

“A Sin that Leads to Death” (An Exposition of 1 John 5:16-17)¹

Introduction

In the previous passage that we looked at last Lord's day (v.14-15) the Apostle John taught us about the believer's confidence toward God in prayer. And one of the most important aspects of such confidence is that *we must ask for things that are in accord with the will of God.*

In v.14 John tells us, **“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that *if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.*”** And he makes clear in v.15 that to say that God *hears* us means that He actually *answers* us in such a way that **“we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”**

Now in our text this morning John gives us *a specific example* of praying according to the will of God, and it is likely that this example was *not* chosen randomly or arbitrarily. In fact, it may be that this example is the very reason why he brought up the topic of prayer in the first place.² Here John instructs us about praying for a brother (or sister) who is caught up in sin of some kind.

In v.16 he writes:

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and *God* [lit. “*he*”] will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.”

This is one of the more difficult and perplexing passages in the entire New Testament. Commentators are more than a little divided over what John means when he speaks of a distinction between **“a sin not leading to death”** and a **“sin that leads to death.”** *What is a sin that leads to death?* We will have to address that at least briefly this morning, although we cannot promise to answer every question that you may have about it.

Praying for One Another

Perhaps the first thing that we should take note of in our text is *our duty as Christians to pray for one another*. The confidence that we are meant to have toward God in prayer should not lead to a self-centered prayer life, but rather to a regular habit of *praying for one another*. John Stott writes:

“Having written generally of answered prayer (14–15), John now gives a specific illustration and a limitation (16–17). It is not now a case of petition, but of intercession. The assurance of eternal life which the Christian should enjoy (13) ought not to lead him into a preoccupation with himself to the neglect of others. On the contrary, he will recognize his duty in love to care for his brother or sister in need, whether the need which he ‘sees’ be material (as in 3:17–18) or, as here, spiritual: *if anyone sees his brother commit a sin*. He cannot say ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ and do nothing.”³

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² See I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT), p.245

³ *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p.185.

Notice that we are not only to pray about each other's *material* needs or physical health, but also about each other's *spiritual* needs as well. We are not only to pray about each other's infirmities and sufferings, but also about each other's *sins*.

We rightly pray for those in the church who struggle under the weight of sickness and disease, such as cancer, but we should be just as concerned with each other's *spiritual health*, as sin is every bit as dangerous as sickness, and it too leads to death. In Romans 6:23 Paul tells us that **“the wages of sin is death.”** And in Romans 8:13–14 he goes on to say:

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

Now this duty of praying for each other, even regarding sin, does not mean that we should be on the lookout for the sins and shortcomings of other believers. Every one of us has more than enough of *our own sins and shortcomings* to be mindful of, don't we? And our Lord Jesus warned us about worrying about the **“speck”** in our brother's eye when we have a **“log”** in our own (Matthew 7:3-5).

But if we happen to see or notice a fellow believer falling into sin of some kind, our immediate response should be to *pray for them*. Not gossip, not expressing “prayer concerns” with others in a way that is tantamount to gossip, but prayer.

And what does John say will happen if we pray for each other this way? He says, **“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God [lit. “he”] will give him life”** This may speak of *restoration* or it may speak of *physical healing*. But either way God is well-pleased to hear & answer such prayer.

Sinning Unto Death

This brings us to the difficult portion of our text – what does John mean when he speaks of sinning unto death or committing sin that leads to death? I wish that I could give you an easy answer to this question. Frankly, commentators are widely divided on this issue, and many of the suggested answers seem to have difficulties of their own.

What kind of sin is this? And what does it mean that it *leads to death*? What kind of death – physical or spiritual death? (And so what kind of life is given in answer to this prayer for the sinning brother – physical or spiritual life?)

Some suggest that this sin is some kind of *heinous, scandalous sin* that is unrepented of, the kind that leads to church discipline and excommunication. Others suggest that this may be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is said to be *the unforgivable sin* (Matthew 12:31-32).

