

Degrees of Sin and Punishment

Parts of this lesson may seem to be obvious to most people, but it is too simplistic to say that all sins are equally serious. Jesus said to lust is to be guilty of adultery in the heart, and 1 Jn. 3:15 says to hate your brother is murder, but I believe this means that they are sins arising from the same base motives, not that they are the same in degree. That is, murder is motivated by hate – hatred is its seed or root. To say “I am OK because I never killed anybody” is a failure to see the same kind of sin in your hatred. But to actually carry out the murder is worse than just thinking about it, even though it is the same kind of sin. “Thought sins” like hatred, lust, and covetousness reveal the sin that is in our hearts and visible to God, while people only see the sins that are carried out in deed.

Some sins are worse than others

- Gen. 19 - Sodom and Gomorrah were singled out as being so wicked that they were burned with fire from heaven, unlike other cities of their day.
- Peter vs. Judas Peter denied Christ in weakness and fear, but Judas betrayed Christ by planning.
- Pilate vs. Judas Jn. 19:11 – “... he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.”
- Abner killed Asahel in the heat of battle as a last resort, while Joab killed Abner in a treacherous murder.
- The OT law decreed death for a great many kinds of sins, like in Lev. 20. These were obviously much worse than things like cheating and burglary, which allowed for restitution and lesser punishment.
- Drug user vs. drug dealer. One is the predator and the other is the prey.
- A desperate woman getting an abortion vs. the doctors who do it day in and day out for the money
- A pedophile vs. child sex traffickers
- A Nazi infantryman vs. Hitler, Eichmann, Goebbels, et al. As a matter of fact, the existence of such monsters as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and countless others implies the necessity of punishment in the afterlife. If this life is all there is, then they were never held accountable for their mass murders. It also implies degrees of punishment. Could God treat them the same as a “nice” old lady who never received Christ?

There are degrees of reward and punishment

- Mt. 23:14 – “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”
- Mt. 25:14-30 – the parable of the talents (shows greater and lesser rewards)
- Lk. 10:13-14 – “Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee Bethsaida! ... But it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment, than for you.”
- Lk. 12:47-48 – “And that servant which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”
- 1 Cor. 3:11-15 – We are all responsible for how we build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Some build with gold, silver, and precious stones, others with wood, hay, and stubble. But in all cases those works will be “tried by fire” and revealed for what they really were. The trial by fire reveals not just the actual works, but the motivations behind them. If our work abides the fire we will be rewarded, but otherwise all those works are burned up. The person “shall be saved; yet so as by fire”.

To say that there are degrees of punishment does not mean differences in duration, as in the Roman Catholic error of purgatory. They say that the worse sinner you are, the longer you will be in purgatory to burn off your sins, before entering heaven. This is a despicable lie – it is nowhere in scripture, it implies that the sufferings of Christ were not enough, so we need to add our own sufferings to be redeemed, and it gives the unrepentant sinner a false hope that he can live in sin and still make it to heaven eventually. No, both the

rewards of the righteous, and the punishments of the unrighteous are forever. The degree of punishment or reward is not in duration, but in intensity and perhaps in kind.

Sins accumulate (in individual lives as well as cultures)

Just because judgment does not fall immediately doesn't mean those sins have been forgotten. Rom. 2:3-6 – "And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds:"

- Gen. 15:13-16 – "And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years: ... But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."
- Nineveh – repented at the preaching of Jonah, but by the time of Nahum, their sin was complete.
- Jeroboam set the course for the breakaway nation of Israel to go after rank idolatry. The nation consistently degenerated until they were taken away by the Assyrians.
- King Manasseh reigned for 55 years and was an especially wicked king who turned the whole nation of Judah to horrible levels of idolatry and occultism. He was taken to Babylon, where he actually repented (2 Chr. 33:11-17). He returned to Judah and tried to undo a lot of his earlier wicked practices, but "the die was cast" and the nation could not recover. Except for some major but temporary reforms by his grandson Josiah, the nation continued to decline until Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians came to take them away. Even after four generations of kings, Judah was held accountable for the sins of Manasseh.

