

Praying for Sinning Christians

The Certainty of Faith

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Turn in your Bibles, if you would, to 1 John 5 as we also mark the passage of time as we come near to the end of our exposition of 1 John. All kinds of milestones coming and going here. 1 John 5 is where we are going to be in verses 16 and 17.

The Apostle John is drawing near to the end of his letter as we come to this passage, and he's really summarizing it, he has brought the letter to its climax here and he is reiterating the privileges of eternal life and I'm going to read verses 13 through 17 to start us, and then we will focus on the last two verses of the passage. 1 John 5:13, the apostle wrote,

13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 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. 16 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 request for this. 17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

This is a wonderful passage designed to instill confidence in those who are true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. First of all, a confidence, an assurance that you actually possess eternal life never to be taken away from you. John says in verse 13, "This is the whole reason I wrote, is so that you would know that you have eternal life." Confidence. Spiritual confidence as you walk through this life knowing that it's ultimately going to lead you to your heavenly home. So that's why he wrote.

Now, as we said last time that I was up here, which I guess was three weeks ago, that assurance isn't a cul-de-sac. It's not meant to stop there. Assurance is simply a checkpoint on the way to something else and that something else is found in verse 14 when John says, "This is the confidence which we have before Him." This is what assurance is supposed to lead to, it's supposed to lead to a confidence in prayer. He says, verse 14, our confidence is, "that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." And not only

does he hear us, verse 15, when we ask, "we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." And we talked about the limits, the contours of that promise of answered prayer last time, but the idea is that assurance isn't an end in itself, it's a means to spiritual growth, a means to growing in prayer, a means to confidence when we approach the throne of God, and that's all designed to motivate us. It motivates us to pray. It motivates us to pray with confidence because we know that having been reconciled to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our heavenly Father hears us with favor when we come before him. So this is all an atmosphere of confidence, an atmosphere of assurance, a vertical confidence with God that is the birthright of every true Christian. It's a wonderful concept to think about and to meditate upon. We have confidence before God when we pray and we have that confidence because we know that eternal life is our irrevocable possession as Christians. So we walk through life and we pray from a foundation of confidence and that's what John has written this whole letter to inculcate into us.

Now, having said all of that and transitioning into the last two verses here of the passage that I read, the key for us to recognize is that even that confidence in prayer is not a cul-de-sac. It's not an end. It's not primarily about us, per se, and what I mean by that is this: is that prayer is not meant to be superficial and, furthermore, prayer is not meant to be selfish. It's not meant to be self-centered. It's not meant to be a means by which we take advantage of our privilege and position before God so that our own individual lives are ordered according to our own liking. No, John goes on and shows us in verses 16 through 17 where a maturing Christian's prayer life should take him, and it's a place of intercession, it is a place of concern for other believers as we pray.

Now, throughout the letter, if you've been with us for any length of time here in Grace Life, you know that John has said throughout this letter that the Christian life, true Christians are known by a couple of different things, at least two that we we'll mention here this morning. True Christians are marked by a love for other believers. They are marked by a love for the brethren. They love the body of Christ because other Christians share the same supernatural life that God has given to each one of us in the miracle of regeneration. When God caused you to be born again, he put a spiritual life that is like unto his own spiritual life, and that is now what animates your existence. Well, a true Christian when he encounters other Christians who have that same kind of life, that same life from God, we are drawn to each other like magnets. That's why the body of Christ comes together, we are drawn together by that shared spiritual life that we have and we love one another because of it. We love one another because we see the image of God in that person, but also we realize that there is a shared spiritual life that we have together that is of great consequence and a reflection of our deepest affections.

Now, keeping that in mind, this love for other brethren, watch this: true Christians are also marked by a love for holiness. They are marked by a desire for righteousness. John said in 1 John 3:7, he said, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous." Verse 9, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he

is born of God." And so there is this orientation not only towards love but toward holiness and righteousness as well that is the mark of the true Christian.

