

Are Some Sins Worse Than Others?

by Martin G. Collins

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," November 1998

Are there varying degrees of sin? Is it worse to commit adultery than steal? Or to murder than lie? Or to commit idolatry than break the Sabbath? Does God make distinctions between different types of sin?

Romans 6:23 tells us plainly that "the wages of sin is death." Does this mean all sins are equal? Under the law is a gossip equal to a mass murderer? Is a petty thief just as sinful as a child molester?

Although all sin merits the death penalty and requires the blood of Christ for expiation, God's Word reveals that some sins are indeed worse than others. Some sins have greater consequences to the sinner, as well as to those his sin affects. From the judgments God makes regarding certain sins, we will see that some sins bring stiffer penalties and greater condemnation.

Some Examples

Israel's making of the Golden Calf while Moses spoke with God on Mt. Sinai is an Old Testament example of the sin of idolatry (Exodus 32). When he returned, Moses told the Israelites that they had "sinned a **great** sin" (verses 21, 30-31). The sin of idolatry is so terrible that Moses reports the Eternal as saying, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book" (verse 33). Being blotted out of the Book of Life may be the most horrible way to end one's existence.

James writes that if we disobey one commandment, we are guilty of all (James 2:10). One sin breaks the entire code of laws. Yet in some of the worse sins, we find that in one act, multiple sins are actually committed. In this example, by committing this great sin, the Israelites directly disobeyed the first two commandments and in principle the third and fourth.

They defied the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:2), when they turned from God in His seeming absence and raised up the Golden Calf to represent something they feared and respected more than God.

They disregarded the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them" (Exodus 20:3-4), when they made the Golden Calf, placed it in a position of reverence and worshiped it instead of the Eternal God.

They broke the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), when they referred to God as "the Golden Calf." They misappropriated the holy name of God for a profane use.

They transgressed the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), when Aaron proclaimed a feast day on which to worship the Golden Calf. By this, the Israelites established their own day of worship to their false god.

In another example, David committed the sin of faithlessness by numbering Israel (II Samuel 24:1-17). Even though Hebrews 11:32 lists David among the faithful, he had his moments of weakness. In

II Samuel 24:10 David admits to God that he had "sinned **greatly** ." Because David numbered Israel and began to rely on his own military strength rather than God's power, his sin cost the lives of 70,000 men (verse 15)!

His actions showed a distinct lack of faith in God, who could protect Israel regardless of how many men Israel could field in its army or how many were arrayed against it. David was proudly counting on his own resources for protection, and it is exactly there that God took out his punishment of David for this sin. It reached out and afflicted the whole nation. Seventy thousand men of Israel and Judah—men that could have been counted on to fill out David's ranks—died of plague to teach David and us this vital lesson.

Finally, the apostle John records an example of differing degrees of sin from the life of Christ. Notice what Jesus says to Pilate during His trial: "Jesus answered, 'You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the **greater** sin'" (John 19:11). Christ's statement to Pilate verifies that there are greater and lesser sins.

Proportionate Punishment

The principle of proportionate punishment states that the more serious sin requires more severe punishment. Consider the method of punishment for broken laws in ancient Israel. Were all the punishments equal? No! The punishment for kidnapping was death (Exodus 21:16), whereas the punishment for stealing livestock was their restoration (Exodus 22:1).

This principle dictates that the punishment must fit the crime. The Romans called it *Lex Talionis* (literally, "law of retaliation"). Many people know of it from the Bible's vivid description:

. . . life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Exodus 21:23-25)

God uses this principle in His judgments—greater and lesser punishments for greater and lesser sins. Under "an eye for an eye" in the Bible, the punishment must match, but not exceed, the damage or harm done by the perpetrator. The law placed strict limits on the amount of damages anyone could collect. It permitted no one to "get rich quick" from another's mishap. Moreover, God intended this law to be a rule of thumb for *judges*, not an authorization of personal vendetta or private retaliation.

Priority and Importance

What about "the great commandment" (Matthew 22:38) and "the weightier matters of the Law" (Matthew 23:23)? Christ explicitly states that certain things are more important or carry greater weight with Him. These are things that we should give first priority to in our lives.

