

Dear Fr. Kerper

What is the difference between mortal and venial sins?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** I was told years ago that there are two kinds of sins, mortal and venial. I don't understand how a loving God could impose eternal death on a person for committing a so-called mortal sin. How can we reconcile God's mercy with a spiritual death penalty? If these sins are so deadly, why can't I find a list? And what exactly is the difference between mortal and venial sins?

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail dearfrkerper@parablemag.com.

Thanks for your question, which shows that you have grasped the core teaching of Christ's Gospel: that God loves us, forgives all sin, and passionately desires that all people be saved. Moreover, you are right on target when you wonder how "a spiritual death penalty" can come from God who is infinite love.

To begin with, we have to understand that God does *not* impose the "mortal" penalty as a vengeful punishment of a specific sin. Rather, a grave sin generates its own lethal consequences. As such, the "death penalty" does not come from God but from the sin itself.

Let's think about traffic signs. You've probably seen those big signs on highway entrances that scream: "Wrong Way. Do Not Enter." If you ignore the warning, drive down the wrong ramp at 50 miles per hour, and collide head on with a 16-wheeler, you will likely experience a "mortal penalty." To complain that the civil authority, which erected the sign, cruelly and unfairly executed you for simply violating a rule would be silly. After all, the death resulted from the head-on collision, which in turn happened because you made a free and conscious decision to ignore the sign.

To put it another way, the designation of that act – driving the wrong way on the ramp – as illegal is not what kills the violator. Rather, the act was made illegal precisely because it is always potentially deadly.

Catholic tradition identifies some specific sinful acts as "mortal" because they "kill" a person's life-giving relationship with God. Note well: God does not withdraw from the relationship with the sinner; instead, the sinner freely and knowingly pulls away from God by choosing the sin. In a sense, the sinner commits spiritual suicide. God is no vindictive executioner.

As to a list of definite mortal sins, no such list exists because no specific sinful act is *automatically* mortal. Three conditions must always be met. First, the act must be seriously wrong, such as a grave violation of God's moral law, especially as expressed in the Ten Commandments. Second, the sinner must know that such deeds are wrong. Third, the sinner must freely consent to the act. If any condition is absent, the act, even though gravely wrong in itself, is not a true mortal sin.

Gravely wrong acts include intentionally killing the innocent, lying under oath, worshipping idols, adultery, assisted suicide, abandoning needy parents, destroying a person's reputation, desecrating the Eucharist, and blasphemy against

the Holy Spirit, which means obstinately refusing God's forgiveness. Each of these acts radically contradicts Divine Love and necessarily turns the sinner away from God, the source and sustainer of life.

Now, let's consider *venial* sins. Venial comes from the Latin word *venia*, which means pardon, forgiveness or remission of debt. These sins, though surely bad, do not "kill" the sinner because they do not turn a person completely away from God.

Some venial sins might be called "defective mortal sins," namely gravely sinful acts committed without proper knowledge or consent. For example, a youngster who removes the Eucharist from his mouth and drops it on the floor because he fears germs or choking commits an objective act of desecration, but his lack of understanding and genuine fear prevent this from being a true mortal sin. However, if an adult commits the same act with full knowledge and the intention of showing contempt for the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, the "moral quality" of that person's act differs significantly. Surely, it should be treated as a mortal sin.

Other venial sins are slight, careless, or habitual failings and violations of God's moral law, such as lies of convenience or exaggeration, frivolous gossip, mild laziness, petty theft, and casual irreverence in church.

Thinking again about traffic regulations will help here. Venial sins are akin to going 76 in a 65 zone or parking illegally for 10 minutes. Though both actions violate the law and are wrong, neither is as mortally dangerous as ignoring the "Wrong Way. Do Not Enter" sign on the highway ramp.

Though the distinction between mortal and venial sins, which comes from Scripture and the tradition of the Church, is certainly helpful, we should never use it to discover "what we can get away with." Such an approach misses the point. As creatures made in the image and likeness of God and empowered by God's abundant grace to lead good and holy lives, we should always avoid every act – whether large or small – that prevents us from being what God intends us to be. We never find true happiness in sin, but only in goodness.

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