

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #9: ARE THERE DEGREES OF SIN? (ARE SOME PARTS OF HELL HOTTER THAN OTHERS?)

By John Temples

I have heard, and have even myself made, the following statements:

- “Sin is sin, and there is no such thing as a big sin and a little sin.”
- “Any sin will send you to hell, so one sin is just as bad as another.”
- “It is no hotter in one part of hell than it is in any other part.”

Are these statements true? Well, there is not much we can know about the temperature of hell; and even if we did know, that would not prove anything about whether one sin is worse than another.

But we can study what the Bible teaches, either by direct statement or implication, about degrees of sin. Let us begin our investigation in the Old Testament.

DEGREES OF SIN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Law of Moses, there were various kinds of sins described along with their punishments. Right away, we notice that different sins had different punishments:

- Exodus 22:15--“He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.”
- Exodus 23:1--“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep.”

Assault on a parent got you executed; stealing an animal meant only a fine.

Also, the Old Testament used some expressions of degree in reference to sin:

- Exodus 32:21--“And Moses said to Aaron, ‘What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?’”
- Exodus 32:30--“You have sinned a great sin.”
- Ezekiel 8:6--“Furthermore, He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel commits

here, to make Me go far away from my sanctuary? Now turn again, you will see greater abominations.”

- Proverbs 6:16-19--“These six things the Lord hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.”

Of course, God hates all sin; but the language of Proverbs 6 implies that these seven are particularly detestable in His sight. Matthew Henry says, “God hates sin; he hates every sin...he hates nothing but sin. But there are some sins which he does in a special manner hate; and all those mentioned here are such as are injurious to our neighbor.”

So we can say that the Old Testament seems to teach that there are degrees of sin.

DEGREES OF SIN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we come to the new covenant, we again see distinctions made between sins. Matthew 23:15 says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to make one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” A “son of hell” meant a despicable and wicked person, destined for eternal punishment. Who then is one who is “twice as much a son of hell”?

In the same chapter, verse 23, the Lord said: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law--justice and mercy and faith.”

And perhaps the plainest reference to degrees of sin is John 19:11--“Jesus answered, you [Pilate] could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore, the one who delivered Me to you [the Jewish leadership] has the greater sin.” Pilate was guilty of miscarriage of justice

regarding Roman civil law; but the Jewish leaders were guilty of blatant rebellion against God's law.

Really, common sense tells us that there are degrees of sin. Which would you rather live next to--a man who lies about the size of the fish he caught, or a dope-peddling murderer?

What makes one sin greater than another? Here are some possible factors:

- The heinousness of the act.
- The degree of knowledge one possesses. (Pilate was ignorant of the true nature of Jesus; the Jews were not.)
- The degree to which a sin affects others. (A "proud look" does relatively little harm; but "hands that shed innocent blood" do much harm.)
- The degree of plainness of Scripture in identifying and defining a sin.

SO IF THERE ARE DEGREES OF SIN, ARE THERE DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT?

Yes. Luke 12:47, 48 says, "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do his master's will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required. And to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more." Notice: if you do not do your master's will, you will be beaten. The only question is, with how many stripes?

Matthew 23:14--"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation."

And remember when Jesus talked about the great advantages of the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida? Luke 10:13,14--"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented a great while ago, sitting in sackcloth and

ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you.”

“Many stripes...greater condemnation...more tolerable in the judgment.” All these are expressions of degrees of sin and punishment. So, some sins and some punishments are said in Scripture to be worse than others. But now we need to look at:

SOME DANGERS IN DEALING WITH THIS TRUTH

Problem #1: There are bigger sins and smaller sins, but we can't infallibly tell which are which. It is human nature to say, “the bigger sins are yours; the lesser sins are mine.” Jesus spoke of this tendency in Matthew 7:2--”And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?”

We might say that *one of the worst sins is to try to rank sins.*

Problem #2: There are greater sins and lesser sins, but there are no insignificant sins. When we start ranking sins, we put the worst ones (in our view) at the top and the “little” ones at the bottom. Then we assume that the “little” sins close to the bottom are sins we can commit with impunity. We imagine that somewhere in this list of sins, there is a line; and sins above the line will doom you to hell, but sins below the line you can get away with. This is dangerous thinking.

This leads to Problem #3: We develop a false sense of security. And we reinforce it by comparing our (smaller) sins with others' (larger) sins. “I'm better than (fill in the blank).” Does that begin to sound like, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men”?

In the judgment, God will not grade on the curve. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

CONCLUSION

We can say with a good degree of certainty that in God's eyes, some sins are worse than others. There are varying degrees of sin and of punishment. But only God can infallibly rank them!

God, the infallible Judge, will see that every unforgiven sin receives an appropriate punishment. But remember this: as far as eternal consequences are concerned, little sins will get you into hell just as fast as big ones. Any sin unrepented of and unforgiven will cause you to be lost. We should just strive to stop sinning, and not worry about which sins are big and which ones are little. --John Temples

POSTSCRIPT:

You may be wondering why I did not cite 1 John 5:16,17 in the discussion of relative degrees of sin. That reads, "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death."

At first glance, this seems to teach that there are some sins I can get away with. But the subject of this text is not really "big sins and little sins"--it is *sin repented of versus sin not repented of*.

John speaks of two kinds of sins: those leading to (spiritual) death and those not leading to death. He says there are some sins a brother may commit for which I can pray in his behalf, and such sins will be forgiven--"God will give him (the sinner) life." So, they are "sins not leading to death" because they are forgiven.

But some sins I may not pray for (verse 16b). What are those? *Any sins of which a brother will not repent*. Any sin, unrepented of and unforgiven, leads to (spiritual) death. Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you will perish" (Luke 13:3).

Brother Guy N. Woods, in his scholarly analysis of this text, says: "1. The Lord will forgive every sin, of whatever nature, that a brother confesses. (1 John 1:8.) 2. There is, however, a sin which the Lord will not forgive. (1 John 5:16.) 3.

Therefore, the sin which the Lord will not forgive, is simply *a sin, any sin that a brother will not confess!*...If my brother sins, and manifests penitence, I not only may, it is my duty to, pray in his behalf: 'Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.' (James 5:16.) If, however, my brother exhibits stubborn impenitence and persistent rebellion, following the commission of his sin, it is useless to petition the Father in his behalf. The sin unto death is thus a disposition of heart, a perverseness of attitude and an unwillingness of mind to acknowledge one's sin and from it turn away. Such a disposition effectively closes the door of heaven in one's face." (Guy N. Woods, "A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude," Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, Tennessee, 1970; page 322.)

In this text, then, it is not a question of the degree of the sin but its nature--whether repented of or not repented of.