

Sproul, R. (1996, c1991). *Following Christ*.

Degrees of Sin?

To speak of an ethical continuum or a complex of righteousness and evil is to plunge us into the debate over degrees of sin and righteousness. The Bible teaches that if we sin against one point of the law we sin against the whole law. Does this not imply that sin is sin and that ultimately there are no degrees? Has not Protestantism repudiated the Roman Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins?

These are the issues that come to the surface as soon as we begin to speak of degrees of sin. Certainly the Bible teaches that if we sin against one point of the law we sin against the whole law, but we must not infer from this that there are no degrees of sin. Sinning against the law is in reality sinning against the God of the law. When I violate one point of God's law, I bring myself in opposition to God himself. This is not to say that sinning against one point of the law is the equivalent of sinning against five points of the law. In both cases I violate the law and do violence to God, but the frequency of my violence is five times as great in the latter as in the former.

It is true that God commands perfect obedience to the whole law, so that by a single transgression I stand exposed to his judgment. The lightest sin exposes me to the wrath of God and in the smallest peccadillo I am guilty of cosmic treason. In the least transgression I set myself above the authority of God, doing insult to his majesty, his holiness, and his sovereign right to govern me. Sin is a revolutionary act in which the sinner seeks to depose God from his throne. Sin is a presumption of supreme arrogance in that the creature vaunts his own wisdom above that of the Creator, challenges divine omnipotence with human impotence, and seeks to usurp the rightful authority of the cosmic Lord.

It is true that historic Protestantism has rejected the Roman Catholic schema of mortal and venial sin. The rejection, however, is not based on a rejection of degrees of gradations of sin. Calvin, for example, argued that all sin is mortal in the sense that it rightly deserves death, but that no sin is mortal in the sense that it destroys justifying grace. Considerations other than the degrees of sin were in view in the Protestant rejection of the mortal and venial sin distinction. Historic Protestantism retained the distinction between ordinary sins and sins that are deemed gross and heinous.

The most obvious reason for the Protestant retention of degrees of sin is that the Bible abounds with such gradations. The Old Testament law had clear distinctions and provisions of penalty for different levels of criminal acts. Some sins were punishable by death, others by corporal penalties, and still others by the levying of fines. In the Jewish criminal justice system, distinctions were made between types of murder that would correspond to modern-day distinctions such as first- and second-degree murder, and voluntary and involuntary manslaughter.

The New Testament lists certain sins that demand the forfeiture of Christian fellowship for the impenitent continuance of them. At the same time, the New Testament advocates a kind of love that covers a multitude of sins. Warnings abound concerning a future judgment that will take into account both the number (quantity) and the severity (quality) of our sins. Jesus speaks of those who will receive many stripes and those who will receive few; of the comparatively greater judgment that will befall Chorazin and Bethsaida as opposed to the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah; and the greater and lesser degree of rewards that will be distributed to the saints. The apostle Paul warns the Romans against heaping up wrath against the Day of Wrath. These and a host of other passages indicate that God's judgment will be perfectly just, measuring the number, the severity, and the extenuating circumstances that attend all of our sins.

Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.

UNPARDONABLE SIN*, THE Attributing to Satan what is actually the work of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated through Jesus Christ. This sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The unpardonable sin must be defined by its context, which is found in [Matthew 12:31–32](#) and [Mark 3:28–30](#). In these passages, Jesus had just cast a demon from a man who was blind and mute. Incontrovertible evidence of the power of God had just occurred. But the Pharisees, with stubborn unbelief, credited this display of God’s power to Beelzebul, the devil ([Mt 12:24](#)). Several Scriptures reveal that many Jews had expressed the same kind of fallacious opinion, namely, that Jesus was performing miracles by the power of the devil ([Mt 9:34](#); [11:18](#); [Lk 7:33](#); [11:14–20](#); [Jn 7:20](#); [8:48, 52](#); [10:20](#)). A group of Jews, mostly Pharisees, were guilty of attributing to the devil what was the work of the Spirit demonstrated through the Lord Jesus. They committed *the* unpardonable sin when they said that Jesus’ actions, performed by the power of the Holy Spirit, originated from Beelzebul, the devil. Put simply, they sinned grievously by boldly characterizing Jesus’ work as coming from the devil. Interestingly, many Jews perpetuated this false characterization about Jesus long after his death. They did not deny that he did miracles; they said he did miracles by the power of the devil.

What Isn’t the Unpardonable Sin The unpardonable sin is not Israel’s rebellion against God, even though this rebellion resulted in the eternal judgment of thousands and a temporary elimination of God’s blessing. The “sin unto death” mentioned by John ([1 Jn 5:16–17](#)) is not the unpardonable sin. It would be impossible for a person who has redemption and the forgiveness of sin ([Eph 1:7](#)), cleansing for present and future sin ([1 Jn 1:7](#)), and eternal life ([Jn 3:16](#)) to commit an unpardonable sin. But those who commit the “sin unto death” are all Christians. [First John 5:16](#) says the person who commits the “sin unto death” is a “brother” in Christ.

The unpardonable sin is not rejection of the Lord Jesus, until the rejecter dies in his unbelief. Such a sin will not be forgiven throughout eternity, but it is not the same sin as that which Jesus condemned with these words: “Anyone who blasphemes against me, the Son of Man, can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come” ([Mt 12:32](#), [NLT](#)). Numerous passages repeat the warning that unbelief in the Savior results in eternal death ([Jn 3:18, 36](#); [1 Jn 5:12](#); [Rv 20:15](#); [21:8](#)), but these Scriptures do not directly speak of the unpardonable sin. Jesus asserted that a person could be an unbeliever in him, even to the degree of speaking against him, yet not be guilty of the unpardonable sin.