

Sermon 49, Let's Maybe Not Pray for That, 1 John 5:16-17

Proposition: The sins of our Christian brothers and sisters won't be ultimately fatal if we pray for them; but if we plead too strongly for unrepented sin to be excused, it reveals how little we care for God's declared way of salvation.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we look today at one of the strangest passages in the New Testament. What is John talking about? And why is he talking about it? I have answers for those questions. John is talking about Christians, whose sin will be forgiven and thus not ultimately fatal, and then contrasting them with non-Christians, whose sin will not be forgiven if they remain non-Christians. He's also saying that there is a time to stop praying, but that as an apostle he cannot be dogmatic on when that time is. However, he can give a general guideline, which is that someone in the grip of deadly sin may be someone you shouldn't pray for. As for why he says it — he says it here at the end because he's summing up the Christian life. We saw last week that prayer is the first act of eternal life. But there is one limit on prayer, and we need to be very cognizant of that limit. As those who share in God's eternal life, prayer comes naturally to us. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters who fall into sin — but we need to beware of pleading too strongly for God to excuse the sin of someone who won't seek Jesus' forgiveness.

I. When You Should Pray, vv. 16-17

We will start with the scenario that is by much the more familiar and easier of the two scenarios John outlines here. We all know this scenario; we have all engaged in this scenario.

A. When You See a Brother Sinning, v. 16a

The scenario begins when you see a brother sinning. If you see a Christian brother doing something wrong, you need to pray for that immediately. If you see me say something nasty to a fellow member of this church, you need to pray for me. That is a given. And in fact, most of the trouble in churches starts when you see someone sinning and decide to talk about it with your friends rather than deciding to talk about it with God, who is actually part of the solution to the problem of sin. If you have eternal life in you, then you need to pray whenever you see a brother sin.

B. When You Understand that Christians' Sins Aren't Fatal, v. 16b-17

But John adds this weird qualifier: "A sin not leading to death." What kind of sin is that? How can he even talk about a sin not leading to death? After all, the distinction between deadly and non-deadly sin was invented by Satan in the Garden when he said, "You shall not surely die." Satan claimed that eating the fruit was a sin that would not lead to death. He was lying. And by the same token, we know that every sin is in its very nature a deadly sin. Every sin deserves death, and every sin brings death. So what is John talking about when he mentions the sin not leading to death? He's not talking about a venial sin, as defined by the Roman Church (a sin that does not kill charity in the soul), because then he would be saying that everyone sinning a mortal sin should not be prayed for. In addition, of course, most venial sins can't be seen anyway. No; the distinction between mortal and venial sin, even if it were true, does not help us interpret this passage (a fact acknowledged by Roman Catholic exegetes as well). Instead, the key to interpreting the reference is found earlier in the verse, when John tells us that this is a brother who is committing this sin. The sin is not deadly, in other words, not because of its nature as a lesser sin but rather because of its agent, the believer. Sin can't kill the child of God! Now, of course, taken in the most literal sense, that statement becomes the anthem of the antinomians. If you believe that because you a Christian sin cannot harm you, and then you go and sin without remorse or repentance, you are not a child of God in the slightest. Rather, the reason sin can't kill the child of God is that God has committed to forgive and heal His children. If you are a Christian today, your sins are bad. But they are not ultimately fatal. Otherwise, we would have to posit that when the child of God sinned, there could be no forgiveness. A Christian who sinned would no longer be a forgiven Christian; he would once again be a Hell-bound non-believer.

Because Jesus' blood covers us, our sins don't kill us. We have eternal life from outside ourselves, from a supernatural source that sin can't touch, corrupt, or ruin. Sin destroys natural human life. But sin can never destroy God's eternal life that we share in Christ.

So when you understand that Christians' sins aren't fatal, you can and should pray for your fellow saint you see in sin. And it doesn't matter how bad the sin is. If you see a Christian committing it, there is hope, and you should pray. Let me ask you, then: How committed are you to praying for Christians you see messing up? Are you more likely to judge their sin or to pray for their sin? And for how long? What will linger with you over the coming months: the judgmental attitude, or the prayerful one?

