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A0503 -- Jan. 16, 2005 – 1 John 5:16-17 – Sin Unto Death

Last week we looked at having Confidence in Prayer. In the context, we can have assurance that we possess eternal life if we have believed in the name of the Son of God and we can have assurance that our prayers will be answered whenever we pray in the will of God! We found that 1 John 5:14-15 is giving a commentary on what Jesus meant when He commanded His apostles to pray in His name, something they had never done before. Praying in Jesus' name is not a magic formula that we just tack on to the end of our prayers and then sit back, expecting them to be answered? What He was commanding them to do was to pray in the will of God. Therefore, praying in the name of Jesus = praying in the will of God. Therefore, every prayer in Jesus' name will be answered because it is praying in His will. Only prayers that are offered in the will of God will be answered. And we can have absolute assurance that when we pray in the will of God it will be answered. That's what John's point is here in vv. 14-15.

1 John 5:14-15 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us *in whatever we ask*, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

In fact, just like we can know that we have eternal life by God's testimony (5:13) we can also know with the same level of confidence that our prayers will be answered when we pray according to God's will (5:15). But how can we know whether our prayers are in the will of God or not? There is one type of prayer request that is always God's will and guarantees your prayer will be answered, provided we meet the other conditions (fervent, persistent, trusting in His ability to answer prayer while abiding in Him). That type of prayer is known as a **Prayer in the Known Will of God**. God has revealed His will for all Christians in His commandments (1 John 5:3a). Therefore, whenever we pray for enablement to follow His specific commandments then we can be sure that He will hear

and answer. When He answers and how He answers are up to His sovereign determination but we can be certain that He will answer them in His way in His time.

In the next two verses John is giving a specific illustration of what to pray for and what not to pray for. In other words, John is giving us an example of a specific prayer that is in the will of God and one that is not in the will of God.

1 John 5:16-17 ¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death (*thanatos*)ⁱ, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life (*zoe*)ⁱⁱ to those who commit sin not *leading* to death (*thanatos*). There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading* to death (*thanatos*).

On one hand, if we pray for a brother who sins a sin that does not lead to swift death then God will answer this prayer and God will give our brother life. This is a prayer that is in the will of God and we can know He will answer it. On the other hand, if we pray for a brother who sins a sin that does lead to swift death we should not count on God answering our prayer and giving our brother life. God has already determined He will not answer this prayer no matter how much we pray about it.

But we have to know what John means by “**sin leading to death**”? All sin *ultimately* leads to death (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; 5:5; Rom. 5:12) so John must be talking about pre-mature death. But what sin(s) result in pre-mature death? John doesn’t give us any hint in this context what sin(s) lead to pre-mature death and which one(s) do not. All he shows is that there is sin that leads to death and sin that does not lead to death. So, we have to be very careful with the question of what is the “**sin leading to death**”? To answer this question we have to know two things about this passage. 1) What is the “nature of the sin” and 2) what is the “nature of the death”.

There are three major interpretations of this passage. Two major interpretations of this verse take **death** here to be spiritual death, going to hell (eternal separation from God). They say that the nature of the **sin** here is that it is a specific unforgivable sin. The third view says the **death** in view is premature physical death and that the **sin** here is general and has a certain qualities about it that results in premature death. The first view has two forms:

#1 ARMINIAN AND ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW

The first view says that the brother here is a Christian who commits some sin which is so terrible that it is unforgivable; such as suicide, murder, idolatry, or adultery. He has committed a **sin unto death** and therefore this brother loses his salvation. This view (which has been held by many through Church history) gave rise to the Roman Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins. In Catholicism *mortal sins* are those which can never be forgiven and *venial sins* are those which can be forgiven. This is, perhaps, why the RSV translates this '*sin which is mortal*' and '*sin which is not mortal*.' But that translation is unquestionably wrong. It should never be translated, '*mortal sin*' for it has nothing to do with the question of salvation. There is no warrant whatsoever in Scripture for distinguishing between mortal and venial sins. Scripture makes no such distinctions. As a matter of fact, this sin mentioned here is not any one specific sin. The Greek makes very clear here that it is simply sin in general. It is not any one sin which is a **sin unto death**; any sin can become **sin unto death**.

