

# Mortal and Venial Sins— What Does the Bible Teach?

## Man's View of Sin

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“If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death” (1Jn 5:16-17).

This article is presented to help us develop our understanding of hamartiology (the study of sin) from the perspective of church and church administration. The better we understand what the Bible teaches about sin, the better we will know how to deal redemptively with the sinner.

We will first look at the history of how the church viewed sin, then what the Bible teaches about sin, and finally what our belief and practice should be today.

**First, let us look at the Roman Catholic view of sin.** The following information is taken from the online encyclopedia or from other Catholic sources.

According to Roman Catholicism, - Venial (forgivable) sin is a lesser sin that does not result in a complete separation from God and eternal damnation in Hell as an unrepented of mortal sin would. A venial sin involves a “partial loss of grace” from God. It does not break one’s friendship with God, but injures it.

On the other hand, mortal (deadly) sins are wrongful acts that condemn a person to Hell after death if unforgiven. These sins are considered “mortal” because they constitute a rupture in a person’s link to God’s saving grace: the person’s soul becomes “dead”, not merely weakened. This category of sin is considered to be more severe than a venial sin in that it meets the following conditions:

- Its subject is a grave (or serious) matter.
- It was committed with full knowledge, both of the sin and of the gravity of the offense.
- It was committed with deliberate and complete consent; a personal decision to commit the sin.

Some mortal sins cause automatic excommunication by the very deed itself. The Church through law has made these sins, such as abortion or heresy, crimes to make their gravity realized. The Church also excommunicates so sinners come to repentance quickly when they would not otherwise. Under normal circumstances it is required that a Catholic bishop determine the penance and carry out the forgiveness of a mortal sin. The recent Papal decree is that for the year of mercy (2016) a priest, and not necessarily a bishop, is authorized to forgive abortion.

Mortal sin is called mortal because it is the “spiritual” death (separation from God) of the soul. Having been in the state of grace, a believer loses this spiritual, supernatural life. If one dies without repenting he will lose Him for eternity. However, by turning one’s heart back to Him and receiving the Sacrament of Penance, a

sinner may be restored to His friendship. Catholics are not allowed to receive Communion if they have unconfessed mortal sins.

Each venial sin that one commits adds to the penance that is required. Penance left undone during life converts to punishment in Purgatory. A venial sin can be left unconfessed so long as there is some purpose of amendment. One receives from the sacrament of reconciliation the grace to help overcome venial, as well as mortal sins. It is recommended that confession of venial sins be made. Once venial sins are confessed they require some kind of penance.

In all this, one ought not to take venial sin lightly, especially when committed deliberately. No one without a special grace - according to the Magisterium, given only to the Blessed Virgin Mary - can avoid even semi-deliberate venial sins entirely. But one must, to avoid mortal sins, seek - as far as possible - to overcome venial sins... Although a number of venial sins do not themselves add up to a mortal sin, each venial sin weakens the will further, and the more willing one becomes in allowing such falls, the more one is inclined towards, and will inevitably fall into - if one continues along this path - mortal sin.

These two categories of sin are explicitly to be found in Sacred Scripture. In the Old Covenant there were sins that merited the death penalty and sins that could be expiated by an offering. This Law was a teacher that prepared the way for the faith (Gal. 3:24). In the New Covenant these material categories are replaced by spiritual ones, natural death by eternal death. There are thus daily faults for which we must daily ask forgiveness (Mt. 6:12), for even the "just man falls seven times a day" (Prov. 24:16), and mortal faults that separate the sinner from God (1Cor. 6:9-10) for all eternity.

Sadly, the Roman Catholic view of sin is marked not only by errors in doctrine but also in practice. Its testimony has been greatly marred by documented accounts from history of the wickedness of men of highest office and the present day cover-up of scandals and corruption. There were times in history when merely attending a Protestant church service was considered a mortal sin. These inconsistencies have led to a serious over reaction to what truth does exist in Catholic theology.

**Next we will review the Protestant view of sin.** Again, these statements are all taken from the online encyclopedia or direct quotes from present day scholars and ministers.

The Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther question the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences and view skeptically the notion that a papal pardon rather than penance or genuine contrition can achieve forgiveness of sins. Luther argued that Christians were being falsely told that they could obtain absolution for souls in purgatory by buying indulgences. Nevertheless, Luther continued the practice of confession of sins to a priest for absolution for the rest of his life.

Luther objected to a saying attributed to Johann Tetzel that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory [also attested as 'into heaven'] springs." He insisted that since forgiveness was God's alone to grant, those who claimed that indulgences absolved buyers from all punishments and granted them salvation were in error. Christians, he said, must not slacken in following Christ on account of such false assurances.

