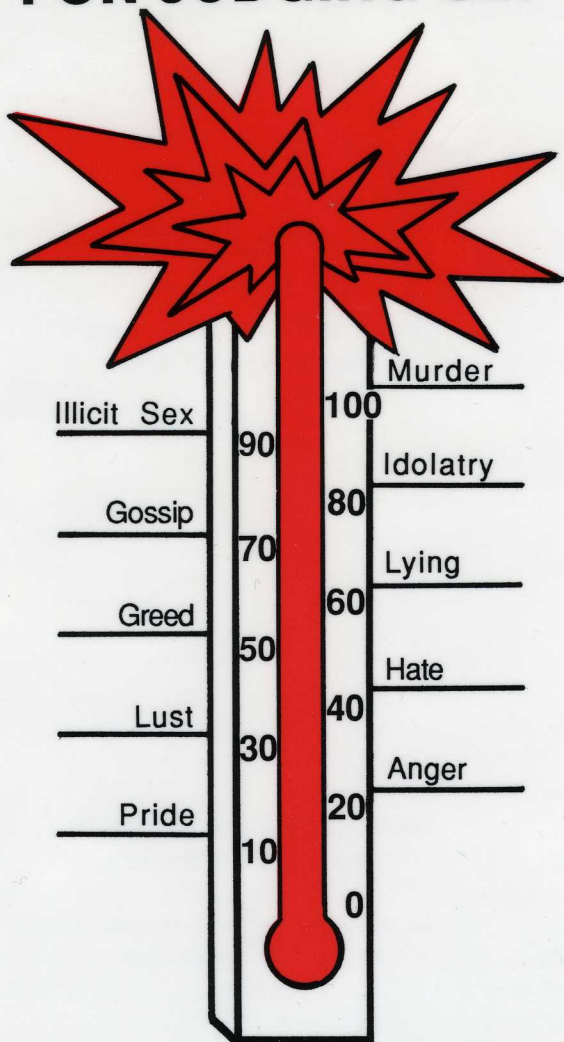


DEGREES OF SIN AND GOD'S CRITERIA FOR JUDGING SIN



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"let the decision stand"

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Stare Decisis is a Latin phrase meaning "let the decision stand." *Stare Decisis* was chosen as the name of the publishing company because the teachings of the Word of God are quickly being discarded by the American society. No longer do the plain teachings of the Word of God stand in the minds of God's people as they once did. Therefore, *Stare Decisis* is committed to publishing only those books which attempt to restore biblical Christianity and align themselves with the truths found in the Holy Scriptures.

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CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>		<i>Page</i>
1	Introduction	4
2	Scripture Passages That Teach Degrees of Sin	8
3	Scripture Passages That Teach Degrees of Judgment	22
4	The Response of the Church to Serious Sin	44
5	A Final Word	59

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is entitled *Degrees of Sin and God's Criteria for Judging Sin*. One might wonder why such a book has been written. The answer is three-fold.

1.) I have the divinely appointed privilege of having been a pastor for eight years. During that time, numerous occasions have arisen where I had a parishoner say to me: "All sins are the same. In God's eyes, there is no difference in sin." This book is written to challenge and hopefully to enlighten all who endorse that position.

2.) In the years that I have been in the gospel ministry, it has been my experience that those who make a statement as mentioned above, or a similar one, usually are the ones who are caught up in a very serious sin. Thus, they make the statement in order to justify their own sinful conduct. By comparing their own sins with the sins of others, they thereupon rationalize that they are not the only ones who are sinning; therefore they are not so bad after all. The interesting thing about such a conclusion is that inevitably the sin of the person making such a statement is far worse than the sin of the person to whom they are comparing themselves. It is always an unfair comparison and any objective outsider would easily see that the sins being compared are not equal. An example of what is being said can be shared to illustrate the point that is being made. I once had a Christian man who was caught up in adultery say to me: "Pastor, if we don't discipline people in the church for smoking or losing their temper, why do we take a stand against adultery

and dismiss people from the church?" In his eyes, this was hypocrisy. But he did not understand that there are degrees of sin. Perhaps the loss of a temper and the smoking of tobacco can be considered sins. But they are not to be compared with the sin of adultery. Adultery is a far worse sin. This book will help clarify just what it is that distinguishes the severity of one sin from another.

3.) This book is for pastors, elders, deacons and all leaders within the local church who must take a stand against sin in its membership. Hopefully, the book will help clarify for all who must make these very difficult decisions—when to discipline and when not to discipline. Certain sins are so serious that they must be dealt with immediately and heavy-handedly. Other sins are not as serious and are to be left to the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit to root out of the life of the believer. All of God's children, no matter how mature in their walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, sin daily. Sanctification is a growth process in which God slowly conforms us to the image of Christ and gradually roots out remaining sin in the life of the believer. This process will not be complete until the day of Jesus Christ. But be sure of this, the church is obligated to hold its members accountable for the more serious sins and exercise discipline if repentance is not sought by the offender.

