# Are All Sins Equal?

Keith D. Stanglin
Center for Christian Studies

> "There is a sin to death…. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not to death." 1 John 5:16–17

## Introduction

In an age that calls evil good and good evil, we should not be surprised that popular sentiment in Western society does not provide a reliable or stable measure of what should count as permissible or impermissible. Many are the evils that are considered good—and for many reasons. Some such evils could be sins that our society ignores because of their wide acceptance and prevalence (for example, greed or usury), or they could be sins that society celebrates in hopes of wider acceptance and prevalence (for example, abortion or homosexual practice). Because such sins have long been woven into the fabric of our late modern culture, they have influenced the church.

Most churches and Christian leaders cannot—or do not—come right out and expressly affirm the permissibility of what has long been regarded by the church as sinful. One strategy for getting to that point of acceptance—calling evil good—is simply to ignore behavior *x*, turning a blind eye as it is practiced by believers. In this case, the silence is tantamount to permission. Another related strategy is to defer the question of the moral assessment of *x* and, in the meantime, promise unconditional love to the doer of *x*. It is claimed that moral assessment is just too difficult or contested, and until an uncontested answer comes that satisfies all parties (which will likely never happen), then one must

simply show love. The problem with this approach is that the moral assessment shapes what love requires. Love, even unconditional love, is the requirement of Christian morality; this core commitment is not up for debate. The question is, what does love require? If *x* is a good behavior, then love requires supporting that practice, encouraging or joining those doing it. If *x* is impermissible, however, then love requires not embracing or participating in the practice and, instead, seeking to help those practicing it to cease.

With both strategies, the necessary question about moral assessment—whether *x* is right or wrong—is bypassed. If the church does not engage the issue, then one can be sure that the culture, probably sooner rather than later, will dictate the terms and provide the dominant answer.

In addition to those strategies, another strategy for tolerating or relativizing sin, and thus introducing ambiguity about sin, faces the question about impermissibility a little more directly than do the other strategies. Rather than bypassing the question of moral assessment altogether, this approach claims that *x*, though a sin, is no worse than any other sin. All sins, it is said, are equal. For example, as this logic goes, Jesus said more against divorce than against homosexuality. Why, then, does the church allow divorce, gluttony, and other sins but not homosexuality?[1] For those who argue in this way, it is hard to know if they really intend to crack down on divorce and gluttony or instead to give a free pass to homosexuality.

To be fair, not everyone who makes this argument is seeking to relativize sin. Many are rightly concerned that the church can incline to focusing on "pet" sins or low-hanging fruit while ignoring sins that should be just as important to address. Whatever the intent, the belief that all sins are equal is strongly and widely held. This claim is encountered more on the popular level than in any scholarly or careful treatment. Yet, regardless of the advocate's actual intent, the effect is to minimize certain sins that are increasingly unpopular to condemn. The purpose of this article is to address this question of whether all sins are equal and then to reflect on some practical implications of the answer.

[1] E.g., Rachel Held Evans made similar points in "Everyone's a Biblical Literalist until You Bring Up Gluttony," *HuffPost* (Dec. 30, 2013), at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/everyones-a-biblical-lite_b_4520676.

## What Is Sin?

Whether or not all sins are equal raises the question of definition. What exactly is sin? The Greek word most commonly rendered as "sin," *hamartia*, could be translated as "fault" or "guilt." It designates missing the target, literally or figuratively. In its original sense, then, the Greek word has a broad semantic range and can apply to any error. Some ancient Greek thinkers attempted to distinguish *hamartia* from other kinds of error, including *atychema*, *adikema* (unrighteousness), and *kakia* (evil, vice).[2] For example, Aristotle narrows the definition of *hamartema* in his attempt to distinguish it from other kinds of error; for him, *hamartema/hamartia* may be pardonable or unpardonable, depending on the causes.[3]

In the New Testament, and especially in Paul's letters, sin is usually more than simply an error easily overlooked or a feature of human finitude and fallibility (as in, "to err is human"). According to Romans 3:23–24, to sin (*hamartano*) is directly connected with falling short of God's glory, and it puts one in need of being made right by God's free gift. As an offense against God, sin puts one in debt, so that buying back at a price is the solution, accomplished in Christ Jesus. Although using different words, Paul conveys the same message in Romans 6:23. Sin results in death, and only God can make the human wrong right. Again, there is a debt-payment metaphor, and the only solution is God's free gift in Christ Jesus. The connection between sin and death is highlighted again in Romans 8:2, and the solution, again, is liberation in Christ Jesus. For Paul, sin means death, so, in order to live, one must die to sin (Rom 6:1–11). Law, sin, and death must be overcome by God through Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:56–57).