Matthew 22:35-40 expounds this point. When someone asks Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" (verse 36), He replies, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment" (verses 37-38). The most important thing we can ever do is to love God completely.

Christ tells the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 that justice, mercy and faith are the weightier matters of the law. He continues in verse 24, "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" The stricter Jews customarily strained their wine, vinegar and other potables through linen or gauze—just

in case they drank down some unclean insect without realizing it and thereby break the law. They were more concerned about their own interpretation of the letter of the law than the more important spiritual application that results in justice, mercy and faith. Like these Pharisees, some people tolerate major sins to work on minor ones because they are easier to overcome, yet greater sins damage spiritual character far more than lesser ones.

What about "the least of these commandments" (Matthew 5:19)? Are they less important? Does it matter if we keep them or not? Jesus says emphatically in this verse:

Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

By a careful reading of what Jesus says here, we can see that He was not speaking about whether God considers breaking these lesser laws to be sin—He does—but about how our keeping of God's law affects our future position in His Kingdom. Transgressing any commandment—even the least of them—can reduce our reward in the Kingdom. On the other hand, if we are faithful to God's Word and teach it, our reward will be great!

"A Sin Not Unto Death"

The apostle John speaks of how some sins do not lead to death and others do:

If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death: I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is sin not leading to death. (I John 5:16-17)

"A sin which does not lead to death" is one that is genuinely repented of and for which forgiveness is available because the attitude of the sinner is meek and truly sorrowful. A person may have this attitude, yet still sin on occasion out of weakness, ignorance, bad judgment or even inadvertently. Both greater and lesser sins can fall under this category. Earlier in the book, the same apostle writes:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9)

Our genuine confession admits to God that we are guilty of breaking His law and seek to be cleared of it by Christ's sacrifice. This true repentance leads to a fierce desire not to sin and to building righteous character. God thus lifts the penalty of the second death, and once again, we, by His grace, are back on the road to salvation.

The sin that John calls a "sin leading to death" is what others know as "the unpardonable sin." Again, both greater and lesser sins can lead to the attitude that causes someone to commit an unforgivable sin. Such a sin is deeply reinforced by the attitude of the sinner—an attitude that denies Jesus Christ as Savior, that flagrantly hates his brother, and refuses to obey God's laws and statutes. Rebellion and defiance set this sin apart from others!

Jesus speaks of this sin in Mark 3:28-30:

"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation"—because [the scribes] said, "He has an unclean spirit."

A person who blasphemes the Holy Spirit allows Satan to influence him so thoroughly that he refuses to submit to God. He rejects the power of God's Spirit and defiantly shakes his fist at His Creator. In this state he is too proud and rebellious to repent, and thus God cannot forgive him.

In Hebrews 6:4-6, Paul explains another way that can lead to the second death:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

He expands on this in chapter 10:26-27:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

Christ's sacrifice applies only once for each person, and if we reject God's grace, it cannot be applied again. This is why willing apostasy is so terrible and why the apostles fought so strongly against heresy in the first century. The eternal lives of thousands of God's people were at stake!

In a more passive way, sin can lead to eternal death by continued neglect. The sinner may know he should repent of sin, but because of lethargy he never bothers to overcome it. He is apathetic; he just does not care. The Laodicean attitude (Revelation 3:15-19) comes dangerously close to this type of sin, and if not repented of, it can lead to the unpardonable sin.

All Sin Separates

We see in scripture that there are greater and lesser sins with varying degrees of punishment. Some sins do more spiritual harm than others. Nevertheless, all sin separates us from God! Isaiah writes, "But your iniquities have separated you and your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). If we do not repent of our sins, our separation from God will become permanent, and eventually we will receive the permanent death.

We can avoid this horrible end by working to overcome all sin, placing the highest priority on ridding ourselves of the greater sins. How can we accomplish this seemingly impossible task? Alone, it would be impossible for us. God, however, inspired the apostle Paul to encourage us in this lifelong endeavor in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

With the strength of Christ, we can overcome!