Several notes of warning are in order at the outset. 1.) This book is not intended in the least to convey that any sin can be taken lightly. All sin is an affront to God. Nor should one think upon reading this book that brownie points can possibly be earned with God through sinning less. One cannot earn his way to heaven through sinning less if for no other reason than his relationship to Adam. All stand condemned in Adam (Rom. 5:12-19), even if it was possible to never sin.

2.) If a scholar should pick up this book and read it, it is not written with him in mind, though I think he could be enlightened and ministered to by reading it. Scholars have many fine works available to them. This book is written for the layman. Most books are written for either the scholar or the layman. Those written for the scholar are too deep for the layman and thus are deemed dull and boring by such; whereas those written for the layman are usually so shallow in theological content that scholars disdain them. Hopefully this book will fall somewhere in between. The scholar will find it to have theological substance and the layman will find it to be meaty, yet understandable. Whatever the case, as a pastor, my heart aches for the layman and my primary thrust in writing this book has been to reach that class of God's chosen people.

I should herein acknowledge those who have helped form my thinking on this topic. First of all, I am indebted to the often-forgotten but faithful scholars of yesteryear, the Puritans and Reformers. Men such as John Owen, John Flavel, Thomas Boston, Martin Luther, John Calvin as well as others have highly influenced my thinking. As well, they have assisted me in my spiritual growth more than any contemporary. To these men, I am greatly indebted.

I am also indebted to Albert Martin, a faithful pastor and excellent preacher, cut from the mold of the Puritans. It was his sermons that first prodded my thinking on this topic. I have incorporated his ideas into some of this book. At the same time, I think I have gone beyond his ideas and further explored and expounded the Word of God in this area of study.

Last but not least, O how I thank God for my dad who has always taken a strong stand against serious sin

in the Body of Christ. His example of faithfulness to Christ in the face of stiff opposition has encouraged me to remain faithful to Christ, no matter what the cost. May God reward him in eternity.

CHAPTER 2

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES THAT TEACH DEGREES OF SIN

The church of Jesus Christ today is stricken with spiritual disease. Leaders and laymen alike seem to be falling into sin on a regular basis. Beyond doubt, much of this can be attributed to the influence of the increasingly sinful society in which the American church exists. Not too many years ago, the church frowned upon divorce, adultery, homosexuality, pre-marital shacking-up, *and* even secular society held worthy moral values in these areas. This is no longer the situation. Due to the influence of a highly liberal media that has access to practically every American's heart and mind via the television, the moral standards of Americans are at an all time low. Sadly, this decadence has infiltrated the ranks of the church. Instead of the church of Jesus Christ transforming the American society through strong preaching from her pulpits and godly living among her members, the reverse has happened. Christians, or those so called, now act and live much like the unsaved world. Holiness is seen as fanaticism and few seem to understand the clear message of Hebrews 12:14, "Make every effort . . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." Such is the sad state of affairs in the American church.

Why has the spiritual life of the American church fallen upon such hard times? I think the answer lies in the fact that we have been hoodwinked! We have been told that "sin is sin" and "everyone sins, including the

Christian." In the right context, such statements may be true enough in and of themselves. But from such statements the false conclusion has been drawn that to judge *any* sin is wrong. Such false teaching has intimidated the Christian community from judging sin at all. As Christians we all know that we fall short of God's holy expectations daily. Therefore, the reasoning goes, "we do not dare judge sin in the life of another person for they can always find fault in us too." Such is the false teaching that has crept into our churches. This has led to very serious sins such as adultery, homosexuality, stealing, gossip, etc . . . going completely unchecked in our churches of today.

Not too long ago, I heard an individual who laid claims to being a Christian, who had also fallen into adultery, make the statement, "you can't categorize sin because God doesn't." I've heard this or similar statements so often that initially I swallowed them hook, line and sinker. Due to my own growth in understanding the teaching of Scripture in recent years, I am now saddened when I hear such a claim. As well, I have heard the statement by professing Christians so often as a cover-up for their own sins that I am nauseated with such excuses. *On the surface*, such a statement seems to be valid and in agreement with the Holy Scriptures. "Is it not true that even one sin is enough to damn an unbelieving soul to hell? How can one then say that some sins are worse than others, when God Himself says that the slightest sin is enough to send one to hell?" Thus is the reasoning of those who see all sin as being equal with no variance of degrees.

However, the Scriptures do plainly teach that God does categorize sin. Some sins are worse than others. Some unbelievers' sins are worse than other

unbelievers' sins and some Christians' sins are worse than other Christians' sins. Not all sins are equal, even though the slightest sin will most certainly send the unbelieving sinner to hell. This is because all sin is a violation of God's own holy character and He is too pure to look upon and thus accept any sin. We will examine many texts that do indeed teach degrees of sin. The texts will be taken chronologically as they appear in the New Testament, simply for the sake of convenience.

