

SIN AND DEATH...AND GRACE
1 JOHN 5:16-17

I was listening to a couple of interviews of some pastors and counselors recently and the interviewer asked two different panels a question that I have asked others a great many times: “what do you think is the greatest need or problem in the church today?” There are many different answers that have been offered to that question, but as I thought about it again, I was reminded of how G. K. Chesterton responded in a similar situation. One morning he opened his newspaper to find an editorial that posed the question, “What’s wrong with the world?” Having an opinion, Chesterton penned this response:

Dear Sirs:

I am.

Sincerely yours,

G. K. Chesterton

With that brief response, he summarized well the reality of his own sinful condition and its influence on the world around him. We are all sinners, and there are implications of that sin on others. But there are also implications of that sin for us as well. Paul says in Romans that the wages of sin is death. So, since we are sinners, we die. That’s what we deserve. But having believed in the gospel of Christ, we now we have been freed from the condemnation of death. And then we read stories like the one of Ananias and Sapphira and John’s words in 1 John that there is a “sin unto death,” and we wonder again about our sin and God’s judgment and whether we have any hope.

Over the months we have been studying 1 John, I have said repeatedly that this book is not difficult to understand — the reason most people struggle with this book is that its meaning is “too plain” — we understand very well what it means and the implications are troubling to us (because we are living differently than the standard we’ve been called to by Christ).

This morning we are considering the one portion of this book that is the exception to the rule. Verses 16-17 in chapter five are without question the most debated and difficult to understand. I’ve come up with a list of 10 questions that need to be answered before these verses can be properly understood (and I’m not sure I’ve asked all the questions that need answering, either). And many good men have disagreed over the answers to those questions and the interpretation of these verses; in fact, this week I changed my interpretation of these verses, though many of the implications are still the same.

These verses are essentially about three things: prayer, sin, and death. And then over those three items is the grace of God. So I’ve summarized the verse this way:

To see how I get there, I want to do something a little different this morning. I am going to ask and answer four questions about these two verses. Then I will summarize the meaning of the verses. And then I will help us think through five implications of these verses on our lives. In a sense, the sermon this morning will serve as something of a “how to study and understand your Bible” session.

1. Questions That Need Answering

- ✓ What is the meaning of “brother?”
- ✓ What is the meaning of “life” and “death?”
- ✓ What does “committing a sin” mean?
- ✓ What is the relationship between these verses and vv. 14-15?

2. A Summary Meaning of these Verses

3. Implications of This Passage for Both Sinners and Petitioners

- ✓ When we see people sinning, we must go and we must pray
- ✓ Every sin is serious
- ✓ Confession and forgiveness is available for every sin
- ✓ If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ (or if your pattern of ongoing sin suggests you are not in Jesus Christ), you are in a precarious place.
- ✓ The believer *can* remain confident of his salvation and security

1. Questions That Need Answering

- What is the meaning of **brother**? (v. 16)
 - ✓ That seems to be a self-evident question — **brothers** have the same Father; so in the NT that generally means people who are believers in Christ (e.g., 2:10; 3:13, 14, 16; 4:21).
 - ✓ However, John uses the term more broadly than that in 1 John (2:9, 11; 3:10, 15, 17; 4:20).
 - ✓ While he doesn't use the term **brother** in 2:19, he is talking about those who were part of the church, identified with the people in the church and who left the church as evidence that while they purported to be "brothers" they were, in fact, not brothers.
 - ✓ As you examine the way John uses **brother** in this book, it is used more often of people who give the appearance of being believers in Christ, but who in fact, are not brothers.
 - ✓ So, while it can't be said dogmatically that **brothers** in verse 16 refers to "supposed" believers, it is at least possible and perhaps probable that is what is meant.
- What is the meaning of **life** and **death**?
 - ✓ In these two verses, John refers once to life and three times to death. But is John speaking about physical life and death, or spiritual life and death?
 - ✓ John uses **life** nine more times in this letter. Once he uses it as a title of Christ — the **Word of Life** (1:1) and six times, he uses it with the word **eternal** — **eternal life** (1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20). And five more times it is clear that he is talking about spiritual life (1:2; 3:14; 5:11, 12).
 - ✓ So it seems clear the most logical thing for John to be talking about in this verse is eternal life (not physical life) — the gift that God gives to those who are in continual sin is eternal life. And if that's true, it would be very odd for **brother** to be anything other than an unbeliever, because God can't **give** eternal **life** to someone who is already a believer (v. 16).
 - ✓ The word **death** is only used here and in 3:14, but it is clear that in 3:14 it is a contrast to eternal life, so he isn't speaking of physical death, but spiritual death. And since **life** in v. 16 is almost certainly spiritual life, it would be very unusual for John to speak of spiritual life and physical death — either they are both spiritual or both physical. I believe that both **life** and **death** in these verses are references to eternal and spiritual **life** and **death**.
 - ✓ One common interpretation of this verse is that John is speaking of a believer who sins to the point that God punishes him with physical death (like Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5), though he doesn't lose his salvation. While that may be possible, I don't think that is the best interpretation based on the meaning of John's words in this verse (though I held that view until this week); it is best to understand this as a "supposed" believer, who is in fact not a believer.

