

Desperate Prayers

Without A Doubt, Part 7

1 John 5:16-18

Let me begin today by asking a series of questions that none of you are to raise your hand and answer . . . this isn't a public pop quiz.

These questions are for you to consider privately.

Have you ever wondered if someone you know is beyond redemption? Maybe you're praying for someone even now who has walked away from God and you've wondered, "Is it too late for them?"

Have you ever wondered if it's possible to commit a sin that God refuses to pardon? Is there a sin so ghastly, so wicked, so vile that even God says, "Every sin can be forgiven, but not that one."

Have you ever wondered if someone has potentially exhausted the grace of God – maybe it wasn't one sin, but it was the fact that they continue to sin . . . you've wondered if God has wiped His hands of them and if you ever tried praying for them, God would just put your prayers on hold . . . those email requests just go to the junk email folder . . . they never get through.

Have you wondered what to do about someone you may have observed in recent weeks or months, walk away from God – walk away from their testimony – their moral character they once held to and you've wondered – how do I pray for them?

Do you pray for them to be saved or for them to be revived and what if you don't know the difference – what if you're praying the wrong way . . . will it mess up a potential answer to prayer?

Simply put, how do you pray for sinning people?

Let me invite you to the First Letter of John and chapter 5 where John addresses this very issue. Now I warn you at the outset of our study, these next few verses have generated a lot of confusion . . . a

lot of different opinions, interpretations and applications.

At first glance you'll understand why there seems to be so much confusion . . . ***First John 5:16-17. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make requests for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.***

That was easy.

Aren't you glad you came today?

I get to a text like this and wonder why God didn't call me to be a topical preacher like so many others . . . you can just skip over passages like these and pick something a lot more fun.

Actually, what I love about Bible exposition – verse by verse – is that once the hard work is done, passages like these yield wonderful principles of Christian life and doctrine – and they provide unique warning and encouragement like few other texts.

So let's try to unravel the mystery here.

The first thing we need to address is this idea of some kind of sin leading to death.

Is there some kind of really bad sin that leads someone to an early death?

Now when you do a survey of all the different narratives from the Old and New Testament, you can clearly see that God has, in the past, responded to some of His sinning people by bringing what we could call a premature death.

You can't help but think of Korah and others who rebelled with him in ***Numbers 16*** against God's prescribed pattern of worship. Moses called them

out into the open and the ground just opened up and swallowed all of them up in judgment. They could have lived longer, but God judged them and put them to death.

You say, “That’s okay, but that’s in the Old Testament.” And then you keep surveying and you also discover that New Testament incident in the early church where Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Apostles and tried to deceive the church to gain prestige and praise.

They claimed to have given more money to the church than they actually had; and their lying and pride and deception was evidently so dangerous to the credibility and unity of the church that that the Holy Spirit put them to death on the spot (*Acts 5:1-11*).

You also discover in your survey that drunkenness matched with pride coupled with spiritual hypocrisy so harmed the church in Corinth that God put some of those early believers to an early death (*1 Corinthians 11*).

So what sin is it that gets you in such big trouble that God just pulls the lever and takes you out?

What are those really bad sins?

The church at large has never really agreed on the complete list. Cotton Mather, the Puritan leader in the New England during the early 1700’s believed that sins worthy of at least excommunication from the church would include, swearing, cheating, stealing and idleness, among others.

Martin Luther, the converted monk and reformation icon in the 16th century once threatened a man who was planning to sell his house for an exorbitant profit. This man had found a buyer who was going to pay him 10 times the original price. In what we would consider today a fantastic real estate deal, Luther warned the man of his unbridled greed and threatened church discipline if he carried out the sale.

Study early American history and you’ll find lists of other sins that made it to the top of the charts as especially egregious – I’ve read some of them and they include bullfighting, tax evasion and smuggling.¹

The Catholic Church has been working for centuries on their list of mortal sins and the venial sins.