Matthew 5:21-22 *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."*¹

In these two verses, Jesus is preaching a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, which comprises all of Chapters 5-7 of the Gospel of Matthew. In this sermon, Jesus is expounding the true meaning of God's moral law as contained in the Ten Commandments. The Jews in Jesus' day had failed to understand that God originally intended His moral law to reach into man's inner being. They saw the law as a set of laws that governed only man's *outward* conduct. As long as they had not physically committed adultery, they were satisfied that they had not violated God's seventh command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). As long as they had not physically killed another person, their conscience was clear of violating the sixth command, "Thou shalt not murder" (Exod. 20:13). In the entire Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is expounding the moral law *fully* to show God's original intent. Originally, God

intended His law to govern not only man's outward conduct, but his inward thoughts, imaginations, ideas and motives.

In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus is teaching that God originally intended His sixth commandment to even control man's emotions. When man fell in the Garden of Eden, his entire being fell under the control of sin. This included his emotions or affections. As a sinner, man now loses his temper or becomes angry inappropriately. And it is plain from this text that Jesus saw some anger as being worse than other types of anger. Jesus says in verse 22 "that anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to judgment." But He further states that if the anger reaches the point of one calling his brother, "Raca," this is a worse sin and will thus be judged more severely—in this case by the Sanhedrin. However, Jesus teaches that one can even sin *worse* through anger by becoming so angry that he calls his brother a "fool." This Jesus says is worse and will therefore subject the angry person to "the dangers of the fire of hell."

According to this passage, is all anger the same? Obviously not. Some anger is worse than other types of anger and thus brings greater punishment on the angered person. In commenting on this passage, Hendriksen says this:

Jesus is teaching just one lesson, a very important one. He is saying that sinful anger—the kind that leads to bitter words—is in its very nature murder. It is murder committed in the heart. Unless he repents, the person with this kind of attitude faces everlasting punishment in hell. Whatever he may be in human eyes, before God he stands condemned and is on his way

to never-ending death. Thus, while the scribes and Pharisees placed the emphasis on the outward deed, as if that alone were reprehensible, Jesus traced the deed to the underlying evil disposition of the heart.

There is, however, another interpretation. In part, it amounts to this: Jesus is saying that for being angry with his brother a man must be sentenced by "a local court"; for doing something *worse*, (emphasis mine) namely, in anger calling his brother a blockhead or a good-for-nothing he must be punished by the supreme court; and, *worst of all*, (emphasis mine) for calling him an idiot he deserves the extreme penalty, everlasting perdition.²

Certainly one can see that Hendriksen clearly believed that Jesus' words implied that there were degrees of anger and thus degrees of sin when angry.

Matthew 7:1-5 *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 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."*

This text is important for two reasons. Not only does it teach degrees of sin as will be shown shortly, but this text is usually the first one cited by those who are

caught up in a serious sin. They will usually say, "don't judge me. The Bible teaches that you aren't suppose to judge me, but love me. Haven't you read Matthew 7?" The author has had this statement made to him on several occasions, one of which was when a young lady was carrying on an affair with a married man. Usually it is made by those who desire the liberty to live and act as they please in the church, without any moral restraints from their Christian brethren. It is a distortion of the teaching of Jesus in these verses as can easily be shown with some reflection upon the text.

For several reasons, Jesus cannot be teaching that all judgment is wrong in the Christian community. Other passages clearly command Christians to judge sin in their midst (I Cor. 5 and 6; Matt. 18:15-18; John 7:24, to list only a few). Also, even this very passage obviously teaches that Christians are to judge. You ask, "how so?" Please notice that Jesus encourages his listeners to "take the plank out of their own eye," but for what purpose? So that they can "then see clearly to remove the speck from their brother's eye." In other words, *so that they can judge clearly and fairly*. You see, Jesus is *not* herein teaching that judgment is wrong. He is teaching that *hypocritical judgment is wrong*. It is OK to judge; it is OK to take the speck out of your brother's eye or the plank for that matter, but one must make sure that he does not have a bigger sin in his own life than the sin that he is judging in the life of his brother. If one has a telephone pole in his own eye, how can he see clearly to remove the toothpick in his brother's eye? The point is he can't, and is thus disqualified from judging fairly. (Maybe it should as well be pointed out that even the very next verse, six, teaches that the Christian is to judge. There Jesus

commands the Christian not to cast his pearls before swine. How can one obey such a directive if he doesn't first make a judgment as to who the swine are?)

The question at hand, though, is does Matthew 7:1-5 teach that there are different degrees of sin? It most certainly does. The very fact that one can have a "plank" in his eye as opposed to a "speck" in his brother's eye, implies degrees of sin. A plank is *bigger* than a speck. It is of a worse degree than a smaller speck. The words of Robertson might be helpful here.

A correct motive in making judgment is crucial to a servant of the King (Matt. 7:1-6). It is necessary to discriminate, but to be hypercritical is wrong. . . . It is wrong to concentrate on the minor problem in your brother's eye while ignoring the major problem distorting your own vision (cf. Gal. 6:1). A self-righteous, hypercritical spirit causes one to ignore his own major faults while occupying himself with the minor faults of others (Luke 18:9; I Cor. 11:28).³

Again the contrast that Robertson makes between *major* and *minor* faults implies that he sees this text as teaching degrees of sin.

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 cummin. 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."*