- What does *committing a sin...sin not unto death* mean?
 - ✓ Read most literally, the words here should be translated, “sinning (pres. tense) sin.”
 - ✓ There are at least half a dozen ways that has been interpreted:
 - It is some specific sin — *a sin*; some have suggested that John has some specific sin that has been committed that invites the judgment of God and that cannot be forgiven. So, murder and adultery have been suggested as these unforgiveable sins; I know of at least one person who on his deathbed was convinced that his divorce fit that category. And this is one of the places that the Roman Catholic church has suggested the distinction between “mortal” (emphasizing the phrase *unto death*) and “venial” sins. And while the NT does teach that different sins have different magnitude and impact (e.g., Mt. 10:15; 11:22, 24), Scripture teaches that *every* sin is enough to condemn us (Rom. 6:23; **Js. 2:10**). However, it also teaches that no sin is beyond God’s forgiveness (1 Tim. 1:15). And the word “a” doesn’t exist in the Greek NT; John says, “sinning sin” — i.e., he is being non-specific about the kinds of sins that are being committed. John is emphasizing the perpetual nature of the sin.
 - It is the sin of *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* (Mt. 12:22-32; Mk. 3:29). However, a close examination of those passages reveals that sin as something else: *blasphemy of the Holy Spirit* was to attribute the earthly work of Christ during His first advent — things He did under the power of the Holy Spirit — to the work of Satan (**Mk. 3:22, 29**). That was a sin that could not be replicated after Christ’s crucifixion, so John cannot be referring to it.
 - It is the sin of apostasy — a believer who sins habitually and ultimately denies Christ. But John has clearly taught that a believer does not live an ongoing life of sin; he may have struggles with sin and face temptations every day and he may lose more often than he wins, but a genuine believer cannot stay in that persistent pattern of sin (3:4-6, 9). In the Ephesian church there *were* some who had claimed to be Christians and then rejected Christ; but John doesn’t say they apostatized; he said they left the church because they were never part of it (2:19). So John can’t be talking about apostasy.
 - It is a sin that is committed on an ongoing basis, but it does not result in a hardening of the heart from which one cannot repent and change. John uses the phrase, *sin not unto death*, and *sin unto death*. The word *unto* has the idea of moving towards something, so here there is a kind of sin that moves someone toward spiritual death and a sin that does not move one toward ultimate spiritual death. How does sin not result in ultimate death? Sin (which is always worthy of death) avoids death when it is confessed and repented (1:7b, 9; 2:1-2; 3:5). So a sin *not unto death* refers to the idea that someone might yet repent of that sin (because of the grace of God who withholds the judgment of death [**17b**; 2:1-2; 3:4-5, 8]); but a *sin unto death* is a sin in which one has so hardened himself that he will not ever confess and repent (**1 Tim 4:2**; cf. also 2 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 3:13, 15; 4:7).