Venial sins were misdemeanors that don’t threaten too much additional time in Purgatory, but those mortal sins are the really bad ones and you could lose your standing with God unless you do

some extra credit somewhere along the line and earned a few more points back with God.

So what sin is it, here in John’s mind that leads to death?

In fact, John seems to complicate matters by telling us that there are sins that don’t lead to death.

You have here – notice the *middle part of verse 16 – a sin leading to death*. What sin is that?

Notice verse 17, there is a sin not leading to death.

We’d really like John to spell it out wouldn’t we? I want to know what sin that is – and I’m hoping I haven’t done it – I’m really hoping it has nothing to do with speed limits or not being nice to cats.

One of my favorite Greek scholars cleared up so much of the confusion by simply pointing out that John is not using definite articles before the word sin.ⁱⁱ

You could translate *verse 16 If anyone sees his brother committing sin – literally, sinning sin – not leading to death.*

Middle part of verse 16 – There is sin (not, there is a sin) leading to death.

Again in verse 17 – There is sin not leading to death.

John isn’t referring to some specific sin as if some sins are worse than others. In fact, he puts to rest the search for mortal or venial sins in *verse 17 by writing, “All unrighteousness is sin.”*

In other words, “All sin is, well, sin.”

He isn’t saying, “There are some sins so bad you’re going to die and there’s no remedy and there are other sin’s that aren’t quite as bad.”

But the question remains, what *kind* of sinning is not unto death and what *kind* of sinning is unto death.

If all sin is sin, how do we know which sin is terminal and which sin isn’t?

Well, keep in mind here that in one sense, *all* sin is terminal, right?

The wages of sin is – what? – death (Romans 6:23).

God warned Adam and Even that if they disobeyed Him and ate of that fruit, *they would surely die (Genesis 2:17).*

Physical death comes to all of us because of sin.

Perhaps John is thinking here of the words of Jesus in *Matthew 12* where He warned the Pharisees of committing the unpardonable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

In other words, sinning unto death is that sin of rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sin that leads to death and separation is simply unforgiven sin.ⁱⁱⁱ

The sin mentioned by Jesus in *Matthew 12:31-32* was nothing more or less than rejecting Jesus as the Messiah.

The Pharisees had so persisted in their opposition to the claims of Jesus that they now had to attribute His miraculous power to the power of the devil rather than acknowledge His power was truly divine.

Had they repented of that blasphemy they would have been forgiven, *for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from every sin – I John 1:7*

In a more immediate context to John the Apostle, John has been counterattacking the false teaching of the Gnostics who persistently resisted the Holy Spirit's revelation of Jesus as the Son of God –they denied both His deity and humanity.^{iv}

All those who deny the saving work of Christ on the cross effectively burn that wooden cross-shaped bridge over which they might have crossed for salvation.

Listen, if someone denies the deity of Christ and disregards the gospel of Christ and refuses to believe the biblical message regarding the cross, sin, atonement, forgiveness through Christ – is committing the greatest kind of sinning there is – because it remains permanently and eternally unforgiven.

John may very well have in mind the fact that people like that are stubbornly sinning their way right into the jaws of death and hell.

They remain unforgiven and unpardoned by God simply because they refused to ask for God to forgive and pardon them.

Sinning unto death is not an issue of God's unwillingness to forgive; sinning unto death is man's unwillingness to repent – and God moves in to judge them whenever He chooses.

So what are we supposed to do for people like that?

Frankly, it's so tempting to get bogged down in what John might be referring to as sinning unto death and not sinning unto death that we miss his primary point.

John is actually exhorting us to pray for those caught up in sin.

Verse 16 basically says, *if you see a brother – that is, a believer – sinning . . . ask and God will for him give life.*

In other words, God may very well bring about restoration – a life revived – a person rescued back into a kind of life worth living.

Now let me address another confusing point here.

