



What is the "Sin Unto Death?"

By Keith Greer

"As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." {2 Peter 3:16} Over time, all Bible students learn, and continue to understand, that some scriptures are harder than others to understand. This means we need to give more time to studying some passages. Yet, God clearly told us He expects us to understand His will. "Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is." {Ephesians 5:17}

Many find it difficult to understand and explain 1 John 5:16. "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that." In and out of the church, many different meanings have been applied to this passage. Can we understand what the apostle John meant in this text? Sadly, some have suggested that this is a passage about which "we cannot be certain." Let's spend some time discussing the context of 1 John 5:13-17 and see if we can arrive at a conclusion.

Why did John write this epistle? "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God." {1 John 5:13} The epistle was written with one thought in mind -- men can know they can have eternal life, through belief in the Son, and continuing obedience to His will. Prior study of the chapter's first twelve verses further drives home this point. They provide testimony on faith and love. Similarly, the apostle John made an earlier statement. "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing

you may have life in His name." {John 20:30,31} John began his first epistle by saying: "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." {1 John 1:3,4}

If we understand and believe we have the promise of eternal life, this realization brings great assurance. It increases our confidence in Him. "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." {1 John 5:14} God's word is sure! "That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us." {Hebrews 6:18} One way we express this confidence is through the avenue of prayer. "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." {1 John 3:21-22} "And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." {1 John 5:15} We know that God can answer our every need. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." {1 Peter 5:7} Even when His answer isn't quite what we want it to be -- we can still trust that He knows what is best. Job said he would trust Him "though He slay me" (Job 13:15,16). We need to have that type of trust and confidence in God our Father?

Now that we've examined the surrounding verses, let us examine more closely the passage in question. Notice its connection with the preceding verse. We have boldness toward the Father. We demonstrate this boldness when we petition Him with confidence - and only if we ask according to His will. We are bold because we know He hears us. What then does John encourage us to do? To pray for a brother if "he sins a sin not unto death." What type of sin is "not unto death"? In our text, this is the sin for which we can seek God's remedy.

In the context, this brother must be an erring child of God. What does God require of His erring child? "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity. Then Simon answered and said, pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." {Acts 8:22-24}

Simon tried to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit with money. In Peter's words to him, we see instruction to repent and pray. The one who is guilty of sin must confess that sin to God. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." {1 John 1:9} God offers no "amnesty" to the rebellious or impenitent. For an example, we need look no further than the great King David. David committed adultery and murder. What did God require of him? "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun. So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die." {2 Samuel 2:12.13}

So what does the passage teach? God's child can sin, despite what many believe concerning the inability to fall from grace (1 John 1:8). Some sins do not "lead unto death." We are instructed to pray for these types of sins. We have assurance that such prayers will be heard and answered. But don't forget, each of God's erring children is personally obligated to go to God to seek forgiveness.

This same passage speaks of "a sin that leads to death," and we are NOT to pray for that sin, because it is futile to do so. Is this the sin against the Holy Spirit? (Matthew 12:31,32) Is the apostle talking about one particular type of sin? What we do know is that the sin was a sin that a brother could discern and identify. Its effects are visible to, and distinguishable by, the Christian. So what kind of sin is it?

The sin the Lord will not forgive is simply a sin -- any sin -- that a brother will not confess and of which he will not repent. If a brother manifests repentance and godly sorrow, I must pray for him. But I am not urged to pray for the one who is unwilling to confess or repent. If such a person dies in that sin, can my prayer cause God to grant forgiveness? NO! At death, the door of opportunity closes forever. One man's prayer can never cancel another's free moral agency. For one sin, a Christian could pray with confidence that the sin could be forgiven; for the other, such confidence is missing. That's the difference. Death ends the guilty person's ability to repent and confess the sin.

"All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death." {1 John 5:17} Sin is unrighteousness. The one who fails to keep God's commandments is guilty of sin. All unrepented-of, unconfessed sin leads to spiritual death (Romans 6:23). We need to repent and pray while we live, and not to hope for a remedy in the grave. It will not be forthcoming!