2 K. 24:3-4 – "Surely at the commandment of the LORD came this upon Judah, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he did; And also for the innocent blood that he shed: for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; which the LORD would not pardon."
- In an individual life, one can sin so much that the conscience becomes seared.

1 Tim. 4:1-2 – "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron"

Sins can become so great that repentance is not possible – it really is too late.

- Ezek. 14:14, 20-21 – The sins of Judah were so advanced that "... Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness."
- Rom. 1:24-32 – Some people are so sinful that it says God "gives them up", to uncleanness and vile affections, and "even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind ..."
- 1 John 5:16-17 – "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death."

It is important though to note that many people are plagued by chronic doubts and condemnation, thinking that they have committed the unforgiveable sin, or that it is impossible to renew them to repentance. While those warnings in scripture are valid, I believe that the very fact that they are worried about it shows that they have not gone that far. True apostates and unforgiveables do not care, they have no desire to repent.

Applications:

1. **We must take warning** – confess and repent as soon as sin is recognized, before it has a chance to take root and bear fruit, and also before it progresses into worse kinds of sin. There is a snowball effect in sin.

- a. In our own lives - unconfessed and unrepented, the things that once bothered us no longer do and so we go to more, and worse sins.
- b. In the lives of our children – it is easier to raise them right from birth, than it is to let them develop into little hellions and then try to straighten them out. Prov. 29:15 (a child left to himself ...)
- c. In the church – men who once stood for plenary verbal inspiration of scriptures have backed off and retreated into modernism and unbelief, and now the whole LGBTQXYZ agenda, and have destroyed whole denominations. See Rev. 2:14 (to the church at Pergamos), and 2:20-23 (to Thyatira). Many churches have opened the doors to the spirits of Jezebel, and the doctrine of Balaam, but the faithful will flee so they do not soil their garments (Rev. 3:4, to Sardis).

2. There is a time to stop praying, or to change the way we pray

Jer. 7:16 – “Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee.” (also 11:14 and 14:11-12)

Pray as long as you can concerning certain specific things (nations, churches, individuals), but if God says it is too late, then it is too late. For just one example, I do not pray that God would change the United Methodist church, but that faithful believers in those churches would recognize that the whole denomination is “Ichabod” (“the glory has departed”), and that they should flee from it, like Lot from Sodom. (Other denominations or individual churches may be as bad, or worse.)

This deserves a word of caution however. Do not think that just because you don’t want to pray for someone means that God has given up on them. Perhaps it is a spiritual laxity on your part, or a lack of compassion and love for them. It could even be like Jonah, that you are so repulsed by their sin that you want to see them judged instead of repenting.

3. There is a time to pray for judgment to fall

By this I do not mean avenging ourselves, or responding to rejection. Lk. 9:54-56 – James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven on the Samaritans, but Jesus rebuked them, saying “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”

Is there ever a time to pray for God’s judgment to fall on people? I believe so, occasionally:

- **For sins that are inhumanly heinous and grievous.** For example, how do we pray for child sex traffickers (kidnappers, movers, and sellers)? We can pray that as individuals they would repent and be saved, but if not, that they be somehow judged (soon) by God in order to keep them from continuing to reek such terrible harm on the children and their families. Our prayers for judgment are not directed so much at the sinners themselves as in delivering their victims from their power. Repentance is possible though, like John Newton, the slave ship captain.
- **For believers who fall into especially serious sin.** This is mainly to preserve the purity of the local church, but also in the hope that the sinner would eventually repent.

1 Cor. 5:1-6 – Paul rebuked them for allowing one of their members to live in open and unrepentant sin, apparently cohabiting with his step-mother. Paul judged “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” (verses 3-5)
- **Also against blasphemers and heretics:**

1 Tim. 1:19-20 – Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.”