Nature of Sin: specific Nature of Death: spiritual

#2 STRICT CALVINIST VIEW

This view says that the brother here is not a genuine Christian but a professing Christian who commits a sin not leading to death. That is, an unbeliever commits some sin that is not really that bad therefore he still has a chance at salvation. His sin can be forgiven by Christ because it's not that bad. He is therefore in need of salvation and we should pray that God will save him. On the other hand, they say, an unbeliever who professes Christ but sins a sin that does lead to death is the man who commits a sin that is so bad that repentance and forgiveness are impossible. God says we should not pray for this man because he is beyond salvation, he cannot be saved. That is, he has committed the unpardonable sin of Matt. 12:31-32.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are some major problems with this view. *First*, the unpardonable sin cannot be committed today. There are two reasons for this. 1) the unpardonable sin was a national sin not an individual sin. 2) the unpardonable sin could only be committed while Christ was on earth because the nature of the unpardonable sin was the claim that Jesus did His miracles by the power of Satan rather than the Holy Spirit. Since Jesus is no longer on earth doing miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit this sin can no longer be committed.^{iv} Today there is no sin that a person can commit that is unpardonable; no sin is beyond the grace of God?

Second problem, how would we know that a person was ever beyond the possibility of salvation? We would have to know this so we could know its not necessary to pray for him. And we would have to be omniscient to know this.

Third problem, the text says “*if anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death*”. The **sin unto death** is a sin that can be seen by others. If we can see the sin then we must be able to see whether the person died or not when he committed it. If we can’t see whether they died or not then how can we know whether to pray or not? This just goes to show that the nature of the death here is not spiritual death but physical death. If the sin is something that can be seen then the death is something we also have to be able to see. And no one can see whether a person has committed an unforgivable sin. Grace tells us that no sin is unforgivable. To salvage their view the strict Calvinists come up with a list of sins that are unforgivable. The list is arbitrary (e.g. 1) not confessing that Jesus is the Christ. But this only indicates that the person is not a believer at that moment. It does not mean that he cannot trust Christ for salvation at some later point. 2) murder. But genuine believers such as Moses and David both committed murder. The Bible never says a believer can’t murder, only that murder does not find its source in God and is totally out of character for a believer. A believer that commits murder does not have eternal life abiding in him but the Bible never says he’s not really a believer. 3) hatred. The spirit of murder. Certainly possible, never denied possible by Scripture. Same reasons as murder). The Bible never says these sins are unforgivable. The Bible teaches that the death of Christ is sufficient for any and all wickedness except the unpardonable sin which was national and committed in the 1st century.

Fourth problem, the text says “*if anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death*”. **His brother** refers to a fellow Christian not someone who merely professes Christ but really does not possess Christ. One must first be a brother before he can *see his brother committing a sin*. A brother is always a genuine Christian in John’s 1st epistle (1 Jn. 2:9, 10, 11; 3:10, 12, 15, 17; 4:20, 21; 5:16). These are some major problems that this view cannot answer and it is stunningly similar to the Arminian and Roman Catholic view of distinguishing between forgivable and unforgivable sins.^v

Nature of Sin: specific Nature of Death: spiritual

#3 MODERATE CALVINIST VIEW

This third view is the one that I think is correct. This view says that a genuine Christian can sin a sin which leads to premature physical death. If we see a Christian brother sinning

a sin which does not lead to physical death then we should pray for him that God would extend his physical life. If we see a Christian brother sinning a sin which does lead to physical death there is no reason we should pray about that. Reason: because God has already decided not to answer that prayer. But the prayer that is in God's will and which we should pray about is when we see a Christian brother sinning a sin which does not lead to swift physical death. Before we look at four biblical examples of the **sin unto death** turn to the Book of Proverbs where we first find the principle of personal sin leading to physical death and personal righteousness leading to extended physical life.

Proverbs 10:2, 11:4 Righteousness delivers from death.

Proverbs 11:19 He who is steadfast in righteousness *will attain* to life, And he who pursues evil *will bring about* his own death.

Proverbs 12:28 In the way of righteousness is life, And in *its* pathway there is no death.