In light of Paul's statements, and in conjunction with the general tenor of Scripture as a whole, we may say that actual sin, in its most basic theological sense and as used in this article, is a breach of God's law—that is, "lawlessness" (1 John 3:4) and "unrighteousness" (1 John 5:17)—committed voluntarily by

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[2] See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 77; Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 49–51.

[3] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V.viii (1135a16–1136a9); VII.iv.1–4 (1147b20–1148a22).

someone who possesses the faculty of reason.[4] One can sin in thought, word, or deed. This definition is admittedly simple, but it is consistent with the great tradition of deep Christian reflection on sin, including, for example, that sin is the disordering of proper loves, that evil is not a thing in itself, and so on.[5]

## Equal and Unequal

As for the primary question before us, first of all, consider how all actual sins are in fact equal. If sin is defined as falling short of the mark or as a transgression of God's law, then any thought or action that fits the definition falls equally under the category of sin as a violation. A bright line exists between what is permissible and impermissible. Sin as such—regardless of which sin it is—equally separates the sinner from the holy God (Isa 59:1–2; cf. Rom. 3:23; 6:23). No one is better or worse; all stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross. Inasmuch as sin is the disordering of proper loves, it comes in many forms—sins—but has one common source (the sinful human heart) and result (death).

Aside from that important initial affirmation of the parity among sins, nearly everything else we can say about sins testifies to their being unequal.

Natural law and the biblical witness are consistently clear that not all sins are equal. This inequality is most evident in connection with the logic assumed in punishments for sin. Just as parents have a range of punishments at their disposal for a disobedient child, so the civil government has a range of penal options. From the smallest to the largest political structures, from family to nation-state, there are different possible punishments, for justice demands that the punishment should fit the crime. The civil laws in the Pentateuch exhibit a wide range of penalties, up to and including death. Sometimes God struck a person dead immediately after a heinous sin was committed, but this was not the case for every instance of every sin. Jesus' statement that it would be better to have a millstone tied around one's neck than to cause a little one to stumble indicates the severity of such a sin (Luke 17:1–2). Similarly, it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for a town that does not

[4] "Actual sin" is in contrast to "original sin," which, when defined as original guilt, is not the topic of this article.

[5] For typical Western Christian scholastic accounts of sin and vice, see Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum libri quatuor* (*Sent.*) II.xxxi–xliv; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) Ia-IIae.lxxi–lxxxix.

welcome Jesus' apostles (Matt 10:14–15). All these instances demonstrate that there are degrees of punishment, a consequence directly connected to different degrees of sin and guilt.

The concept of the punishment fitting the crime is behind the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) in Exodus 21:23–25, a version of which is also found in the Code of Hammurabi and other Ancient Near Eastern laws.[6] It can be interpreted as prescribing either a minimum or a maximum on the penalty for a crime or sin, and mercy can and should be exercised (Zech 7:9; Matt 5:38–42), but the only point to be made here is that punishments are intended to correspond in some way to the varying severity of the crime. Punishments are not identical because the crimes are not of equal weight.

The principle of *lex talionis* is assumed in so many biblical passages that it is unnecessary to attempt an exhaustive account; what follows therefore is only a sample. The Lord will take vengeance against Babylon and "do to her as she has done to others" (Jer 50:15). "Repay her for her deeds; do to her as she has done" (Jer 50:29). The book of Revelation includes the same principle in its declarations of divine judgment. God will destroy "those who destroy the earth" (Rev 11:18). When the third bowl of wrath is poured out, the rivers and fresh water are turned to blood, whereupon the angel proclaims, "You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were; for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve" (Rev 16:4–6). Later, it is said about Babylon, "Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Pour her a double portion from her own cup. Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself" (Rev 18:6–7).[7]

When the punishment not only fits the crime but also matches the nature of the crime, it is an example of what is later called, in Italian, *contrapasso*. Made famous later in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *contrapasso* indicates suffering a penalty that is counter to or opposite the sin being punished. It is no doubt an extension of *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye. This principle may be self-imposed, as is the

[6] For more on the *lex talionis*, including its Ancient Near Eastern background and parallels, see William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 225–31.

