

Are All Sins Equal?

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

I am actually getting ready to leave for a week with my lovely bride. We are celebrating our 30th anniversary and have both been running hard all year and thought, boy, we need to hit the eject button and get away.

So we're headed out of town for a week, flying out tomorrow morning, Sunday morning, and we'll miss you all, miss gathering together.

But also very excited to just chill out. Just chill out. We are big time fans of chilling out on vacation.

[1 : 37] I'm doing this podcast because someone texted me probably two weeks ago now asking a simple question that gets brought up quite a bit.

And that is the question of are all sins equal? Are all sins equal? And the answer to that is no. And I can prove that to you at various levels.

And so I'm just going to get right into it and explain. First of all, to explain the motivation for why that. Why that phrase ever came into being.

I was certainly taught this, that all sins are equal in some way or another. I think that lots of people have heard this. And I would tell you that the motivation there is an attempt to sort of dismantle self-righteousness.

It's not that all sins are actually equal. But what we're trying to do is dismantle this sort of, well, in our world, the Bible Belt self-righteousness that puts certain sins so small as to not really be a big deal.

[2 : 44] And the Bible handles that. It does that in, say, James 2.10. Where it says, for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

And there are a lot of texts like that. So there is a sense that we would want to dismantle the self-righteousness of someone who thinks that because they haven't done any of the big sins, they're okay with God.

The Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Romans 3.23. And that the wages of any sin is death. And so all sin is a violation of who God is.

It's a rebellion against God. I'll talk more about that in a moment. And so in some sense, all sin is very serious. But that does not mean that all sins are equal.

Now, the Bible is really clear about this as well. It goes from the beginning of the Old Testament all the way through. We see in the Old Testament that there were different punishments assigned for different sins.

[3 : 44] Particular sins involved the death penalty, while others did not. Some merely involved a beating or restitution of some kind. And others involved the death penalty.

Jesus clearly indicates throughout his conversations that there are degrees of sin. When he is handed over to Pilate, he tells Pilate that the one who handed him over is guilty of a greater sin than Pilate.

Jesus refers to some sins as specks in Matthew 7 and other sins as planks. In Matthew 23, Jesus talks about straining out gnats and swallowing camels.

And every time he does this kind of conversation, he's not suggesting that the specks or the gnats aren't a big deal. He talks about things like, you should keep the small things and the big things.

And whoever removes the smallest jot or iota from my word will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. So clearly, there are layers of sins.

[4 : 46] Jesus, in one of his Judgment Day parables in Luke 12, talks about one person handed over to judgment, but he only gets whipped a little bit, and then another person gets handed over to judgment, and he gets whipped a lot.

And it's because of the difference in their behavior. He reserved, you know, obviously some of his most severe condemnations for religious teachers. And that's another category we see in the Bible where, you know, James talks about this as well, that those who are teachers will be held to a higher account.

One of the places I immediately thought when this person asked me, you know, hey, are all sins equal? I thought about how Jesus, in a couple places in the Gospels, says things like, to whom much is given, much will be demanded.

And that there is actually a higher standard for those who have been blessed with more light, with more insight, and so forth. I'll talk more about that in a moment. And then, of course, I thought immediately of how Jesus said that there were certain cities in Israel during his time that would be judged more severely than Sodom and Gomorrah in the Judgment, because Sodom and Gomorrah did not have the works of Jesus that these cities had.

And he says even that if Sodom and Gomorrah saw what I'm showing you now, they would have repented in dust and ashes. So yeah, the answer is there is definite difference between sins.

[6 : 27] Another place to go would be 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul says that sexual immorality in particular is a sin against the body, and it holds a certain level of weight that other sins do not.

Now, what makes some sins more serious than others? Well, there's kind of two ways, two directions we can go here, and I can cover both of them pretty quickly. One has to do with sort of knowledge, intention, and effect.

So the more someone knows, the worse the sin is. So you could even have a situation where two people are doing the exact same sin. I'm thinking of something sexually immoral, something sexually immoral that you shouldn't do, but people do alone.

That's a good example of this. I'm always mindful of the kids in the car. You could have a situation where someone literally does not know that that's wrong, and then you could have a situation where that same person, a couple years later, does know it's wrong.

And that sin, though it's the exact same action, has a completely different kind of depth to it, because there's a clarity and a knowledge.

[7 : 38] Intention, the more deliberate someone is in their sin, the more serious the offense. There's lots of examples in the Bible where people sin accidentally, forgetfully, or rashly, passionately, and so forth.

And then there's those who plot and really intend to go down a path. And then effect. Another measure of what makes one sin worse than another is, well, what does it do to people?

That's one of the reasons why teachers are judged more severely, as James 3 says, because their impact is, it's a bigger impact. You know, and then that gets to like committing adultery, for instance.

It's far worse to do that than to do it privately in your own head. Both are sins. Both are the same species of sin, but one has had much more of a pronounced effect on others.

So one way to like evaluate what makes some sins worse than others is, you know, this intention, effect, knowledge kind of matrix. But I want to introduce something else I think is actually really important when we're talking about sin.

[8 : 49] And it just came up in a conversation I had with a group of guys around a systematic theology that we're reading. And that is, is that it's very important that you understand and that you teach your kids to understand that when they sin, it's not that they violated a set of rules.

That's not what sin is. Sin is revealed in the rules. But sin is actually a violation of God. Sin is actually a rejection of God. You see, one of the things that's really baked into the way that we think about morality is Hellenistic, particularly Plato's conceptions of morality.