We may not know all the details of how our lives can be lengthened or shortened by sin and righteousness but we do know that this is a dynamic God has built into history. In a study like this it is important to remember that "all unrighteousness is sin...but there is sin which has a certain element about it, a certain characteristic which will result in physical death, physical judgment."^{vi} That's what we are looking for in the following examples. We want to discern the characteristics of a sin that results in premature physical death.

Nature of Sin: general

Nature of Death: physical

TWO OT EXAMPLES

First, turn to **Leviticus 10:1-3** "*Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them.* ² *And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.* ³ *Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'"* This sin had three characteristics. 1) It was intentional. Nadab and Abihu knew not to offer strange fire before the Lord (v. 1). 2) It directly attacked God (v. 3). 3) It was done in the sight of the people of Israel (v. 3). This constitutes a **sin unto death**.

Second, turn to **Numbers 20:8-12** ⁸ "*Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.*" ⁹ *So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him;* ¹⁰ *and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?"*

¹¹ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. ¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." This **sin unto death** also has three characteristics. 1) It was intentional. Moses knew he was supposed to speak to the rock not strike it (vv. 8, 11). 2) It directly attacked God because the stone was a type of Christ (v. 11). 3) It was done in the sight of the people of Israel (v. 12). This constitutes a **sin unto death**. "Later on, when they came to the borders of the land, Moses said to God, in effect, 'Lord, allow me to go on in. Forgive this, and let me go on in.' And the Lord said to him, 'Speak no more to me about this matter,' that is, 'Do not pray about this, but get up to the mountain and I will let you see the land, but that is as far as you can go.'"^{vii} (Dt. 34:1-6) Moses **sin unto death** was not immediate death. This shows that the **sin unto death** is not always immediate but it is always decisive and certain.

TWO NT EXAMPLES

Third, turn over to the NT to **Acts 5:1-10** "*But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. ⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband." Again, what are the three characteristics of this **sin unto death**. 1) It was intentional. Ananias and Sapphira plotted together ahead of time (vv. 4, 9). 2) It was directed against the Holy Spirit (v. 4). 3) It was done in the sight of Peter and young men in the Church (vv. 3, 6, 8)*

Finally, turn to **1 Corinthians 11:21, 29-30** “*for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk...*”²⁹ *For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.* ³⁰ *For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.*” Once again this **sin unto death** has three characteristics. 1) It is intentional. They knew better, they had instructions from earlier revelation on how to observe the Lord’s supper. 2) It is directed against Christ who is God because the supper symbolizes Christ’s death (v. 27). 3) It was being done in the sight of all the Corinthian church (v. 18). Once again, the **sin unto death** does not always result in immediate death. Here some were weakened, some sick, and some were dead. In such a case there is no reason to pray for the brother. There is nothing you can do except let God's judgment wake him up. Perhaps God in grace will deal patiently with him, give him a time of sickness or weakness, and that will bring him to his senses. But if not, God will take him home.^{viii}

What is interesting is that in all four cases the **sin unto death** was different (offering of strange fire, striking a rock, lying to God, and taking communion in unworthy manner). So, the **sin unto death** is not a *specific* sin but a *general* sin that has the three characteristics we observe in each context. 1) A **sin unto death**^{ix} is intentional.^x You know better. 2) Directly against God and 3) in the sight of God’s people. In such a case there is no reason to pray for the brother because God has already made up His mind about that matter. The brother must undergo divine discipline or judgment. However, if we see a brother commit a sin not unto death then we should demonstrate our love for our Christian brother by praying for him. When we do God will answer our prayer by extending the physical life of our brother.

By way of illustration “Dr. H.A. Ironside used to illustrate this as follows: Sometimes you see children playing outside, and when quarreling breaks out the mother says, 'If you don't behave yourself, you will have to come in the house.' Her child says, 'Don't worry, Mother, I'll be good.' But a little while later quarreling breaks out again and the mother comes out and says, 'Now that's enough. You've got to come in. I can't trust you outside anymore.' The child begs his mother to let him stay out some more, 'Oh Mother, I'll be good. I promise I will.' But she says, 'No, I gave you a chance. Now come on inside. I can't trust you out there anymore.'