It sounds like John is suggesting that we should only pray for people we know are believers and who may very well repent – but we're not to pray for people who don't seem to be responding – *they are*, middle part of *verse 16 – sinning unto death – I do not say that he should make request for this.*

The problem is, since we don't know the ultimate response of anyone caught up in a lifestyle of sinning, *is* John saying we shouldn't pray for the really hard cases. I mean, if they persist in their stubbornness or even in their unbelief, we ought to take 'em off the prayer list, right?

Just get their coffin ready.

Is John suggesting that we identify bad sinners and stay out of their way and pray for restoration and life and forgiveness for people who seem open to listening?

It does appear that way.

I have to admit to you friends, I really struggled with this passage. It was pinning me to the mat.

How in the world are we supposed to determine who is sinning in such a way that God will bring death and who isn't? How are we to determine who we pray for and who we don't pray for as long as they're alive?

If you look at *verse 15* where John is encouraging our prayer life – notice the last line of *verse 15 – and we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.* Now *verse 16, the last line – there is sin leading to death – I do not say that he should make request for this.*

There's that word, *request* again. It sounds like John is saying we're not to make any prayer requests for the really persistent sinner.

I love the repetition of verbs that God uses in the word – and we've noted several – "*we know . . . we know . . . we know*".

And now in regard to prayer – *we ask . . . we ask . . . we make requests . . .* but now – here – *don't make a request.*

I struggled with this prohibition . . . until I did a little more translation work and discovered that John had actually changed the verb he'd been using all along.

The word translated *request* and *ask* in *verse 15* is the same word used in *verse 16*, the first part

where John encourages us to ask God – it’s the word *aitew* (αἰτεῖω) which most often refers to asking a request in prayer.

In fact, if you have a pencil, circle them in your Bible. I think if you see this, it will help underscore the point John will make which is most often misunderstood.

Back up to *verse 15*, ***And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask (circle that), we know that we have the requests (circle that) which we have asked (circle that) from Him. 16. If anyone sees his brother committing sin not leading to death, he shall ask (circle that).***

Now all those words you circled come from the same root word (*aitew*) – to request or petition.^v

Now notice the middle phrase of *verse 16*. ***There is sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.***

And you immediately assume John is telling you not to pray about it.

But John changes the verb – he uses an entirely different word.

It’s the verb *erotao* (ερωτάω).

And John – more than any other biblical author uses this verb to refer to someone who is requesting information. Its primary meaning is to “to seek information.”^{vi}

I want to recommend that you write a word next to this word ***request*** in *verse 16* – somewhere in the margin of your Bible – or else all my translation work for you will be forgotten by lunchtime.

John is actually saying here in this phrase in *verse 16*, ***“I do not say that he should make a request for information.”***

In other words, it isn’t up to you to go after the details.

This word is used

- when Jesus asked His disciples for information about how many loaves there were (Mark 8:5);
- when Jesus asked His disciples who people thought He was (Matthew 16:13)
- when the disciples asked Jesus the meaning of the parables they used this word – they made a request for more details – for more information.

And John uses that same word here in *verse 16*.

And I couldn’t help but smile – the confusing problem we have with this text in trying to determine what sinner is leaning toward repentance and not death and what sinner is leaning toward

death and not repentance – so we’ll know who to pray for – which would make us want to get all the information we can about his situation and his sin – is exactly the opposite of what John is telling us to do.

He’s simply telling us to pray for both. We don’t need more information in order to practice intercession. God knows all the details.

We don’t need to know who might be disciplined and who might be restored . . . we don’t need to know what God is ultimately going to do . . . John is effectively saying here, that isn’t up to us.

All we’ve got to do is pray for them. That’s John’s major point here. Pray! Pray desperate prayers for people who have become desperate in their sin.

Pray passionately for people who have become enslaved to their passions.

You never know – God just might use you to bring them restoration back to spiritual health and life.

Alright – so far we now understand that there is not one particular sin that may bring about an early death; even the so-called unpardonable sin is nothing more than rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we’ve also learned that no one gets taken off the prayer list – because it’s not up to us to know who might face the discipline of God and who is going to repent.