And for Plato, there was this idea that, you know, there's these exist, these, these virtues that just exist independently of the gods. And so like he calls them, you know, these forms, you know, courage, benevolence, charity, so forth.

These exist. And then everything is measured, including the gods, are measured against these sort of forms, these sort of moral categories that just exist. And if you want a good example of kind of how that plays out in a modern religion, Mormonism believes basically that, that the God that we know of as God, who's the God of this planet, started off as a person, and he lived up to some objective standards.

You know, he ascended to moral virtue to the extent that he became glorified and is now the God of this particular planet.

[10 : 29] So this is, I will tell you that I don't know of a single Christian who doesn't think about it this way, at least sometimes. And it really does make a huge difference to your understanding of holiness and what sin is.

So I want you to understand that, you know, you've been contaminated, your brain's been contaminated with some Platonic thinking that is not biblical. And it sort of puts you in the position where you tend to think of sin as a violation of a set of rules.

But that's not right. The rules actually just reveal the character of God. So the rules just reveal who God is. And it's not that you're sinning against the rules. It's that you're sinning against and violating the basic fundamental nature of God.

So when you sin, it's not that you've broken a rule that God has told you to follow. That's not quite right. God told you to follow the rule because it was a way of protecting you from offending him.

But when you sin, it's really against God. It's not against a set of objective rules out there somewhere. And I don't, again, I don't know of any Christian who really consistently grasps, grasp this and doesn't need to be reminded of it.

[11 : 38] And this is very important, friends, when you're raising your kids to do this in a way that doesn't make God seem overly emotional and passionate and so forth.

But, so you can't use like whiny language when describing God. The heart of God is broken right now. You've made God so sad and so on and so forth. I don't think that's the way to do it exactly.

But on the other hand, you don't want to hold out a list of rules and say you broke rule number four. You want them to understand that they have offended God, not just some kind of set of rules.

So when you begin to think about sin as offense to God, God being a person, the person in some sense, you begin to understand how, of course, of course, there's layers to the seriousness of sin.

You know, you could do something to me accidentally. It wouldn't tick me off. It would, you know, but I'd be like, all right, well, he did it accidentally. You know, it's, you know, it's not that it's okay exactly because it could be really bad that you've done something really bad, but it's still like, well, that's, but you, if you do it to plot against me, well, that's another layer.

[12 : 57] If I've told you explicitly, don't do, don't do, don't do, don't do, and I know, you know, please don't do this and you do it to me anyway, then there you go. There you go. There's another layer of seriousness.

If you take something that I've given you and use it to hurt me, there's another layer of seriousness. You know, so you, it really, this question gets answered pretty clearly when we break free of that platonic sense where it's like, hey, I've sinned against a rule.

No, you have, you have offended a person. All of the virtues, goodness, love, joy, beauty, mercy, righteousness, justice, these are not things that God measures himself up to that exist on their own.

These are who God is and our understanding of what goodness is or what righteousness is or what mercy is and so forth is based on who God is. So when we sin, we sin against a being and of course that, that offense is not always at a 10.

Sometimes it's out of two. Sometimes it's out of five. Sometimes it's out of, you know, you get my point. It's all worthy of condemnation because God is wrathful against violating himself, against people who violate him.

[14 : 15] But God's, God's figured that out, right? Through the cross, he had a plan all along to allow, allow his forbearance and his kindness and his justice to coexist in the cross, through the cross of Jesus Christ.

So anyway, that's the answer to the question, are all sins equal? No, they're not. They're, they vary wildly and there are two ways to think about how that is so. One is the knowledge, intention and effect kind of metric and the other is just to remember you're interacting with a person and when you rebel against him and violate him in some way or another, there could, there's all sorts of, you know, layers to that.

One that I forgot would be, if you did something against me, that would tick me off. But what if you did something against the people that I love?

Well, that would be even worse. So that's why sometimes, you know, you'll see sins singled out that have a, a more potent damage effect on other people.

Well, that would be a worse sin in that respect. So anyway, you get my point. It's a, it's, it's actually pretty intuitive when you just remember that you're not breaking rules.

[15 : 34] You're breaking, you're trying to break God. You're not succeeding, but you're trying to break God. All right. Well, with that, I'm going to leave you. I found another song I want to play for you. And this one is one that I've just always found to be such an encouragement in reminding me of God's bigness.

And so this is Where Were You? by Ghost Ship. I said, God, I do not understand this world.

Everything is dying and broken. Why do I see nothing but suffering?

God, I'm asking, could this be your plan?

Sin has taken hold of this whole land. Will you not say anything else to me?

[16 : 49] He said, Where were you the day that I measured?

Sung the bass and stretched the line over all the earth and carved out its cornerstone?
Where were you the day that I spoke and told the sun to split the night open?

Called the morning dawn with its light to show who shot empty ocean with stone doors?

Marked the reach of tides on those new shores? On the day the waves rose and first broke for? Have you seen the springs of that great sea?

Walked the caverns carved in the black thee? Through the gates of darkness there on its floor? Have you seen the armory I hold?

[18 : 21] Snow and hail are stacked up in silos for the times of trouble and war and strife? Can you raise your voice to the storm cloud?

What will thunder answer and ring out? Does the lightning ask you where it should strike? Who has left a channel for torrents?

Rain to sprout the desert with forest in the wilderness that my hand has filled? Can you want to pray for your clients?

Can you lose the cords of all riders? Is this whole world bending me in your will? I spoke of things I did not understand Things too wonderful for me although I had no right to ask my God knelt and answered me What with people with people Can you come to my islands?

Can you islands? Can you Can you Can you Can you Can you