So we've seen two pieces of the scenario. First of all, you and I are morally obligated to pray for any Christian we see sinning. Second, the non-deadly sin is something that only a believer can commit. Thus, John is repeating himself in one sense. The reason we can pray for a sinning brother is that the brother's sin isn't going to kill him regardless of our prayers.

C. When You Can Pass On God's Life, v. 16b

But John suggests a further tantalizing possibility. He talks about a scenario in which your prayers actually pass on God's life. When you pray, the power of God's eternal life is shared, not with you but rather through you.

Do you have this concept of prayer? Do you think of accessing and claiming God's life on behalf of someone else through getting on your knees and asking? If you actually believed that prayer could do this, would you pray harder? Prayer can raise the dead. Prayer can give a new dose of life to erring brothers and sisters. And so let your voice rise like a fountain day and night, as Tennyson says. Brothers and sisters, ask, and God will grant life. That is pretty astonishing. But you know what? It's true. There are parents in this room who can tell you how they got to see God give life to their child through their prayers.

II. When You Maybe Shouldn't Pray, vv. 16-17

But John presses beyond the seemingly obvious teaching that we ought to pray for our Christian brothers and sisters when they fall into sin. And he presses beyond it into a downright confusing topic: What are the limits of prayer? There are limits to prayer. The Bible is clear about that. God told Jeremiah repeatedly to stop praying for the people of Israel — indicating, presumably, that Jeremiah kept right on praying for them after the first two times God told him to quit. But the event shows that prayer has limits. John wants us to be aware of those limits.

A. When the Sinner Isn't a Brother, v. 16a

The first of them, it seems, is when the sinner isn't a brother. The scenario specifically mentioned seeing a brother committing a sin — with the implication that if you see a non-believer committing a sin, you are not obligated to ask God to give that sinner life. Why is this? Surely we are supposed to pray for the conversion of the lost? Of course we are. But when the lost are indulging in particular deadly sins, prayer may not be warranted. John doesn't say that you may never pray for deadly sins. But he does go out of his way to highlight that such prayers may be inadvisable, and certainly he says that he does not require them. So if you see a non-believer sinning, it may be okay to pray for him. But you don't have the same level of responsibility to pray that you do for a Christian brother.

B. When the Sin Appears Fatal, v. 16c

But John specifies further. When the sin appears fatal, prayer is likely not advisable. Now, what on earth does he mean by this fatal sin? Well, there are two ways we can think about this. One is the broader consideration that every unforgiven sin is fatal. You will die if your sins are not forgiven. You will perish if you don't believe in Jesus and accept His covering of your sins. This ties back to the earlier point, that if the sinner is not a brother then you know the sins are deadly. Unless they somehow change substantially, their sin will kill them. But another way to think

about the question of the deadly sin is to review what John has taught in this letter. He has called out a number of sins and labeled them as the opposite of life, as the teaching of antichrists, and as lies that put us in darkness.

1. The Fatal Sin of Denying Christ, 5:12, 4:1-3, 2:22-23

The one of these that he has majored on most clearly is the sin of denying Christ. The person who does not have the Son, who does not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, does not have God and does not have the life of God. He says clearly just before our text, “the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Who is it that abides in death? The person who does not confess Christ. It is a deadly sin to deny Christ. And so John seems to be suggesting that we need not necessarily pray for someone who denies Christ. We may not need to pray for someone who seems bound and determined to reject Jesus and His way of salvation.

2. The Fatal Sin of False Teaching, 2:19

But a second fatal sin is the sin of false teaching. John labels those who indulge in teaching falsehoods “antichrists,” and clearly implies that they do not have Christ or the Father — and thus, they do not have the eternal life of Christ or the Father. You do not necessarily need to pray for false teachers. They too may fall outside the limits of prayer.

3. The Fatal Sin of Excusing or Hiding Sin, 1:6-10

Finally, you don’t necessarily need to pray for those who are hiding in the darkness and refusing to confess their sins. Those who won’t confess, who won’t admit their own sinfulness, are close to being past the limits of prayer. They are borderline, maybe on this side of the border — or maybe on the far side. It is a judgment call on whether to pray for someone who prefers the darkness and thinks he can permanently hide his sin from the Father and from the church.

