

Is All Sin Equal in God's Eyes?

David 2015

All Sin is Sin and All Sin is Worthy of Hell

It is often taken for granted by contemporary Christians that all sins are equal in God's eyes. It is definitely true that all sin is sin and that all sin is enough to condemn a soul to hell. Paul writes in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death". He does not qualify the sin with a certain degree of badness or certain amount; he just says the penalty for sin is death. God says in Ezekiel 18:20, "The soul that sins shall die."

Jesus makes very similar claims in the Sermon on the Mount. He says in Matthew 5:28, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." And earlier in verse 21-22 Jesus says that while murder is liable to the courts so is being unjustly angry with your brother. He even says that calling your brother a good-for-nothing is worth being thrown into hell.

This is pretty serious wording by Jesus especially to the Religious Jews of His day. They thought they were pretty good people; they had never murdered anyone and definitely wouldn't sink so low as to commit adultery. Much like us today, we think we are pretty good people; we've never done anything too serious like kill someone. But what Jesus is saying is that sin is a manifestation of what's in the heart.

Lust versus Action

But is Jesus saying that lust is equal to adultery or anger equal to murder? I don't think so. I think what He is saying is summed up in James 1:14-15. "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." There is an apparent hierarchy here: temptation, lust, sin, death. All sin starts in the heart as lust, and all sin brings forth death. All sin is sin, but not all sin is as bad as it could be, just like all people are sinners (Romans 3:23) but not everyone is as bad as they could be.

We are made in the image of God and one of the manifestations of that is that we have a sense of justice. No other animal seeks out justice. Though our consciences and hearts are scarred by sin and our reflection of God's image is imperfect, we still to a certain degree understand crime and justice. Every human being will say that some crimes are worse than others. It is almost universally agreed that murder is one of the worse sins a man can commit, while stealing, though wrong, is not as terrible. We would also mostly agree that premeditated sins committed on purpose are worse than sins committed in ignorance.

Though our reflection of God's character is marred by sin, I believe that the sense of justice that we have is a reflection of God's justice. And the belief that there are different degrees of sin is a reflection of God's view of sin. Do I have any evidence from the Bible that God regards some sins as worse than others? Here are a few passages.

What does the Bible Say?

In Revelation 20:11-15 John sees the great white throne judgment. In verse 12 John says, “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.” The unbelieving dead are judged according to their deeds done while alive. The idea is that there is perfect justice. Jesus said that men will give account for every idle word they speak (Matt. 12:36). This scene is not a blanket judgment where every sinner goes to hell to face the same punishment. Every sinner is cast into the lake of fire, but they are judged there based on their sins.

We are not under the Mosaic Law but it “was written for our instruction” (Romans 15:4). In the Law God set different punishments for different sins. The punishment for murder was death (Genesis 9:6 and Exodus 21:12). The punishment for stealing was less severe. Exodus 22:1 says, “If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.” At least in the Old Testament, some sins were considered worse than others.

There are several passages that deal with teachers and leaders receiving a tougher judgment because they are responsible for those they teach. There are many times that Jesus condemns the Pharisees for not leading the people of Israel correctly. Ezekiel 33:6 says, “But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman’s hand.” God is drawing the similarities between negligence in warning of the danger to come and negligence in warning people of God’s wrath and judgment for sin. James expounds upon this situation more in James 3:1, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” Here he is saying that there is greater condemnation for a false teacher than a layperson because the teacher had the responsibility of his congregation on his hands.

A similar situation to that one of the teachers is the idea that more is required from those to whom more is given. In the parable in Luke 12:47-48 Jesus says, “And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know *it*, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.” Jesus is saying here that sins committed in full knowledge are worthy of greater punishment than sins committed in ignorance.

Also Jesus condemned the people of Capernaum harshly for rejecting Him because these people knew the Old Testament by heart and had received prophets and revelation from God for millennia. In Matthew 11:23-24 Jesus says, “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in *the day of judgment*, than for you.” Sodom is infamous for its sin and wickedness and yet Jesus says the Jews living in Capernaum will fare worse off than the

Sodomites. Why? Because they had received so much: even the Son of God and yet they still rejected Him.

Peter says of false teacher in 2 Peter 2:21, "For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them." He who hears the truth of the Gospel and hardens their heart to reject it is guilty of more than the one who does not hear the Gospel. Hebrews 10:29 says, "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God...and has insulted the Spirit of grace?"

Jesus says plainly to Pilate that there are greater and lesser sins in John 19:11. "Jesus answered [Pilate], 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin.'" Pilate was in sin for crucifying the Son of God, but Jesus clearly says that the Jews who delivered Him to Pilate had a greater sin. Jesus regarded some sin as worse than others.

Conclusion

I believe the common sense assumption that there varying degrees of sinfulness. I think it is safe to assume that murder is worse than stealing in God's eyes. The natural sense of justice that we have as human beings, which is a reflection of God's justice, would agree that there are varying degrees of sins.

The idea that God sees all sins as equal does have some merit, but I believe it is a hyper spiritual assessment based off of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is definitely true that every sin, no matter how small, is enough to condemn a soul to hell. But the extrapolation that all sins are equal is not consistent with the punishments ordained in God's Law to Israel or the judgments pronounced at the great white throne.

We should not err too far on the side that says that only "big" sins are really that bad. Or that God will overlook "small" sins like lying or dishonoring your parents. That is a failure to understand God's holiness. On the other hand, saying that all sins are equal is erring in the other side and is also a failure to understand God's perfect justice. I'll end with Ecclesiastes 12:13 "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person."