Now, that's just by way of background. This is all energy that has been building up into the climax that John leads us to here, and with those things in mind, where he goes with prayer is going to be very evident and self-explanatory to you.

Go back to our passage now in 1 John 5:13 through 15 here. John says that he has written these things that we might know eternal life and he goes into the whole area of Christian prayer and he says in verse 15, "if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Here's the question, here's the question: with that kind of inestimable privilege before the throne of God, what does someone do with that who has a burning love for other Christians and a consuming desire and passion for righteousness? What do you do with that? Well, in light of those broader themes, the answer to what we do with prayer is obvious. This is obvious even though I think it's probably an area of weakness for us in the American church and even, let me say, within the walls of Grace Life. We could do better at this. The answer is obvious. If you've got those desires in your heart and you have a privilege of God in prayer, it's obvious what you're going to do with it. The answer is, what are you going to do with it? We will pray so that others will receive the spiritual benefit of our intercession. When we go to prayer, we don't disconnect ourselves from our love for the brothers, we don't disconnect ourselves from our desire, our passion for righteousness; and when we go to prayer, we want to plug those two desires in together into one unified petition before the throne of God that says, "God, my desire is to see that the brothers that I love manifest the righteousness and holiness in their lives that I also love and that I know is a priority to you." That becomes a guiding principle in the way that we intercede for one another.

I understand, and there are a couple of things that should be said here, I understand that just culturally the way that we interact, we don't really expose ourselves too much in terms of the struggles that we have with one another. We are more private than that. But the discerning growing Christian understands that the other brothers in Christ that he knows that are in one manner or another experiencing the same kinds of struggles with sin that he himself is, I know that you are struggling and battling with sin in one manner or another, and you know that that's true about me. Our words, our actions, our motives, they are not all that they could be. Not one of us has reached a stage of perfection. The truth of the matter is that perfection is still future to us. The truth of the matter is that our daily outworking of our salvation leaves a lot to be desired, doesn't it? It's okay, you can nod and agree with me. I'm not wearing my glasses so I can't really see how vigorously you are agreeing with me anyways, so feel free to agree without the threat that, "Oh, the pastor is going to know too much about me if I agree too much." Look, I already know about you. I read my Bible so I know about you and if you read your Bible, you know about me. We're all in this together. We're all in this together, this body life together, of growing in righteousness but falling short is something that we are all in together. So motivated by a love for one another, motivated by a love for holiness, we realize that when we go to prayer before God, that one of the surpassing and enduring aspects of our

prayer life is to ask God to help our brothers and sisters in Christ grow in holiness. We love them and we want what's best for them. We want what God wants for them and that's what God wants for us, he wants us to grow in holiness.

So that is where John is going as we come to verse 16 and we're going to look at two different points here from verses 16 and 17 as we consider the topic of praying for sinning Christians. If you want a title to right at the top of your notes, if you're taking notes, that's the title of today's message, "Praying for Sinning Christians," and we're just going to have two points that John brings out of this passage here. The first point is this, is that we're going to discuss the expectation of effective intercession. The expectation of effective intercession, the idea that you and I as Christians would be praying for the spiritual growth of the Christians around us as an expected part of the Christian life. John makes that plain to us, and when we pray, we should be concerned to see other Christians advance in holiness.

Look at verse 16 as we dive into the text here. John says,

16 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.

Let's stop there for now. He says if anyone, well, he's writing to the church. He's talking about anyone within the body of Christ. If anyone in the body of Christ sees his brother, that is another Christian, committing a sin not leading to death, well, what does that person who sees this sin do? What does he do? He writes it in the future tense, in the future indicative. This is the expected response when you see that situation, it's obvious and natural what you will do as someone who loves Christians and desires holiness not just in your own life but throughout the body of Christ. If that's your desire and that's the desire of every true Christian based on everything that John has said up to this point, then when you see that situation, your response is going to be obvious. You're going to turn in prayer to God for that person and ask him to help them and to intervene so that they might turn away from that sin and grow in holiness. This passage, in other words, teaches us to expect to see Christians in sin from time to time; that there are going to be times where we see each other falling short of the glory of God as we walk through life and in the outworking of our salvation. It tells us to expect that and it tells us how to respond to it. This is very practical for our relationships within the body and it is transforming in our approach to prayer.

