

Are All Sins the Same?

By Dave DeWitt

It seems that whenever we evangelicals deal with someone committing a difficult or devastating sin today, before long somebody will come along and say something like, “Well, you know, we are all sinners, Jesus paid for all of our sins, and **all sins are the same.**” This has become such a pat answer that the idea has entered our casual theology and is repeated repeatedly.

But here’s what I found surprising about all of this. I thought there would be a need to defend the fact that all sins are **not** the same. Actually, there is no need for such a paper at all. If you look at most papers written by Bible teachers and knowledgeable evangelists, they do not say all sins are the same. Most (probably all, except those supporting divorce/remarriage or homosexuality) conclude all sin is **not** the same.

The Case Against “All Sin Is the Same”

Most who write about this have done what I would do if I were writing such a paper. First, they go through a presentation of the gospel saying all sin is sin, that it requires the blood of Christ, and it is applied only by receiving Him as Savior (followed by a list of salvation references). Then, they go on to point out that, both practically and biblically, it is clear that all sins are not the same. There are three main arguments:

1. The Bible specifically says some sins are greater (like Proverbs 6:16-19; Matthew 11:21-22; 12:31-32; John 19:11; Mark 12:40; Luke 12:48). It cannot be denied that some sins, and judgments for some sins, are clearly stated as greater than others.
2. There is a judgment, sometimes in this life but always after this life, of individual sins for both believers and unbelievers (Matthew 12:36; 16:27; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 11:30; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 20:11-15). Judgments for individual sins would make no sense if all sins were the same. And the Bible is filled with statements about judgements for individual sins.
3. Practical application reveals the greater devastation of certain sins. Lust and adultery are both sins of the same sort. Murder and anger are both sins of the same sort. But one is clearly more devastating than the other. Someone bullying your daughter and someone raping your daughter are clearly not the same.

So there is a big gap between the casual theology of many evangelicals, who claim “All sin is the same,” and the teaching of almost all Bible believing theologians, teachers, and writers who point out the differences. It is actually hard to find a scholarly paper supporting the idea that all sins are the same (again, unless they are supporting divorce/remarriage or homosexuality). So then...

Why Do So Many Evangelicals Say, “All Sins Are the Same”?

It’s a bit speculative, but three things seem pretty obvious:

1. Many evangelicals tend to focus on the gospel and ignore the holiness of God (and the rest of the Bible, for that matter). In the many traditional churches, our evangelical sermons, songs, and services focus on the gospel. Some churches want a presentation of the gospel in every sermon. I can remember hearing one speaker say it was wrong to preach anything other than the gospel. Well, if all you think about is the gospel, then it’s reasonable to conclude that all sins are the same. It’s true that Jesus’ death paid for all our sins, and that payment is applied to us when we receive Him (John 1:12; 3:16, 36; 5:25; 14:6). So if all sin is paid for, and that’s all we talk about, then it sounds reasonable to conclude that,

from God's perspective, all sins are the same. Today, we even have "Christian universalists" that claim, "Since Jesus' death paid for all sin, everyone is saved whether they believe in Him or not." In that case, all sin everywhere is the same. But it's never a good idea to make conclusions by ignoring accurate information (in this case, the rest of the Bible).

2. Evangelical preachers are pressured to accommodate today's audiences, rather than teach the Bible. Of course, our pulpits preach the Bible, if the audience wants the Bible preached, but that's a decreasing crowd. The goal of most "local churches" has changed (since, say, the 1950s) from proclaiming the Word of God to getting more people to attend meetings. And today most of our churches are increasingly facing an audience of people who are cohabitating, gay friendly, using recreational drugs, committing adultery, lying whenever it seems convenient, and 30-something-years-old still living with their parents. If we tell them there are sins *that the Lord hates*, or things *that are an abomination to Him*, they might attend a different church. And we can't have that!

3. Evangelicals often give comfort in counseling (both formal and informal) by equating all sins. Jesus said anger was sinful like murder (Matthew 5:22 & 28), counselors like to say murder is no more sinful than anger. Jesus said lust was sinful like adultery, counselors like to say adultery is no more sinful than lust. The difference is, Jesus was convicting the sinner, and we are comforting the sinner. Jesus preached repentance because His goal was for us to get right with God, not to stabilize our psychological condition (Matthew 4:17). Christian psychologists and friends tend to comfort by downgrading the sin, rather than facing it with the need for repentance. They play the "all sin is the same" card, not because they have done a study and come to that conclusion, but because it offers comfort. Of course, such comfort is only a temporary fix that requires repeated visits to our counselors.

If all sins are not the same, what makes bad sins worse?

Here's another interesting thing I discovered about this subject. Remember, most credible teachers do **not** claim that all sins are the same. But many of them focus on the sin's impact on people rather than the offence to God. This is especially true in Reformed Theology. J.I. Packer wrote, "Scripture shows that in God's estimate some sins are worse and bring greater **guilt** than others, and that some sins do us more **damage**" ["Christianity Today," December 28, 2004, bold mine]. So, sins are greater or lesser depending on the **guilt** they cause the sinner and the **damage** they cause others.