"The sin that leads to death is unforgiven and remains unforgiven because it refuses to appropriate the gracious means of pardon which God has provided....It is possible to close the heart against the influences of God's Spirit so obstinately and persistently that repentance becomes a moral impossibility." [Jackman, 165]

Perhaps an example of that is of the atheist Christopher Hitchens who, "himself said in the last year or so of his life, any expression of faith which might issue from his dying body...would not be coming from a Christopher Hitchens that Christopher Hitchens would recognise: 'The entity making such a remark might be a raving, terrified person whose cancer has spread to the brain. I can't guarantee that such an entity wouldn't make such a ridiculous remark. But no one recognisable as myself would ever make such a ridiculous remark.'" [[*"Christopher Hitchens, an atheist in a foxhole."*](#)]

- Summary: The one who **commits a sin** is someone who claims to be a believer, but is not a believer. He professes Christ without possessing Christ. He is actually an unsaved man who demonstrates that he is an unbeliever by his life of ongoing sin. And some of those get to the point where they are hardened so that they will not ever repent.
- What is the relationship between these verses and vv. 14-15?
 - ✓ Verses 14-15 are about the prayer life of the believer — because we are sure of our salvation, we are also sure of our prayer life. And these verses are about the effectiveness of a particular kind of prayer — the prayers we pray for those who are ensnared in sin — **he shall ask and God will for him give life...** (v. 16a).
 - ✓ So John is saying that because we have assurance that God hears our prayers, we should intercede in prayer for others (we should not just pray for ourselves). And specifically, we should pray for the repentance of sinners. This sounds like Paul (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:2-6).
 - ✓ In the midst of all the questions about what **sin** and **death** mean, don't miss John's primary point — "you've been given the privilege of prayer; use it well!"
 - ✓ There is a time when we don't have to pray — concerning the **sin leading to death**, John says, **I do not say that he should** [has to] **make a request for this**. That is, when someone has completely hardened his heart to God, the gospel, and Christ by his repeated, ongoing sin, we are not required to pray for their repentance; you have permission to stop praying. However, we are not commanded to stop praying, and given that we do not know when someone's heart is hard, I cannot conceive of a time when I would claim this verse as a justification for not praying for someone's repentance. Who would have expected the thief on the cross to repent? And who knows when God might grant repentance to those for whom I'm praying (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:25)? So it seems best to keep praying always for the repentance of sinners.

2. A Summary Meaning of these Verses

- If any believer sees anyone in the church body continually sinning sins without hardening his heart to Christ, he should intercede by prayer for that person, asking God to bring him to repentance.
 - ✓ That sinner is claiming to be a brother, but by evidence of his continuing sin it is clear that he is a professor of Christ without being a possessor of Christ.
 - ✓ Yet if he has not hardened his heart, when the believer prays for Him, God will grant him the eternal life of salvation.
 - ✓ In all this, it is also recognized that there can be a continued life of sinful rejection of Christ that produces a hardness of heart from which a person will never repent and he will die in his sins and face the eternal wrath of God.
- All this demonstrates the seriousness of sin.
 - ✓ *All* unrighteousness is sin (17a).
 - ✓ Every act of disobedience and rebellion against God is sin and worthy of the judgment of God.
 - ✓ Yet in His grace, God makes the possibility of repentance, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration available for all men.
 - ✓ While we all sin, no one has to die in that sin and face the wrath of God.

3. Implications of This Passage for Both Sinners and Petitioners

- When we see people sinning, we must go and we must pray
 - ✓ One of the things we emphasize at GBC is the role of the church body in restoring sinners to Christ; so we say that if we see someone who is in obvious sin (it isn't a questionable sin; it's *seen*, obvious), we need to go to him (Mt. 18:15-17). We have a role in seeking their repentance.
 - ✓ But this verse also means that we must pray. We understand that if anyone repents, it is only because of the grace of God that produces that in them — ***God...will give life...***
 - ✓ John says, ***he will pray***. He means that he should pray; but even more than that, he means that prayer is the most natural thing when a believer sees someone who professes Christ engaging in willful sin. He doesn't gossip; he doesn't criticize or moralize; he doesn't ignore the sinner. But he prays.
- Every sin is serious
 - ✓ When John made the distinction between sins leading to death and not leading to death (v. 16), some might have been tempted to say, "there are sins that aren't damning...it's okay if I sin. My sin doesn't really matter."

