

Viewpoint: JAV402

ALL SINS ARE NOT THE SAME

by Michael W. Austin

This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 02 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

A few years ago, retired NFL wide receiver Chad Johnson sent out a tweet expressing the idea that no sin is worse than any other sin. In reply, recently retired NFL running back Arian Foster tweeted, “You mean killing a baby is the same as stealing a stick of gum? I don’t get it. Touchy subject.”¹ One mistaken and unfortunate trend in many parts of the contemporary American Christian church is the propagation of “Christian” clichés that are neither Christian nor true. One of these is this very idea: no sin is worse than any other sin. That is, from God’s perspective, all sins are equally bad. I’ve heard this view espoused for many years, in one form or another. Since God is morally perfect, any form of sin is *just as bad* as any other form of sin. But I think Arian Foster is right; all sins are not the same. Some are worse than others. This is clear intuitively, and there is also a strong biblical case to be made that, in God’s sight, all sins are in fact not the same.

Sin Is Sin. Before I discuss some problems with this view, I first want to point out what is right about it. It is true that because God is perfectly holy, He detests all sin. It is not as if God takes murder seriously but merely gives theft a wink and a nod. God is morally perfect, and His heart is grieved by all sin. We should expect no less from a morally perfect and holy God who is worthy of all of our worship. God’s perfect character requires that He abhor all sin. As followers of Christ, as people who aspire to exemplify His character in our daily living, we should pursue holiness and avoid all sin.

It is true also that no matter how great or small, all sins separate us from God and require forgiveness in Christ. The consequence of sin — any sin — is spiritual death. All sins leave us in need of redemption. But this does not entail that all sins are the same in the sense that they are all equal in God’s sight.

I believe that when many claim that all sins are equal in God's sight, they have in mind the fact that God is perfect and grieved by all sin, or that all sin results in spiritual death. However, it is important to distinguish between these claims. God is perfect, sin separates us from Him, but all sins are not equal in His sight.

Consider what it means to accept the view that all sins are equal in God's sight. It is intuitively clear that there are degrees of wrongdoing, and the claim that murder and stealing a pack of gum are morally equivalent actions is absurd for many reasons. For instance, the level of harm is vastly different in each case, and harm can be used as one criterion for evaluating the morality of an action. If someone steals a pack of gum from me, that's not good, but I'm not dead, and I can enjoy the many other blessings of God that I retain. In addition, the right to life is a fundamental right. It is the most important right we possess. It is much more important than property rights. One reason that the right to life is more important than property rights is that human life has greater value than whatever property we possess. In light of this, murder is a morally worse act than theft of a piece of gum. The two actions are not morally equivalent. All sins are not the same in God's sight.

Size of Sin. There is a strong biblical case to be made against the claim that all sins are the same in God's sight. Consider the words of Jesus, from Matthew 23:23–24: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (all Scripture references NIV). Jesus Himself, the moral and intellectual exemplar for Christians, rejects the claim that no sin is worse than any other. There are matters that are more important, morally speaking, than others. For example, justice, mercy, and faithfulness are more important than giving a tenth of one's spices. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees in this passage centers on the fact that they focused on the *lesser* matters of the law, while neglecting the *more important*. It is clear that Jesus does not hold that all sins are equal, because His teachings here directly contradict this view.

There are other reasons for thinking that Jesus believed that some things matter more, morally speaking, than others. In the first half of Matthew 12, Jesus and His followers are thought to be involved in breaking religious law by working on the Sabbath, which was to be a day of rest. Over the years, many rules and regulations had cropped up around this day. In reply to these criticisms, Jesus points out that the welfare of people, including their need for food and for healing from physical ailments, takes precedence over such rules.

The conversation Jesus has with a teacher of the law in Mark 12:28–34 also reveals that, from the perspective of Jesus, some things have greater moral significance than others. The teacher of the law asks Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" In reply, Jesus does not say that they are all equally important, and that disobeying any of them is equally wrong. Rather, He says, "The most important

one...is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." If some commandments are more important than others, then some moral obligations are more important than others. If some commands are more important, then others are less important. It follows that when we sin by violating one of these more important commandments — such as loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves — we are doing something that is more egregious than when we violate a lesser command.

It is worth noting that when the teacher of the law agrees with Jesus that loving God and one's neighbor "is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices," Mark's Gospel adds the observation that Jesus "saw that he answered wisely" (Mark 12:34). This is a key point. Wisdom is a crucial Christian virtue. We are to value it much more than silver and gold (Prov. 16:16), and nothing else compares with it (Prov. 8:11). If we want to flourish as followers of Christ, if we want to be like Christ, then we must both pursue and be growing in the virtue of wisdom.

This is one reason why it is so important to think through these passages and their implications. We want to think like and be like Jesus, and this means that we need to seek His kind of wisdom. Such wisdom includes the skills of moral discernment that Jesus not only exemplifies but also teaches about in the above passages. An important mark of sound moral reasoning, and of moral and spiritual maturity, is the ability to distinguish between different levels of significance in moral matters.

Sawdust vs. Plank. Consider one other passage of Scripture, from the Sermon on the Mount, that also supports the claim that all sins are not the same: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:3-5). The primary point of the foregoing passage is that we should focus more on our own sins and character flaws compared to those of others. Not doing so is to exhibit hypocrisy. However, notice that there is an assumption in the passage. The sin of one's brother is compared to a speck of sawdust, while the sin in one's own life is compared to a plank. This represents the comparative seriousness of the sins in question. One's sin is larger than the sin of his brother, where his focus wrongly rests. Again, this is an important piece of biblical evidence in support of the claim that Jesus does not think all sins are the same. And we should follow His lead here, as in all things.

Finally, there is an issue of practical apologetic importance here. When we make claims such as "All sins are the same to God," we undermine the credibility of our case for the Christian faith. Most people intuitively know that this must be false. Even in a post-Christian culture such as ours, there is sufficient moral knowledge concerning the

fact that some acts are worse than others. People know that an episode of dishonesty is less morally reprehensible than murder, torture, or genocide. Fortunately, followers of Christ don't need to try and defend such a view. It is not a view that Jesus holds, it is not entailed by the fact that all sin separates us from God, and it is not entailed by the theological truth that God is a morally perfect being. —*Michael W. Austin*

Michael W. Austin is professor of philosophy at Eastern Kentucky University. His latest book is *Virtues in Action* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He blogs at his website, www.michaelwaustin.com, and at *Psychology Today*, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ethics-everyone.

NOTES

1 <https://twitter.com/arianfoster/status/28588345755550209>.