[7] See Jan Fekkes III, "Scorched Earth Warfare in the Book of Revelation and *The Lord of the Rings*," *Journal of Christian Studies* 3/2 (May 2024): 74–75.

case with voluntary repentance, an inward change of mind that leads to outward action. Zacchaeus cheated people of their money, so repentance demanded a sort of self-imposed, just penalty of returning the money, plus some (Luke 19:1–8). More typically, however, it is the impenitent sinner that merits a penalty imposed from the outside. The *contrapasso* theme is seen clearly in pagan stories such as the torment of Tantalus in Tartarus,[8] as well as in biblical stories, as in the case of Revelation 16 cited above, where those shedding blood are doomed to drink blood.

This biblical precedent of people suffering a penalty corresponding to their sins was quickly carried to further specificity in the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter*, whose depiction of hell includes vivid examples of *contrapasso*. Women who on earth had plaited or braided their hair, not for beauty but to entice for fornication, are now hung by their hair. Other women who had once procured abortions are now faced by their children, from whom lightning shoots forth into their mothers' eyes. Slanderers are condemned to chew their tongues, liars' lips are cut off and fire enters their mouths, and the lovers of money are clothed in filthy rags and thrown upon a sharp pillar.[9] Dante, who includes so many examples of *contrapasso* in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, uses the word only once in the *Commedia*, linking this tradition with the *lex talionis*. Bertrand de Born, who allegedly incited the rebellious schism of Henry the Young King against his father King Henry II, for the sin of "parting those so closely knit," is condemned with beheading, that is, parting the head from the body. In hell, Bertrand carries his own severed head in hand and expresses clearly the principle implicit throughout: "Cosi s'osserva in me lo *contrapasso*" ("Thus is observed in me the *counter-suffering*").[10] In the late medieval period, the popular imagination with regard to *contrapasso* in purgatory remained vivid. Late medieval purgatory was starting to look like high medieval hell. Eamon Duffy

[8] Tantalus' penalty of never reaching the water for a drink is reminiscent of the rich man who lived in earthly luxury later suffering fiery torment in Hades, begging Lazarus for a drop of cool water (Luke 16:19–24).

[9] For these examples and many more, see *Apocalypse of Peter* 7–12 (following the translation from Ethiopic), in *New Testament Apocrypha: Volume Two: Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, rev. ed., ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: WJKP, 1992), 628–33.

[10] Dante, *Commedia*, *Inferno*, canto XXVIII.139–42 (emphasis mine). The Italian text is available at https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/intertext/index.html, which also mentions that this is the only occurrence of the word *contrapasso* in the Divine Comedy.

reports on some of the popular descriptions: "Often the punishment was carefully matched to the crime: the sexually promiscuous were tormented in the loins, the gluttonous forced to drink scalding venom or nauseous filth, the backbiters and liars had their tongues or lips sliced away."[11] We might add that *contrapasso* is another instance of the biblical principle, "on earth as it is in heaven." Whether or not one finds these later speculations to be far-fetched, the point is that different sins merit different degrees and kinds of penalty.

In sum, the different kinds and degrees of punishment indicate that not all sins are of equal severity or have identical weight. If severer penalties indicate graver sins, then less severe penalties imply less weighty sins.

If the range of different penalties for different sins and crimes is one clear indication that not all sins are equal, so also are the language and distinctions used in Scripture about various sins. For example, some sins are singled out as an abomination (as in Lev 18:22). Other sins prevent one from inheriting God's kingdom (as in 1 Cor 6:9–10). There seems to be a thread throughout Scripture of an unforgivable sin. The Old Testament speaks of the high-handed or deliberate sin that results in cutting the sinner off from the people; the sinner's guilt remains (Num 15:30–31). Jesus speaks of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt 12:31–32). The Hebrews writer speaks of the impossibility of repentance (Heb 6:4–6) and no sacrifice left for certain sins (Heb 10:26). A distinction is made in 1 John 5:16–17. While admitting that "all unrighteousness is sin" (all sins are equal), John also acknowledges that there is "sin not to death" and "sin to death" (not all sins are equal). The sin not to death is forgivable, for one may ask and God "will give him life." It may appropriately be called venial, that is, pardonable. For the sin to death, however, John does not recommend seeking forgiveness. It is, after all, properly deadly or mortal. The point right here is not to solve all the difficulties of identifying what these sins are—specifying which are mortal or venial and what exactly these categories mean. The purpose is simply to draw attention to what is clear (explicitly and implicitly) throughout the biblical text: Not all sins are equal.

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[11] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 339. Duffy, ibid., continues: "The retailing of such horrors was not simply intended to harrow and terrify but to convert and chasten."