The Free Grace Doctrine of our day is parroted by most Protestant theologians. It is distinct from the original position of Luther, but a natural development of it. Its teachings are as follows:

All sins are equal in degree: In relation to eternal life or everlasting death, there are no degrees of sin, all are the same. Man classifies sin as 'little, medium, or big against a holy God. But there is no such thing as 'a little

sin' against a holy God. Sin is big, ugly loathsome, black as the walls of hell. Advocates of this belief may say failure to pray enough for one's brother is no different than another believer's involvement in adultery.

Sins do not affect one's salvation: The Father-son relationship is not broken by sin; only the sweet fellowship is lost by the believer. Sin breaks the communion with the Father, takes away the joy of salvation, and loses much of the reward a Christian might have.

Sins are not imputed to the believer: So when one trusts Christ, he receives forgiveness for all sins. From then on, all sins are charged back to Christ and are not charged against the believer at all. None of the sins of the elect are imputed to them by God; while true believers still sin and they must fight against sin all their lives, the sin is not 'counted' or 'imputed.'

The believer's sins are already forgiven for the past, present, and future: God's plan of redemption includes salvation, both from past sins and all that come after salvation; that is, sins committed before the new birth and those committed after it. When the believer sins, he is still safe, because his sins are charged against the One who took his place under the law and met all its demands against him.

**Finally, we will consider the Mennonite/Anabaptist view of sin.** Sadly, from the little that one can find written on this subject, one might conclude we have some gaps between our theology and practice. Anabaptists tend to believe like the Protestants while their administration in church life in some ways reflects Catholic theology.

From *Doctrines of the Bible* - "When God says one thing and we do another, the thing which estranges us from God is that we were disobedient to Him, not necessarily the vileness of the sin committed. Let us not, therefore, console ourselves with the thought that our sins do not seem as black as those of some other people; but when we find ourselves to be guilty of sin, even though it may seem but a very little thing, it is nevertheless big enough to estrange us from our God, and the only way we can possibly get rid of the stigma of sin and its results is through repentance and by the grace of God through the atoning merits of the blood of Jesus Christ... The thing that separates us from God is SIN, not sins...

From *The Shorter Catechism* in the *Minister's Manual* compiled and published in 1890. *Question:* If a member of the church falls into some sin, or misdeed, what is to be done in such a case?

*Answer:* I confess by virtue of the doctrine of Christ and his apostles, that reproof and discipline must be fostered and maintained amongst believers; so that the headstrong, as well as such as have committed gross sins and works of the flesh—whereby they have separated themselves from God—may not be suffered in the communion of believers; but for their own amendment, be "rebuked before all, that others also may fear." Matt 18:15-18; Isa 59:2; 1Tim 5:20.

From our *Decrees* - "Confession of sin shall be made personally to God. The Scriptures also teach that we should freely confess our failures to each other. Inasmuch as sin influences the lives of other individuals and also brings reproach upon the name of Christ, the church holds that where individual relationships and influence are involved, the involved persons should make suitable confession one to another and in the church when necessary to acquire peace in accordance with the teaching of Matt. 5:23,24; 18:15-20. 1Tim. 5:20 "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Sins such as fornication, adultery and other immoral involvements, drunkenness, substance abuse, persistent worldliness and pleasure seeking shall be

confessed publicly in accordance with the principles of such Scriptures as Josh. 7:19; Acts 5:1-11 and Pro. 28:13.

In summary, the Mennonite church has not taught “mortal” and “venial” sins; in fact many church leaders and members believe that all sins are the same. Then in practice we indicate that we see a great difference in sins. Some sins are not brought to the brotherhood at all. Other sins we require to be confessed publicly but have not excommunicated for. Gross sins have brought immediate excommunication on the part of the offender. Have we over reacted to the error of a human priesthood, confession, penance and purgatory, and therefore failed to develop a consistent response to sin?

And so our people are often confused by our responses to sin. Sometimes we excommunicate a very penitent sinner if he was guilty of “gross” sins. Our people may wonder, “Why was the action taken?” In some settings, the ministry may decree members to stay back from communion for some unknown sin; and the congregation is not informed why this action is taken, while sins of severe moral gravity are seemingly passed over lightly.

We’ve now touched on the views of mortal and venial sins of three different church groups. We want to adopt God’s view of sin, so now we will be looking at “What the Bible says about sin.”

## What Does the Bible Teach About Sin?

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What should our doctrine and practice be?

First, let us always remember, “All unrighteousness is sin” (1Jn 5:17). We dare not treat disobedience to God in a light manner. Jesus did not die on the cross so we could have a light or careless attitude toward sin. In fact, His death should make us feel our sins even more deeply.

However, there is a difference in sins, a very great difference in sins, and the way we respond to sin in our membership must reflect this difference. “There is a sin unto death and there is sin not unto death” (1Jo 5:16).

Let us first look at sins not unto death. There is sin that charity will cover or hide the knowledge of (1Pet 4:8). There are sins the disciple is to put off or put away in his daily walk (Eph 4:22-32). Paul felt the fact that no one stood with him at his trial represented fault on the part of believers, but he prayed God would not lay this to the absent brothers’ account (1 Tim 4:16). We will need to be forbearing one with another for many of the small things we notice in each other’s lives.