The Lord simply wants us to pray.

Let’s go a little deeper into the heart of John’s message here . . . let me point out three characteristics of biblical intercession:

1. First, the Lord wants us to be confidential in interceding

John writes, If anyone sees his brother committing sin . . .

Stop there for a moment. John uses a word that indicates you are actually seeing another believer committing a sin.

In other words, it isn’t a matter of personal suspicion, but an observed fact.^{vii}

You’re an eyewitness.

So what are you supposed to do about it? John tells us – look again ***If anyone actually sees his brother committing sin not unto death, he shall*** call 7 close friends and tell them about it; he shall bring this new prayer request up at his next small group meeting.

No quite.

Don't talk to everyone but God; talk to God about him – and listen, you can be sure that God is able to keep a secret. One author wrote, the greatest antidote to scandal is prayer.^{viii}

The truth is, we never pray for people we gossip about; and we'll never gossip about people we're praying for.

If you see your brother sinning, go to God about him.

By the way, do you realize how easy that first part is?

It's so easy for us to spot the sin in someone else's life and fail to see our own?

We are experts at spotting other people's sins.^{ix}

We are not as expert at interceding for sinners.

John wants us to be confidential. That doesn't mean you can't include other prayer warriors; just make sure they're praying and not just one more cluster of grapes on the grapevine.

2. Secondly, the Lord wants us to be confident in interceding

The latter part of verse 16b reads; And God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death.

In other words, your prayer life along with your personal interaction with a sinning believer becomes the channel through which God chooses to work in that sinner's life: transforming their lives and their hearts from backsliding.^x

Paul wrote these stunning words in *Galatians 6:1 – Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual – or spiritually minded – restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness.*

Did you get that – *you* are the one God uses to restore them.

Both Paul and John view the praying, interceding, interactive believers as conduits as it were of the grace of God. You become the channel of blessing – the intercessor is credited with restoration.

Ultimately we know that it is the grace of God – but the Apostles Paul and John reveal that in the mystery of God's will, He delights to use you and me to both intercede and restore.

So be confidential . . . be confident . . .

3. Thirdly, the Lord wants His intercessors to be continual in interceding.

John effectively says it isn't up to us to know if the believer will be restored or if the unbeliever will be saved – he simply tells us to pray.

Frankly, none of us need anybody to encourage us not to pray – that comes naturally. We naturally forget about others and spend most of our time praying for ourselves.^{xi}

John joins with the Apostle Paul in urging us to pray desperately for desperate situations and for desperate people.

In that classic passage on spiritual warfare, in Ephesians 6, Paul describes the armor of the believer, the dangers of the battles we'll engage in as we deliver the truth against world systems that battle us and our gospel . . . Paul gets us all dressed up in our armor and then says, "Now you can pray."

You're all dressed up . . . to kneel down. He writes, *with all prayers and petition pray at all times in the Spirit; and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and pray for all the saints, and pray for me, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. (Ephesians 6:18-20)*

I Thessalonians 5:25 – Brethren, pray for us.

John would say – you don't know who will believe and who will refuse to believe – so pray for both.

Which means we are never to label some situation as hopeless.

Even though they may reach the point where they are disciplined from the fellowship of the church – as the unrepentant adulterer was in *I Corinthians 5* and, in the words of Paul, *delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, and yet his spirit would be saved.*

In other words, the disciplined believer didn't lose his salvation – he didn't lose his sonship, but he did lose his fellowship – with the church and with God.

However, that man was never off the believer's prayer list. And so, when Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians he could rejoice with them that this man had repented and now stood ready to be welcomed back into fellowship (*2 Corinthians 2:8*).

Maybe you're even wondering about yourself
– maybe you're not a Christian. Maybe you're wondering right now, "Have I somehow committed some sin worthy of unforgiveness – have I gone too far – have I leaned so far toward death in my rebellion that God won't even forgive me now?"