- ✓ In fact, that was one of the very things that the heretics said in their teaching (1:6). But sin does matter. Every sin matters. Every sin is enough to condemn us to an eternity away from Christ. And that's why John says, ***all unrighteousness is sin***. This has been a theme throughout the book (1:5-6; 2:3-4, 15-17; 3:4, 10; 5:2-4).
- ✓ There is always a temptation to minimize the significance of sin.
- ✓ Cf. Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 17-19.

"...the whole idea of sin may have disappeared from our culture. It may have been softened in many of our churches so as not to make the audiences uncomfortable. And, sad to say, the concept of sin among many conservative Christians has been essentially redefined to cover only the obvious gross sins of our society. The result, then, is that for many morally upright believers, the awareness of personal sin has effectively disappeared from their consciences. But it has not disappeared from the sight of God. Rather, all sin, both the so-called respectable sins of the saints, which we too often tolerate, and the flagrant sins of society, which we are quick to condemn, are a disregard for the law of God and are reprehensible in His sight. Both deserve the curse of God." [Bridges, 22.]

- Confession and forgiveness is available for every sin
 - ✓ Don't ever overlook the significance of 1:9. While every sin is unrighteous and evil and while no believer will ever stay in a pattern of unrepentant sin, every believer will still sin (1:8). We hate it, but while we are on earth, though we are new creations in Christ, we still have the flesh and we will still sin.
 - ✓ The difference between a growing, sanctified believer and a "professing" believer (who is not saved) is not that the believer has no sin; the difference is confession and repentance.
 - ✓ When we confess, two realities occur: God forgives and God cleanses.
 - ✓ And the reason that God is faithful to do that is because of the faithful work of Christ on the cross who satisfied God's wrath against sin (2:2). And because of that work, Christ serves as our Advocate with the Father. He is our court defender against the accusations of Satan (Rev. 12:10). He doesn't say, "Terry didn't sin." But he does say, "Yes, Terry did sin, but my righteousness has been imputed to Terry so that Terry is now acceptable to the Father..."
 - ✓ When you sin (and you will), confess. And know that God will forgive (2:12).
- If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ (or if your pattern of ongoing sin suggests you are not in Jesus Christ), you are in a precarious place.
 - ✓ If you are not a follower of Jesus, while you aren't dead yet, you are headed that way. You may not be dead, but you may be on life support. And unlike the life support in the hospital, you may not be aware of how close to spiritual death you are.

- ✓ Your only hope is to believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior of your sins by repenting (confessing and turning away from your sins).
- ✓ I urge you in the strongest terms possible: you must repent. And when you repent, Jesus Christ will save you (2:2b).
- The believer *can* remain confident of his salvation and security
 - ✓ Verses 16 and 17 have been understood in many ways that have left believers shaken about their salvation. But remember that John is writing so that those ***who believe in the name of the Son of God...may know that [they] have eternal life*** (v. 13).
 - ✓ John wants to confirm faith, not upset it.
 - ✓ So notice John's final words in v. 17 — ***there is a sin not leading to death***. That's hopeful for the unbeliever who is ensnared by his sin (he can still repent); it is hopeful for the believer who is praying for him (God might still grant life); and it is hopeful for the believer because he has been rescued from death and given life.
 - ✓ If you are trusting in Christ as your Savior you have *eternal* life.
 - Because your life is eternal, it cannot be taken from you.
 - Because your life is given by God, it cannot be taken from you.
 - And because your life is rooted in Christ's life, it cannot be taken from you.

CONCLUSION: There aren't too many certainties in life. We like to say death and taxes are the only certainties. To that we might also add sin. Sin is a reality in everyone's life. We will sin and we will be sinned against. My dad likes to say, "Death is one out of one. Everyone will die." The same can be said about sin: "Sin is one out of one. Everyone will sin." But not everyone dies because of their sin.

There is grace in God through Christ to make an escape out of sin and away from the wrath of God. And it is that which we pray not only for ourselves, but everyone else we see claiming to be believers but who are obviously living lives of sin.