It's not that Reformed Covenant Theology denies the offense to God. The offense to God is acknowledged. But the emphasis is on the human impact—to ourselves and others. The idea seems to be this. Since Jesus paid for our sins, the gauge of more serious sins is not primarily their effect on God, since He's already taken care of that on the cross. The difference in sins is focused on their effects on us and those around us. To support this idea, Packer refers to the Westminster Larger Catechism, questions #151 and #152.

Here is what the Catechism says. [I have not added or changed anything but I have omitted parts of the answers because they are quite long.]

“Q. 151. What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?”

A. Sins receive their aggravations,

1. From the persons offending if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace . . .
2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace; the Holy Spirit, his witness, and workings against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any

other, and the common good of all or many.

3. From the nature and quality of the offense: if it be against the express letter of the law, break many commandments, contain in it many sins: if not only conceived in the heart, but breaks forth in words and actions...nuance, or relapsing after repentance.
4. From circumstances of time and place: if on the Lord's day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these, or other helps to prevent or remedy such miscarriages; if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.

Q. 152. What doth every sin deserve at the hands of God?

A. Every sin, even the least...deserveth his wrath...and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ."

Q.152 is the best support for covenant reformers saying all sins are the same in their offense against God. But Q.151 elaborates on the question of some sins being "more heinous." Response A.2 lists "aggravations...immediately against God, his attributes, and worship." Q.151 and Q152 taken together seem to be saying every sin "immediately" offends God and deserves His wrath but is "expiated" by the blood of Christ. So from the standpoint of the offense to God, all sin is the same. Sins are only (or primarily) **not** the same when it comes to "aggravations" against people.

- In A.1. sins are "more heinous" if committed by older or more mature or gifted people.
- In A. 2 sins are "more heinous" when they are, "against superiors, men of eminency...weak brethren...and the common good of all or many."
- In A. 3 sins are "more heinous" if they are "against the express letter of the law" (a commandment), "or relapsing after repentance."
- In A. 4 Sins are "more heinous...if on the Lord's day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these."

Of course, it could be argued that the Catechism is saying worse sins against people are worse because they offend God more. But it never says God is offended differently. Also, it does not seem like "of riper age, greater experience or grace," "against the express letter of the law," or "if on the Lord's day" constitute legitimate categories for greater offences. And aren't acts against "the common good of all or many" just acts against socialism and Communism? Anyway.

Here's what J.I Packer takes from this is:

"No sins are small when committed against a great and generous God. Beyond this, however, the gravity of each transgression depends on varying factors.

First is the extent to which the *transgressors* know better, are in the public eye, and are objects of public trust...

Second some transgressions are categorized by *persons offended*, ranging from the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to "any of the saints, particularly weak brethren."

Third comes the extent to which, defying conscience and censures from others, the transgressors *act* "deliberately, willfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastfully, maliciously, frequently, obstinately, with delight, continuance, or relapsing after repentance."

[Emphasis his, the underlines are mine]

It seems Packer thinks, although there are no small sins against God, beyond that, greater sins are those which damage people. But is that a good gauge for greater sin? I don't think so. I suggest

Sin is worse when it is more contrary to the character of God

By definition: Sin is anything contrary to the character of God. So, I suggest, the more contrary it is to the character of God, the worse it is.

If we look to Scripture, not only are some sins worse than others, it seems the differences are because of their violation of the character of God. The Bible does not give us a list of sins in order from least to worst. That's impossible because circumstances, attitudes of the heart, and intentions all play a part in determining the greatness of the sin. But we can determine from Jesus that sins directly against God are worse. A lawyer once asked Jesus this question:

Matthew 22:36-39 *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,’ this is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

Jesus gave two basic categories for commandments. That would seem to mean breaking the commands to *love the Lord your God* is greater than breaking the *love your neighbor* ones. But we also know that the reason the *love your neighbor* ones are sinful is because they offend God. After David committed adultery and murder, he prayed,

Psalms 51:4 *“Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”*

Let's go back to Jesus' *great and foremost commandment*. In both testaments, the worst sin was idolatry. The Bible has constant, consistent, repeated, warnings about idolatry, calling it not just a sin but a **great sin**. [Remember, although David was an adulterer and murderer, he was not an idolater.]

- **Exodus 20:3-5** *You shall have no other gods before Me...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,*
- **Exodus 32:21** *What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?*
- **Deuteronomy 16:22** *You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the LORD your God hates.*
- **2 Kings 17:21** *Then Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the LORD and made them commit a great sin.*
- **1 Corinthians 8:4** *...we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.*
- **1 Corinthians 10:14** *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*

But idolatry does not usually bring “guilt” to the idolater or “damage” to others. Sins that increase the “damage” to others are violations of *love your neighbor*. Therefore, they do offend God. But sins against God do not necessarily observably “damage” people, although they are the worst sins. So we must conclude that the seriousness of sins cannot be determined by how they impact people. **Coexist** sanctions idolatry and the worship of false gods, yet it does no observable damage.

Conclusion

The severity of sin can only be determined by what God says about the sin. Those called *greater sin*, those God says He *hates*, those that are called an *abomination*, those in the Mosaic Law requiring the death penalty, those we are told to *flee from*, and anything resembling the tolerance of other gods, should be a warning that we are approaching a *great sin*.

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.)