

INTRODUCTION

ARE ALL SINS EQUAL?

“LET ME GET this straight. You are saying that God will hold people responsible based on the *different* sins that they commit?” one of my middle school students asked, clearly astonished. “But we *all* sin,” another student chimed in. “Different degrees of judgment?!” a third student interjected, “but *everybody* sins.” This topic was not even the subject of my lesson for the day. I had no intention of going down this theological rabbit hole in a humid, balmy classroom in my hometown in south Louisiana. I had simply replied that “some sins are worse than others” in answer to a student’s question. I didn’t think this topic would be controversial, but clearly, I struck a nerve.

Most of the students in my classroom in this large K–12 Christian school attended Bible churches, Baptist churches, and non-denominational churches on a weekly basis, with a smattering of others in Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Methodist congregations. My school was the largest Protestant secondary school in the state of Louisiana. I had assumed (wrongly!) that most of us, at least those of us who were evangelicals, were on the same page when it came to degrees of sin. I thought it was common knowledge that although all sins are certainly worthy of God’s judgment (Rom. 6:23), some

sins are more severe in their degree of evil before God and in the amount of harm they cause to others. But if my students were a representative sample of the broader evangelical world, there clearly was *not* a consensus.

In my own perplexity at my class's reaction, I was reminded of a field trip that I went on during my freshman year of high school. On a muggy day in April, our school buses rolled past the steely-eyed security guard into the lonely outskirts of Louisiana's notorious prison, Angola State Penitentiary. An inmate on good behavior toured us around the facility under the watchful care of armed guards. He showed us fellow inmates working on the property, pointed out the maximum-security wing of "the pen," and finally, led us to the famed lethal injection chair, where some prisoners were brought to die.

Even as freshmen, we all understood that Angola was where the "worst" criminals were taken. All men confined to these quarters had committed a severe crime—a crime worthy of life imprisonment. Some had even committed crimes worthy of *death*. Not one student on our field trip protested the idea of degrees of lawbreaking when it came to law enforcement. No one opposed the idea that different crimes entailed different punishments.

Shifting my gaze back to my middle school classroom and our charged-up discussion of degrees of sin, my students' reactions were ironic given the fact that our Christian school operated on a demerit system. Different behaviors warranted different infractions according to a point system, which, in turn, brought about various levels of punishment. Talking out of turn in class was 1 demerit, being out of uniform was 2 demerits, disrespecting a teacher was 3 demerits, and throwing an object in class was 4 demerits. Accumulating a certain amount of demerits led to detention. A greater number of demerits led to a work session, or in greater numbers still,

a suspension. In the most severe cases, this led to expulsion from the school.

Although I heard students and parents question teachers' disciplinary decisions on occasion, I had never heard a parent or a student question the basic *principle* that certain behaviors were worse than others. No one protested the idea that greater infractions warranted greater consequences. However, it suddenly occurred to me that most of my students had a hidden assumption. The degrees-of-demerit system and the levels-of-crime approach was the "human" way of doing things. But surely *God* doesn't look at things that way. Surely *God* doesn't distinguish between offenses. Surely *God* doesn't rank sins ... Or *does* He?

"Sin is Sin"

Many evangelicals in the present day are quick to affirm the slogan "sin is sin." They have the idea that every negative deed we do as human beings is basically on a level playing field. Many contemporary evangelical authors have asserted, on a popular level, that when it comes to wrongdoing before God, "all sins are equal."¹ In their view, ranking sins according to varying degrees of seriousness is an unbiblical pursuit. With gusto, they malign the idea of having different categories for sin and protest that God does not see things that way.

In addition to popular-level treatments of sin, so too have many present-day works by Protestant scholars arrived at similar conclusions. To give one example, the author of a book on the doctrine of sin concludes by asserting, "We must understand, further, that God's wrath is directed against all sin. He does not

1. Jonathan Acuff, *Stuff Christians Like* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 196–98; Amy L. Sherman, *Restorers of Hope: Reaching the Poor in Your Community with Church-Based Ministries That Work* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 62; Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2012), 9.

distinguish between ‘little’ sins and ‘big’ ones.”² Remarking on the prevalence of the idea that “all sins are equal,” a longtime theology professor remarked, “I can’t begin to estimate how many times I’ve heard it said in theology classes, in common spaces of Christian colleges and universities, in churches, and everywhere evangelical Christians gather and talk.... I’ve hardly ever heard this maxim questioned.”³ Evangelicals in both the pews and the academy are pushing to equalize sin and to put all sins on a level playing field. But the key question is: do all sins bear precisely the same weight in God’s sight? Will God judge all sins equally? Or do some sins rank higher than others?

Jesus on Trial

While on trial, Jesus declares to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, that the one who handed him over to Pilate, Caiaphas the Jewish high priest, is guilty of a “greater sin” (John 19:11).⁴ There is no mistaking the importance of Jesus’ words. He clearly indicates that some sins are inherently worse than others. Jesus lays down a category for “more sinful sins.”