"That is what God sometimes says to us. Do we realize, Christian friends, that God's whole reputation is at stake in our behavior? Everything we do and say is reflecting the character and the being of God to the world around. No wonder he watches us so assiduously. No wonder He judges us so precipitously at times. If there be a willful determination to

disgrace Him in the eyes of others, as Moses had, God will say, 'All right, that's enough. I can't trust you out there any more. Come on home.' And home we go."^{xi}

In conclusion, this difficult passage does not teach against unforgivable sins or the unpardonable sin but the **sin unto death**. The unpardonable sin can no longer be committed. There are no unforgivable sins. Christ's death on the cross is sufficient for all sin no matter how terrible. The readers of John's epistle already possessed eternal life. That eternal life can't be lost. If eternal life could be lost then it would be eternal life would it. But just because they possessed eternal life did not mean that they always abided in eternal life and never sinned (1:8). Jesus, Paul, and John all teach a distinction between possessing eternal life and enjoying eternal life. Jesus said, "I come that you may have life and that you may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). That's a distinction between having eternal life and having it abundantly. There is possessing eternal life and enjoying eternal life. Paul taught this distinction when he said to Timothy, "you man of God... *take hold of the eternal life* to which you were called," (1 Tim. 6:12). Timothy already possessed eternal life but he also needed to take hold of that eternal life. That is, start enjoying eternal life by living according to the principle of eternal life by living a life of righteousness. And John also taught this distinction in 1 John 3:15 when he said, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that *no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*" John didn't say that the one who hates his brother doesn't possess eternal life but that eternal life is not abiding in him. He's making a distinction between possessing eternal life and abiding in it. Jesus, Paul, and John make this distinction clear. There is both possessing and enjoying eternal life. What this implies is the teaching that a Christian brother can commit a **sin unto death**. When he does commit an intentional, God directed, and visible sin he does not have eternal life abiding in him at that moment. In such a case we have no reason to pray for that believer. He's in God's hands now and it's up to God what to do with him. God may immediately judge him like he did Ananias and Sapphira or He may discipline him by weakness or sickness like the Corinthians. But, John's point is that no amount of praying can change God's mind at this point. Sin is a life and death issue in the Christian life and should be taken seriously. This is John's purpose in writing the letter, that Christian Fellowship will be Promoted by the Avoidance of Sin and Maintenance of Right Doctrine. Avoiding sin is a key component of promoting joy and fellowship and protects you from the danger of **sin unto death**.

ⁱ The Greek word used here for death, *thanatos*, is used in both a literal and metaphorical way in the New Testament. It can therefore refer to either spiritual death or physical death. A metaphorical use is found in John 5:24, a literal use is found in John 11:13. The author's usage must be defined by the context.

ⁱⁱ The Greek word used here for life, *zoe*, is also used both literally and metaphorically in the New Testament. It can therefore refer to eternal life or physical life. *Zoe* is used as an antonym of *thanatos* in Romans 8:38, both in the literal sense of physical life and death. *Zoe* is used in its metaphorical sense in 1 John 5:13. Again, context must determine the author's intention.

ⁱⁱⁱ Busenitz, Irvin A., *The Sin unto death* (The Masters Seminary Journal 1/1, Spring 1990), 17.

^{iv} Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 47.

^v Busenitz, Irvin A., *The Sin unto death* (The Masters Seminary Journal 1/1, Spring 1990), 17, says, "*The context and word selection point to the conclusion that the individual "committing a sin not unto death" is an unsaved man who professes to be a believer, but who is, in actuality, in need of salvation. On the one hand, John refers to one who is sinning but is not doing so to the point of the impossibility of being granted eternal life. The apostle encourages intercessory prayer for such an individual, that God may grant to him eternal life. On the other hand, he asserts that if a man does sin to such an extent that repentance and forgiveness are impossible, it would be "unto death," spiritual death in the sense that his condition is irrevocable (cf. Matt 12:31-32).*

^{vi} Ray Stedman, Praying Boldly (Sermon on 1 John 5:14-17 can be found on the web at <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/1john/pdf/0167.pdf>)

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^{ix} James also teaches about the **sin unto death** in Jas 5:19-20.

^x References to intentional sin are Num. 15:28-31; Heb. 10:26ff; Titus 3:10-11.

^{xi} Ray Stedman, Praying Boldly (Sermon on 1 John 5:14-17 can be found on the web at <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/1john/pdf/0167.pdf>)

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