A final, implicit distinction is worth considering. One may sin or miss the mark by doing something that should not be done. One may sin or miss the mark also by leaving undone something that should be done. These are commonly called sins of commission and omission, respectively. To do something that is forbidden, a sin of commission, is usually regarded by natural law as worse than a sin of omission. To hate one's neighbor is worse than not loving or not caring or remaining neutral. Doing nothing is better than doing harm. Doing no harm is a so-called "perfect duty," because it can be kept perfectly by doing nothing, and thus to break this duty is unnecessary. To love neighbor is a so-called "imperfect duty," because it can never be kept perfectly—there is always more to do but left undone, and doing nothing is insufficient. Sins of omission may still be sins, but, as an offense, it is generally better to omit the good deed than to commit the evil deed. Committing a murder is worse than standing idly by, and, contrary to popular opinion, silence is indeed not the same as violence.

Based on the penalties due to various sins, as well as the way they are described in Scripture, there is ample evidence that sins are unequal. But what are the various factors that could make sins unequal? What makes some sins worse than others? I propose thinking about sin, vice, and what makes a behavior evil as we might think about virtue and what makes a behavior good. In moral theology, it is typical to consider the consequences of an action, the action itself, and the agent's motivations behind the action. In simplistic terms, this threefold distinction corresponds to utilitarian, deontological, and virtue approaches to ethics, respectively. It is difficult sometimes to distinguish or isolate these three categories from each other, but, for the sake of the discussion, we shall try. The point here is that, if there are degrees of good and better consequences, actions, and motivations, then, by analogy, there may be bad and worse consequences, actions, and motivations.

First, the direct consequences of a sin are a key factor in assessing bad and worse. Murder is a worse sin than hate, and most people would rather be hated or insulted than murdered. Words are not violence, or at least not in the same way as physical harm.[12] Adultery is worse than lust. With both of these examples, I am channeling the first two antitheses from the Sermon on the Mount

[12] Though many in our society have sought to reverse this natural law, claiming to justify physical harm in response to spoken words that caused offense.

(Matt 5:21–30) and contesting a popular-level interpretation of this passage. Jesus' point is not to equate hate with murder or lust with adultery. Instead, he means to say that the lesser sins—the thoughts and words—can lead to the more heinous deeds, which is different from claiming equivalence.

Second, with regard to actions and behaviors, we may assess the severity of sins by reflecting on the rules or duties being broken.[13] We have necessary responsibilities first to God and second to neighbor. To blaspheme God would seem to be worse than slandering a neighbor, though the vertical and horizontal loves are surely linked (1 John 4:20–21). Murder is especially evil not only because of the finality of the deed (a consequence) but also because it is an attack on the *imago Dei* (Gen 9:6). On the horizontal level, because we have so many billions of neighbors, the reality of proximity—implied by English *neighbor* and Greek *plēsion*, both meaning "someone nigh"—counts for something. In this case, it would be worse to neglect the needs of my own child than those of someone else's child. Do good to all, but especially to those of the household of faith (Gal 6:10).

Third, the motivations or internal causes behind a sin can indicate the severity of the sin. What are the possible motivations? Gregory the Great distinguished between a sin out of ignorance (*ignorantia*) and one out of malice (*malitia*).[14] Peter Lombard (ca. 1096–1160) distinguished a sin out of weakness (*infirmitas*) and one out of ignorance (*ignorantia*).[15] Building on that Augustinian tradition, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) noted three internal causes of sin—ignorance, passion, and malice. The Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1559–1609), likewise listed three internal causes, corresponding roughly to those of Aquinas—ignorance, weakness, and malice.[16] Elsewhere, Arminius distinguished four different motivations for sin—ignorance, weakness, negligence, and malice. A sin out of ignorance is when a man does something that

[13] It is especially difficult to isolate the consideration of commands from the immediate consequences of breaking them and the motivations behind them.

[14] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* IV.40, in *Patrologia Latina* (PL), vol. 77: col. 397B. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 355.

[15] Peter Lombard, *Sent.* II.xliii.4, in *PL* 192:756.