Others suggest that this sin is that of *apostasy*, which is certainly something that John deals with earlier in this letter, when he speaks of false teachers as antichrists who went out from us (departed from the faith and from the church) because they were never really of us (2:18-19). This suggestion certainly has merit in that it fits well with what John has said elsewhere in the letter.

There is another possibility, and that is that John is speaking of *physical death as a severe chastisement* from God for a serious sin of some kind. This may in fact be the simplest option.

First, the Scriptures give us numerous examples of sin leading to sickness and even death as a form of chastisement from God. While this certainly does not mean that we can or should assume that most sicknesses or serious illnesses are the result of sin, it is clear that this does happen.

Think of God's dealings with *Ananias & Sapphira* in Acts 5:1-11. They were struck down by the Lord in the presence of the Apostles for lying to the Holy Spirit and for their sin against the purity and peace of the church in a time of severe need.

Think of Paul's words about the *abuses of the Lord's Supper* in the church at Corinth! In 1 Corinthians 11:27–32 he writes:

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. *That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.* But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”

The Scriptures tell us that *judgment begins with the household of God* (1 Peter 4:17), and this includes even things such as this. And the Apostle James also brings up the subject of sin, sickness, and prayer. In James 5:13–16 he tells us:

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

And so there is the possibility that seeing a brother sinning a sin that leads to death simply means that the brother in question has, in fact, already died. This would mean, as one commentator puts it, that Paul is essentially telling us not to pray for the dead.

Having said all of that, it must be said that none of these possible views is without difficulties. None of them really settles every question that we may have. John simply does not explain in any detail what he means by a sin that leads to death; he expected the churches in his day to which he first wrote these words to clearly understand what he was referring to – and they most likely did.

But it may just be that there are some limitations for the time being, of what we are able to understand when it comes to these verses, and more study (and prayer) is needed.

Lessons to Learn

Despite the limitations of our understanding in this matter, there are a number of *lessons that we should learn* from what is abundantly clear from this passage. After all, John's point is to get us to pray for one another, not to get us bogged down in speculative questions for their own sake.

First, *all sins are not equal*. While all sins are worthy of condemnation and Hell for those outside of Christ, some sins are more heinous than others. Not all sins are such that they lead to death. Not all sins bring upon us severe chastisement from our Heavenly Father.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* teaches this as well:

“Q. 83. Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous?

A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.”

This is something that needs to be clearly understood and upheld in our day, when many seek to downplay the heinousness of the sin of sexual perversion by making all sins equally heinous, falsely equating a sin like gluttony (for example) to sodomy.

Second, as we have seen already, *our heavenly Father at times chastises His children for our sin*. This is not condemnation, but loving discipline which is meant for our good. Hebrews 12:4–11 tells us:

“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”

**“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.**

**For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”**

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

God disciplines us and chastises us at times, when necessary, for our good. It is a sure sign of His love for us, and should even strengthen our assurance in a strange way!

Last but not least, *we should be encouraged to pray for one another*, even regarding sin and sanctification. After all, that is John's main point here in our text, isn't it? James Montgomery Boice writes:

“The difficulty with a discussion such as this is that it becomes strangely fascinating to certain Christians, so much so that they tend to spend all their time on the exception (the sin unto death) and not on the central message of the passage. Whatever the interpretation we give to the exception, therefore, we must always bear in mind that it is the exception, and that the burden laid upon us by John is to pray for any believer whom we see falling into sin.”⁴

How do we respond to the sins of our brothers and sisters in the church? With gossip? With condemnation and pride? Or with mercy and prayer? Even our necessary admonition and discipline should be carried out with love and concern for our sinning brother, and therefore *with much prayer*.

F.F. Bruce writes:

“The intercession of a fellow Christian may be a most effective means of inducing repentance and reliance on the promise given earlier in this letter: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).”⁵

And so let us pray for one another, trusting in the promise of God to hear and answer, even in such a way as to **'give life'** to one who is caught up in sin. To the glory of His grace. - Amen

⁵ F. F. Bruce, [*The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes*](#) (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2018), 125.