In context, Pontius Pilate has just stated to Jesus that Pilate himself has “authority to free” him and “authority to crucify” him (19:10). Jesus’ distinction between Caiaphas’ sin being “greater” than Pilate’s sin stems from the fact that whereas Pilate *does*, indeed, possess authority over life and death in his

2. David L. Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1994), 405.

3. Roger E. Olson, *Questions to All Your Answers: The Journey from Folk Religion to Examined Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 140.

4. Much of the material in this book is adapted and repackaged from Jeffery Adams Moore, “Greater Sins: Are Certain Violations of God’s Moral Law Weightier Than Others?” (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022). All biblical renderings and translations of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in the present work are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted. Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

divinely appointed position as governor of Judea, Caiaphas, as Jewish high priest, has no such power. And yet Caiaphas is the manipulative mastermind behind the deadly plot against Jesus' life (11:49–53). Also, as a pagan ruler, Pilate was ignorant of heavenly truths, not recognizing that one “from above” gave him his political power (19:11). The high priest Caiaphas, on the other hand, knew divine revelation through the Jewish Scriptures, along with the rest of the Jews, and thus he had no excuse (19:7).

In sum, although both Caiaphas and Pilate would be held guilty for the death of Jesus (Acts 4:27), Caiaphas's sinful actions were considered “greater” due to: (a) his lack of authority in the realm of capital punishment and overreach; and (b) his greater knowledge of divine truth (see also Rom. 2:12).⁵ It is painstakingly clear that in John 19:11, Jesus ranks certain sins as weightier than others.

In truth, it is Stoic philosophy, not Christianity, that affirms that all sins are equal. Greek Stoics such as Zeno of Citium (334–262 BC) held such a view in addition to numerous Roman Stoics.⁶ This ancient Greco-Roman philosophy was one of the thought systems which the apostle Paul confronted on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:18).⁷

5. For the former point, see Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John*, eds. William P. Dickson and Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1874), 2:340. For the latter point, see Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 603–04. The reader should note, however, that Ridderbos perceives Jesus' referent to the guiltier party as pointing to the Jews as a whole (i.e., a collective singular), not just to Caiaphas as an individual.

6. Eugene F. Durkin, *Theological Distinction of Sins in the Writings of St. Augustine*, *Dissertationes Ad Lauream* 23 (Mundelein, IL: Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary, 1952), 1–2.

7. Jeff Moore, “Paul and Pagan Philosophy: Collaboration or Conflict in Acts 17:16–34?” *Pro Pastor*, 1.1 (2022), 15–23, esp. 16, 20.

Degrees of Sin in Protestant History

In their theological work on the doctrine of sin (*hamartiology*), have Protestants reserved a category for degrees of sin or different levels of vices? In the past, have Protestants viewed sins on a spectrum such that some sins are more serious in God's sight than others?

A number of historic Protestant confessions of faith recognize a category of degrees or gradations of sin, but they don't identify specific sins that are worse than others. In the Swiss Reformed church, Henry Bullinger's *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) states that "sins are not equal ... [since] some are more grievous than others."⁸ The Anglican church's *Irish Articles* (1615) speak of some sins that are "far more heinous than others."⁹ Likewise, in Presbyterianism, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) makes a distinction between sins "great" and "small," as does the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) in the Baptist tradition.¹⁰

Many of these confessions pinpoint the uniqueness of one sin: namely, the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But aside from the unforgivable sin, the reader is still left wondering at the end of the day: what precise sins, exactly, are "more grievous" or "more heinous" in nature? Which sins are categorically worse than others?

8. *Second Helvetic Confession, A.D. 1566*, article 8, in *Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 6th ed., 3 vols. (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 3:831–909.

9. *The Irish Articles, A.D. 1615*, article 27, in *Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 6th ed., 3 vols. (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 3:526–44.

10. *Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: PCA Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), chapter 15.4; William Collins et al., *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (repr., Sand Springs, OK: Grace & Truth, n.d.), chapter 15.5.

Unfortunately, theologians from the time of the Protestant Reformation onward do not provide much more detail. John Calvin (1509–1564), the Swiss Reformed pastor who brought sweeping reformation to Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century, makes a distinction between private and public sin. He also employs the categories of “faults,” “crimes,” and “shameful acts,” concluding that the latter two categories would be deserving of public discipline in the church.¹¹ However, the reader is left to wonder what concrete sins might be included in these three categories; Calvin does not specify.

Writing in the nineteenth century, the premier theologian of Old Princeton Seminary, Charles Hodge (1797–1878), sets forth a distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate sins. But Hodge does not go on to elaborate on any specific transgressions.¹² In the Baptist tradition, Augustus H. Strong (1836–1921) offers more thorough categories. He distinguishes between natural versus personal sin, ignorant versus knowledgeable sin, infirm versus presumptive sin, and partially hard-hearted versus entirely hard-hearted sin. Strong, like Calvin, also highlights the fact that there is an ultimate unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit.¹³ Nevertheless, Strong does not name any other concrete vices that are more severe than others.

Like the historic confessions of the Protestant Reformation and post-Reformation period, many Protestant theologians affirm a category of “degrees of sin.” Many of these sources acknowledge that some sins rank higher than others in severity.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.12.3–4; 3.3.21–25.

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1872–1873; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 2:186–87.

13. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (New York: Revell, 1907), 648–52.