These are three fatal sins that John talks about. The first one is absolutely incompatible with sharing in God’s life. The other two are at least potentially incompatible with sharing God’s life. But certainly in someone who isn’t a brother anyway, they are all sins that lead to death.

III. Why You Maybe Shouldn’t Pray

Now, that said, why does John say this? What is the reasoning behind this odd warning, comparable only to God’s prohibition of Jeremiah’s prayers?

A. Even an Apostle Can’t Be Sure When You Shouldn’t Pray

The first thing to note here is that this is not a direct command. You and I are not absolutely forbidden from praying for non-Christians who are committing the sins leading to death. Even an apostle can’t be sure when you shouldn’t pray. That’s how delicate this subject is, how tricky it is. You may be perfectly right to pray for the most hardened sinner, the most unrepentant walker in darkness who denies Christ and teaches falsehoods about Him.

B. Your Overzealous Pleading Identifies You with the Wicked

But beware. If you insist on praying for such a person, it is only too easy to subtly alter your request from “God, please forgive and save Adolf (to name our hypothetical wicked person) through the sacrifice and merits of your Son Jesus” to “God, please go easy on Adolf even though he won’t submit to your Son.”

C. God Won't Save Outside His Way of Salvation (His Son)

You see, the Bible is clear that there is one way of salvation, and that that way is found in Jesus. To be saved, you must submit to Him, obey Him, seek His forgiveness, and walk in the light. If you begin to pray that someone would be saved without following the one way that is found in Jesus, then you have left the Christian faith behind and are asking for something else.

Let me put it this way. Back in the seventeenth century, in the era of Reformed and Lutheran Scholasticism, a debate roiled the theologians of Christendom. Is it true, they asked, to say that good works are necessary to salvation? Brothers and sisters, the Reformed and Roman Catholics alike answer with an unequivocal “Yes”. If your prayers begin to edge into the territory of suggesting that maybe Adolf can be saved without any good works, if you want to plead with God to save him without repentance, faith, and obedience, then you are getting perilously close to taking the side of the wicked over against God. If your prayer implies that you think God's mercy in Christ isn't wide enough, that He isn't generous enough with His salvation, that the way is too narrow and the path too hard, then you are not asking according to His will. You are not taking your stand with God as one who shares His eternal life through His Son. That is the only basis for prayer, John just told us in the previous verses. And thus, he spells out this implication: If you want to pray for anyone's sin to be excused, as opposed to forgiven, then you are not praying as a Christian. Quite the opposite. You are praying as a non-believer. You are asking that the path of death not lead to its destination this time, rather than asking that God would put Adolf onto the right path. Brothers and sisters, the greatest danger here is in praying for ourselves — praying that God would overlook our sins, that He would give us every spiritual blessing even as we persist in the sin that cuts us off from those blessings. If you plead for the wicked on your terms instead of God's, you are in great danger of identifying more with them than with Him. If you plead for yourself on your terms, you are already identifying with your sin rather than with your Savior.

John is warning us not to stand on that ground. He's telling us that no one is off limits to prayer per se — but that if you pray for God to overlook certain things, and especially if you pray for Him to overlook them outside of His declared way of mercy in Christ, then you are at risk. You are doing something of which the Almighty can hardly approve.

You share the life of God, Christian. Pray for your brothers and sisters to share it too. But beware of praying for anyone outside of that circle to share it in a way not authorized by God. Yes, by all means pray for repentance, for Adolf and every nonbeliever to leave the path of death, turn around, and walk on the path of life. But don't you dare pray that God would suspend the rules this time, that in just this special case the path of death would lead to Heaven for you, for your child, your friends, your pastor, or anyone else. No matter how dear the person is to you, don't do it. If the path of death could lead to life, Jesus died in vain. Don't dishonor Him by suggesting that His death was unnecessary, that you or your loved one can be saved without Him. You can't. Only in Jesus is salvation to be found. So pray for everyone to find Him — but don't

pray for anyone to find life apart from His work. You have life in Him, and only in Him. Never forget it. Amen.