On the other end of the spectrum there is sin that is unto death. These sins must come under the judgment of the church to be either remitted (sent away) or else, depending upon the attitude of the offender, retained (Jo 20:23). These are sins that are to be rebuked before all so others may fear (1Tim 5:20). We have several parallel passages that identify a list of serious sins, sins unto death (1Cor 5:11, 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; and Eph 5:3-7). (See also Matt 18:17 and Rev 21:8 and 22:15). These sins:

- Should not be once named among us (Eph 5:3-5).
- Bring the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience (Eph 5:6). They which do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor 6:9-10 and Gal 5:19-21). It is obvious the act or commitment of

a sin must be judged more severely than the thought. (We acknowledge that the thought paves the way to the act.)

- Constitute grounds for forbidding from the communion table (1 Cor 5:11, Eph 5:7). If one should not be in communing relations because of a sin unto death, it is consistent that his membership be terminated.
- Must be forgiven. When the immoral brother in the Corinthian church had repented and the church had judged the sin, there came a time when the punishment was to be considered sufficient. Then the brother was to be restored to fellowship (2Cor 2:6). This implies there would have been a time when restoring him would have been premature. The church needs to judge righteous judgment.

Perhaps a word ought to be said here about the difference between forgiveness and trust. When a person's sin comes to light and he asks for forgiveness, we are required to forgive. Failing to forgive is in itself sin on our part. We release the offender and place all justice into the hands of the Almighty. But trust is a different issue. When a person who has been trusted breaks that trust, it will take considerable time for that trust to be regained. It is true that some trust has to be extended. It is also true that a good bit of the trust will need to be earned. A person who has committed a sin unto death has a large debt to his family and his church that needs to be repaid. Since communion is about relationships and since relationships are based on trust, it is only right that membership and communion privileges be withheld until the trust is restored.

One integral part of rebuilding trust is giving evidence of godly sorrow. All exposed sinners are sorry. Some are sorry for how they look to the world. The loss of reputation is huge. The stigma and shame are almost unbearable. Emotions are affected. But the person can still have a self-centered sorrow, and if the sorrow is all about self then self will return to sinful self-gratification. Other exposed sinners are truly sorry for how they look to God. Each type of sorrow has its expressions and will become generally recognized by those close to them in life. Restoration into the church should be dependent upon trust rebuilt by evidences of godly sorrow.

There is another aspect of mortal sins that should be addressed. Sometimes people have a stain of such a sin on their conscience and they have never done anything about it. Perhaps it was a single involvement in fornication years ago or going to a palm reader or another of these sins unto death. They have been able to outwardly live as though everything is normal, but inwardly the memory still haunts them. Satan whispers, "But what will people think?"

As a church we should make it clear there is only one way to deal with these things. Go straight to your minister or bishop. Confess it all in all its sordidness. Let the church help you deal with it. You will be blessed with the new found freedom possible only through transparency in Christ. Of course there are complications when sins are brought to light, but it is God's way. The worst coping method is to just act like it didn't happen. If treated in this way, a long ago sin unto death will haunt a person through all time and all eternity.

Church leader, if a member comes to you with their conscience burdened with one of these sins, do not treat it in a trivial manner. Share with the rest of your ministerial team. It may be the most benevolent response for your struggling church member if you take this sin to the church and follow the process of excommunication and restoration. Painful? Of course. Healing? Absolutely. It is God's method.

In evaluating sin, there is another category that seems somewhat by itself. The church may not always be able to discern and judge it, but it will keep someone out of heaven. That is an unforgiving attitude toward

wrongs that have been committed. Jesus made it plain that holding a grudge will keep one from finding God's forgiveness; thus each of us should give this issue grave consideration (Matt 6:15; 18:35).

### In conclusion:

- There are elements of truth in the Catholic view of mortal and venial sins and the forgiveness thereof that have Scriptural support. Penance, Purgatory, and Indulgences are clearly of human origin and in error.
- There is an element of truth in Protestant doctrine. Only Jesus is the mediator of our sin. Faith in Christ's atoning work is our only salvation. While the church may fill a role in dealing with sin, it cannot go beyond the bounds of Scripture. However, the prevailing doctrines of free grace and unconditional eternal security turn the grace of God into lasciviousness (Ju 1:4).
- We should have an appreciation for a Mennonite tradition that made a difference in judging sin, even if it did not explain why it did so.
- Some sins must be dealt with by the church and in the assembly. If these sins remain unconfessed they will keep one forever from the bliss of heaven (Rev 21:8; 22:15).
- Some sins are cleansed by personal confession to Christ (1Jn 1:9). Each disciple should be encouraged to maintain a close walk with God, through Bible reading and prayer, to maintain a sensitive and clear conscience.

May God help us be a pure body, consistently judging the sin in our own lives and in our churches, so we will not be judged with the world.

~Steve Ebersole