[16] Jacobus Arminius, *Epistolae ecclesiasticae*, 45, in *The Works of James Arminius*, London ed., trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols. (1825, 1828, 1875; repr. Grand Rapids, Baker, 1986), vol. 2: 743–50.

he does not know to be a sin. A sin out of weakness is done through fear, passion, or any other disturbance of mind. A sin out of negligence (here, distinct from weakness) is when someone is overtaken and acts before contemplating the deed. A sin out of malice is done deliberately and with determined purpose.[17]

Some motivations are worse than others, a fact that affects the gravity of the sin. For Gregory, the sin out of ignorance may be purged (after death).[18] Aquinas is clear that ignorance does not excuse a sin, but it can diminish a sin.[19] Likewise, a sin out of passion, though not altogether excused, is diminished.[20] In fact, citing Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, Thomas writes, "the greater the temptation that overcomes a man, the less grievous his sin."[21]

Sin out of malice, however, is a different story. According to Thomas Aquinas, "A sin that is committed on purpose, for this very reason deserves heavier punishment."[22] A sin committed "out of malice" (*ex malitia*) is "more grave" than one committed out of passion.[23] Similarly, for Arminius, a sin arising "out of malice" (*ex malitia*) causes a fall from grace. He adds that whether such a sin of apostasy can be forgiven depends on the object of malice. If the sin arises out of malice for the law and causes one to fall away, it is forgivable. If the sin, however, arises out of malice for Christ, the consequent apostasy is unforgivable.[24]

Lombard, Aquinas, and Arminius affirm, along with the great Christian tradition, that there is such a thing as a grievous sin that is not forgiven. What makes a sin unforgivable? In Numbers 15, a high-handed, defiant sin is contrasted with an unintentional sin (Num 15:22–31), so it seems to be the deliberate, premeditated, and especially impenitent nature of a sin that makes it unforgivable. It is the same in Hebrews, where repentance is out of reach (Heb

[17] Jacobus Arminius, *Disputationes publicae* VIII.5, in *Works*.2:158–59.
[18] Gregory, *Dialogues* IV.40.
[19] Aquinas, *ST* Ia-IIae.lxxvi.3-4.
[20] Aquinas, *ST* Ia-IIae.lxxvii.6-7.
[21] Aquinas, *ST* Ia-IIae.lxxvii.6. s.c.
[22] Aquinas, *ST* Ia-IIae.lxxviii.4. s.c.
[23] Aquinas, *ST* Ia-IIae.lxxviii.4. resp.
[24] Arminius, *Epistolae ecclesiasticae,* 45, in *Works* 2:743–45. For further discussion of Arminius on the conditions of apostasy, see Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate 1603–1609*, Brill's Series in Church History 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 135-39.

6:6). These sinners are not people who are trying to do better and sin out of weakness and want to repent when they are confronted.

It is not that God will ever come to a point where he won't accept the penitent believer. But the impenitent reaches a point of no return. Esau, Pharaoh, Saul, Judas, North Israel and South Judah—leading up to the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, respectively—all had been given chances, multiple opportunities, to repent. But then the judgment finally came. God's mercy is great. The terminus of repentance lies with the sinner. God still stands ready to receive the penitent. The only obstacle between the sinner and full divine forgiveness is the refusal to repent. As the Lombard put it, quoting Augustine, "Impenitence is the sin against the Holy Spirit."[25]

## Conclusion

On the one hand, to equalize all sin can understate the severity of some sins and can lead to security or false assurance. Even if it is not anyone's stated intent, such equalizing could make it seem like no sins are all that serious or deadly. Murder would thus be no worse than hate.

On the other hand, to equalize all sin can overstate the severity of some sins and can lead to despair or lack of assurance. A hateful thought or word would thus be every bit as bad as murder. In this case, if someone is on the roof, misses the nail and hits his finger with a hammer, shouts an obscenity, and falls off the roof and dies before confessing that specific sin, he might be eternally damned—as if the state of this sinner is equivalent to that of an impenitent murderer.

The insistence that all sins are equal reflects a lack of necessary subtlety. It rightly recognizes the bright and clear line between permissible and impermissible, but then fails to account for all the nuance that is possible on either side of that dividing line. Natural law and the biblical witness testify that not all sins are equal and that some sins are worse than others. The penalties for and language about sin demonstrate this claim, as well as the various motivations for and consequences of sins. Upon reflection, a badly motivated bad action with bad consequences can be evaluated as a severer sin than, say, an ignorant

[25] Peter Lombard, *Sent.* II.xliii.2, in *PL* 192:754, quoting Augustine's *Sermon* 71.

action with minimal consequences. In the latter case, the severity of the sin is diminished.

Let me be very clear: The church should not overlook or minimize any sins. To acknowledge the inequality of sins—degrees of severity—must not be used as a rationale for tolerating or excusing sins considered less severe. Otherwise, the result would be no better than those who seek to tolerate sins by equalizing them all.