain our reconciliation with God. In that sense every sin is a capital crime against God, deserving of death.

But as we will see in a moment, not every sin is given the death sentence as the fitting punishment. But in terms of offending and violating the holiness and perfection of God, the sin of gossip is equal to the sin of murder. Any sin is deadly in that it separates us from God and offends his holy character.

But in another sense sins can be quite unequal. We certainly get this understanding by simply looking at the consequences or punishments for various sins. In the Old Testament some sins were so severe that the death penalty was mandated for them. Murder is one such obvious example.

Other sins received much lighter penalties or punishments, such as an animal offering. Thus a lesser crime, such as theft, was punished by paying a fine of an equal or greater amount. Often principles of restoration and reparation were in operation in biblical criminal justice.

In Leviticus 24:17-21 we find these words: "Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution – life for life. Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death."

That is the doctrine of *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye), and clearly implies a tit for tat punishment for crime, with lesser penalties for lesser crimes, and greater penalties for greater crimes. So there is gradation here, with more serious crimes warranting more serious punishments.

But it is not just the OT which speaks of degrees of sin. The New Testament also speaks to this. For example in Luke 12:42-48 we read of a parable in which evil doers are punished either with more or less blows. The unfaithful servant who did wrong out of ignorance will be subject to a less severe punishment than the one who did wrong knowingly. It seems that there will be degrees of punishment in the next life based on such considerations.

The OT also speaks to this issue of criminal activities done either out of ignorance or done deliberately (see for example Numbers 15:22-26). Thus it seems that there are degrees of sin, in part based on one's knowledge. The principle is this: the greater the knowledge, the greater the responsibility, and the greater the punishment.

And in Luke 19:11-26 we have hints of degrees of blessedness in heaven as well as degrees of punishment in hell. At least that seems to be one of the lessons presented in the Parable of the Ten Minas. Paul also speaks about a judgment of believers' rewards in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

Also, in John 19:11, Jesus speaks about "a greater sin" which may also imply that there are varying degrees of sins or of culpability. The context has to do with the sin of Pilate, but also of Judas and Caiaphas who are even more guilty of their sin.

And in 2 Peter 2:20-21 we read about those who have "escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome" They are "worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them." Again we find the principle of greater knowledge leading to greater responsibility and punishment.

And even more important, consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:23-24: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

Here Jesus clearly distinguishes between more important matters and less important matters. He does say all these things should be done, but he also indicates that we should major on majors, and not major on minors. While all these things are important, some are more central while others are more peripheral.

Indeed, Jesus could also speak about the greatest of the commandments (Matt 22:37-39). While all God's commandments are important, Jesus could say that some really seem to take priority. And some may well sum up and encapsulate the others.

Then of course the NT speaks about an “unpardonable sin” (Matt 12:31-32). Suffice it to say that this passage has resulted in much ink being spilled, and there are many different understanding of what exactly the sin against the Holy Spirit means.

I will not enter into that very big debate here. I merely point out this passage as another indication of certain differences in the various sins one can commit. Having at least one unforgivable sin does remind us that not every sin is exactly equal, in at least this one sense that is.

But how all this translates into our role as salt and light in a dark world remains to be discussed. Thus the place of believers in the world and their prophetic voice to it will be examined more closely in Part Two of this article.

ARE ALL SINS EQUAL?

**From the Newsletter of Revesby Presbyterian Church
November 2008
Rev Dr Peter Barnes**

In a sermon delivered in 1933, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones asserted quite vigorously that all sins are equal in God's sight: 'All sin is sin to God and miserliness is no worse than drunkenness. Both are equally repugnant to Him, and equally to be punished. It is we who classify sin, not God – to Him all sin is sin'. In a similar vein, David Prior wrote in his commentary on Habakkuk: 'There are no degrees of righteousness or unrighteousness.' The Old Testament scholar, R. K. Harrison, however, tried to modify this by arguing that there are no degrees of sin, but there are degrees of culpability.

I must confess to finding all this rather bewildering as it seems to me obviously untrue. It is a Stoic belief that all sins are equal but it is hardly a Christian belief. Jeremiah pronounced that his generation had 'done worse' than the previous generation in forsaking the true God and His law (Jer.16:12). The Old Testament does not attach the same punishment to all sins. For example, murder attracts the death penalty but stealing attracts restitution plus compensation. It also distinguishes between sins that are done unintentionally and those that are done 'with a high hand' (see Numbers 15:28-31). At His trial, Jesus told Pilate, with reference probably to Caiaphas but possibly to Judas, that 'he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin' (John 19:11). Similarly, in His denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus declared: 'For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others' (Matt.23:23). Clearly, some commandments are more vital than others, and some sins are worse than others.

Jesus speaks of the blasphemy against the Holy God which will not be forgiven, which, I assume, refers to attributing the works of Christ to the devil (see Matt.12:22-32). John writes of a sin that leads to death, and he does not press his readers to pray for a person caught up in such a sin (1 John 5:16). Paul can write of Timothy's making progress as a preacher, which surely includes moral progress as a Christian (1 Tim.4:15), and also warn against impostors who go from bad to worse (2 Tim.3:13). None of this encourages the notion that all sins exist on the one plane.

Undoubtedly, part of this is related to the issue of culpability. God declares through Amos: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). The sting is in the 'therefore'. The book of Hebrews testifies that those who reject Christ deserve a greater punishment than those who rejected Moses (Heb.10:26-29). Jesus Himself says that it will be better in the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon, and even Sodom, than it will be for Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum – towns where the Son of God walked and talked and performed mighty miracles (Matt.11:20-24).

Most explicit of all is Jesus' teaching at the end of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants: 'And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more' (Luke 12:47-48). The experience of everlasting punishment is not the same for all unbelievers. Which is to say, that in the day of judgment, it would be better to have an ignorant savage practising voodoo than Bishop Spong holding forth on television.

It seems to work the other way too. There will be those who, while saved, will suffer some loss in the day of Christ's return because they have built badly on a good foundation. Fire will destroy their works of wood, hay, and straw while those of gold, silver, and precious stones will remain (1 Cor.3:10-15). In the parable of the talents, Jesus says that the one with two talents receives two more, while the one with five talents receives five more. Again, the lesson is that 'to everyone who has will more given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away' (Matt.25:29).

Rather than declare that all sins are equal – which violates both common sense and Scripture – we ought to recognise that any sin cuts us off from God. It is misleading to say that God is equally opposed to each of our sins, but it is true to say that He utterly opposes all of our sin.

With warmest regards in Christ,
Peter Barnes