

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 40—Sin is Heinous by Degrees, Q. 83

- I. What is meant by the *heinousness* of sin?
- A. To be *heinous* is to be *offensive*; so that to consider the heinousness of *sin*—which is *transgression of the Law of God* (1Jn 3.4), is to consider its *offensiveness to God*, Hab 1.13. Thus, the heinousness of sin is not to be gathered from man’s judgment, but from God’s (cp. Ex 31.14; 35.2, re: the Sabbath).
- B. Sin is *offensive* to God:
1. Being contrary to His nature (as holy) and will (for righteousness), it (anthropomorphically) displeases Him, grieves His Spirit, and provokes His hatred, Isa 1.13-16; Jer 44.4-6.
 2. It provokes His loathing and disgust, like bile in the mouth and smoke in the eyes, Rev 3.15-16; Isa 65.2-5.
- II. All sin is heinous in the sight of God, *but not* to the same degree.
- A. There’s *no sin* that God is indifferent about, *none* that He can pass by without putting a mark of His indignation on it, Ex 34.7; cp. Lk 16.15.
- B. There’s no such thing as a small sin before God. The least sin is great in His sight, Ps 5.4-5 (“all”).
- C. *Yet, there are degrees* of heinousness as some sins are greater than others, Ezk 8; Mt 7.1-5; 23.23-24.
- III. Sins vary in heinousness both from their *nature* and their *aggravations*.
- A. Some sins are more heinous *by nature*, such as idolatry, which provokes the Lord to jealousy (Ezk 8.3; 1Kgs 14.9; Jer 8.19), or rejection of Christ, which provokes the Lord to judgment (Mt 10.14; 24.2), or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mk 3.28-29).
- B. Some sins are more heinous than others by reason of *aggravating circumstances*.¹
1. To *aggravate* a sin is to add to its natural weight by circumstances which increase the evil and therefore offensiveness of it (cf. **WLC 151**). Sin is aggravated by:
 - a) The person offending, 1Kgs 11.9; Jer 2.8; Rom 2.21; Lk 12.47-48. The more notable the person, the more heinous his sins. The same sin is greater in magistrates, ministers, parents, and the learned, than it is in subjects, members, children, and the ignorant.
 - b) The person offended, 1Sam 2.25; Acts 5.4. A sin more directly against God or His worship is more heinous than a sin more directly against man and his substance, Mt 26.24; Ps 51.4. A sin against superiors in the family, church, or state is more heinous than against one’s fellow-man, Pr 30.17. A sin against a fellow disciple is more heinous than against an outsider, Mt 18.6.
 - c) The nature and quality of the offense. Sins have both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities which can affect their degree of offensiveness.
 - (1) *Intrinsically*. Some sins are against the spirit of the law and others against the letter. Some sins are mother-sins which bring in many others with it, as compared to single sins. Some sins are scandalous, others are not (1Cor 5). Some are committed in the heart, and others in the life (Mic 2.1).
 - (2) *Extrinsically*. Some sins are committed against the means provided to avoid it (Mt 11.21-22) while others are not. Some sins are against vows (Mal 2.14). Some sins are done deliberately, willfully, and presumptuously (Ex 5.2; Dt 29.18-21).
 - d) The circumstances of time and place, Isa 1.10-16; Ezk 8; 2Kgs 5.26; Jer 7.10. Sins committed on the Lord’s Day and in the Lord’s house or following worship are worse than those committed otherwise, Ezk 23.37-39. And those committed publicly are worse than those committed privately, 2Sam 16.22; 1Sam 2.22-24.

¹ I highly recommend Thomas Goodwin’s three treatises on the *Aggravation of Sin* in Vol. 4 of his Works.
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Inferences

- I. Never think lightly of sin and its sinfulness, nor slightly of Christ and your need of Him.² All sin is heinous and odious to God and can only be forgiven and cleansed by the saving work and blood of Christ, Isa 53.6; 1Jn 1.7.
- II. Since there are degrees of sinning, there will be degrees of torment in hell, Mt 11.21. And yet the least is dreadful and terrible.
- III. Is it any wonder when God is greatly provoked by the sins of superiors? As their sins are worse than others, so they are more offensive to God and, unless cut off by repentance, will bring greater judgments upon the land, the church, the family, Jer 8.8-12.
- IV. Consider the great offense of sinning against the means of grace! The greater the light and knowledge and mercy and means provided for holiness, the greater the heinousness of our sins against it.
- V. When we are convicted of sin and go to the Lord in repentance, we need to consider all the aggravations of our sins and let them increasingly humble us.
 - A. Meditate on WLC 151 and its Scripture proofs until it makes an indelible impression on your heart.
 - B. What does it mean that the “circumstances [of sin] lie heavier on the soul than the act” (Goodwin)?
- VI. Though some sins are more heinous than others, yet no sinner should absolutely despair of mercy, for just as the vilest have been pardoned, so will you be if you repent and fly to Christ, 1Cor 6.11; 1Tim 1.13-16. And if you’re a greater sinner than others who’s been pardoned more than others, then see that your love for Christ abounds more than others, Lk 7.41-47.

² I highly recommend: *The Sinfulness of Sin*, Ralph Venning and *The Evil of Evils*, Jeremiah Burroughs.
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