Let me answer that by asking you to do something – I want you to take in a breath – on the count of three – were you able to take in a breath?

Then it's not too late.

That criminal whose crimes were capital offenses, now hangs next to Jesus Christ on his own cross. Before the night is over, he'll be dead. At first he curses and mocks along with the crowd – but then stops . . . and eventually looks over at the blood soaked Savior and effectively says, "Lord, if there's any way you would ever have me in mind when you come into your kingdom, would you grant me entrance?"

What did Jesus say? Did He say, "You got to be kidding . . . you've spent your entire life as an unbeliever; and your adult life as a thieving, murdering criminal – in fact, Jesus would know every one of this man's sins, right?"

You mean you – of all people want to come up to your dying breath and then be able to get into heaven?

Yes! Yes, you can.

That man had been leaning toward death his entire life. And on his last day and just before his death he is given eternal life.

You don't need to know which way they're leaning . . . you don't need to have all the information . . . you don't need to know what God has in mind.

You just intercede . . . pray desperate prayers for desperate people.

Is there hope for even the hardest heart?

There is nothing in the category of human sin that is beyond the reach of divine forgiveness. Isaiah said it this way: Although your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though are like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).

You can't get crimson stains out of a white wool sweater – I don't care what the commercial says.

But God can take deep crimson, scarlet stains and make your heart as clean as freshly fallen snow.

Time magazine ran an article a few years ago about the rise of suicide in the country of Japan – rising with each decade. In fact, just in the past 10 years, 30,000 people have taken their lives. But then it told the story of a man named Yokio Shige – a retired detective – and a believer. Every day since 2004 he has roamed the area known as the Tojinbo Cliffs, a popular site for suicides, along the coast of the Sea of Japan. He goes there looking for people who are considering jumping. If he spots someone that looks like they might be contemplating suicide by jumping off the cliffs into the Sea, he slowly approaches them, offers a gentle "Hello" and then does his best to engage them in conversation. At some point Shige will offer them a light touch on the shoulder, which often causes the person to begin crying. Shige will then say, "You've had a hard time up until now, haven't you?"

He doesn't stop there. He will invite them back to his office where he offers free counseling. But first, he offers them a dish of pounded sticky rice served with grated relish. Traditionally the food is prepared to celebrate the New Year, with each family taking its own rice to be mixed with that of its neighbors. He said to the reporter, "When people come here and eat this dish they often remember [good things from their past; and they implicitly consider there is a new year ahead of them.]

The ring tone for this man's cell phone is set to "Amazing Grace".

So far, 188 desperate men and women have been rescued and restored to life, through his personal, quiet, caring message.

The church has many organizers, but few agonizers; many will enter and pay; few will leave and pray; the church has many who rest; few who wrestle; many who are enterprising, but few who are interceding; tithes may build a church, but tears will give it life.^{xii}

John would agree . . . and challenge us all. He would say through this paragraph, "Look, you don't know which way that person is going to go . . . you don't know if that desperate person is going to jump off the cliff or not . . . so intercede for them . . . carefully interrupt them . . . invite them to a conversation . . . a meal . . . counseling them . . . this is the way to start a new year . . . a new life.

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- i Illustrations taken from Stephen Davey, In Pursuit of Prodigals (Kress Biblical Resources, 2010), p. 29
- ii D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 261
- iii Sam Gordon, Living in the Light: 1,2,3 John (Ambassador, 2001), p. 212
- iv Herschel Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p.139
- v Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed. Theological Dictionary of The New Testament, abridged (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 30
- vi Ibid, p. 262
- vii Hiebert, p. 258
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- x Joel Beeke, The Epistles of John (Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 206
- xi James Montgomery Boice, The Epistles of John (Baker Books, 1979), p. 143
- xii Leonard Ravenhill, quoted in Michael P. Green, 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching (Baker, 2003), p. 277