Think about it this way with me, the concept of love amongst the body. We are used to thinking about the concept of love as responding to believers who have physical needs. They are in illness, they are in material poverty or whatever, and we say, "Okay, I have the physical means, I have the resources that I can help relieve their suffering, and out of love for them, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to look to alleviate their physical suffering." Now, that is good and that is right and that is what we should do.

Look over to chapter 3, verse 16, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." So what he's saying is, in this concept of Christian love that is a reflection of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf, when we see a brother in physical need and we have the world's goods that are necessary to relieve that, it's obvious that we would show a similar spirit of sacrifice in order to relieve their physical need. That's the idea, and so it is good and right for us to do that. That is an expression of true Christian love, but as good and proper and necessary as that is, that's not the point for today. That's not John's point here in chapter 5. He is moving beyond the physical needs to teach us another aspect about our love for one another, and what this passage, chapter 5, verses 16 and 17 are teaching us, is this passage teaches us that that same spirit of Christian love also responds to believers who are in spiritual need. They have fallen into sin. They are falling short of the glory of God and you see that, you observe that in real time. Well, the question is: what do you do? And the answer is for us to remember that we have the spiritual means of prayer to help them recover, and notice the certainty of this; this is such an untapped resource that we have in the body of Christ to help one another walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord who saved us.

Go back to verse 14 with all of this in mind. John says, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 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." Now, having said that, he goes into verse 16 and says, "If you see your brother in sin, you shall ask and God will give him life." This is an extension of the assurance that we have in salvation; it is an extension of the promise that we have from God in prayer that he answers our prayers.

Now, with everything that we've said here, isn't it obvious that if we see one another falling short of the glory of God in their lives, that we would go to prayer and say, "God, increase their sanctification. Help them to grow from where they are at to a place of greater conformity to Christ. O God, I see that they have sinned. I saw his angry reaction. Father, would you work in his life and help him to respond in a way that is righteous and godly? And by the way, Father, as I pray that, I realize that I am prone to the same sins as well. So, Father, I'm not praying in a spirit of pride and condescension toward this brother, I'm praying in a spirit of love knowing that I am also a man of flesh, I am also a man who falls short but, Father, out of my love for your holiness and my love for my brother, I ask you to work in his life to greater sanctify him so that he might better understand and better experience the blessings of walking an obedient Christian life." That's the idea.

Compare that manner of praying that John brings us to here in verse 16 with, "Dear Father, please help Aunt Martha with her toe fungus. I know that that toe fungus is bad. Would you help her with her toe fungus and relieve her suffering?" That's so superficial, isn't it? When we get serious about what John says in this letter, when we get serious about what he says in this passage, we realize that our prayer lives have been superficial

in that we need to grow in prayer in order to conform ourselves to what Scripture calls us to, and also to advance and to grow into what God would have us to be because you're like me, most of you anyway, you don't want to be a superficial Christian, do you? You don't want to be a mediocre believer. You want to grow in holiness. Well, here is a particular means of growing in holiness that the Scripture lays out to us, out of love for God's glory and love for the brethren, we should be consistently and persistently praying that God would soften the hearts of believers against sin and help them better live the spiritual life that he has already given to them.

So when we see a brother sinning, we avoid the immediate harsh judgment that we are prone to. "He calls himself a Christian, look at what he's doing." We avoid the gossip. "Hey, do you know what John is doing? Come here, I'll tell you." You avoid the frustration. "My family member, my spouse, oh my goodness. I am so frustrated that they don't get this." You steer your heart away from all of those things and you take the humble posture of a praying Christian and you go to God and you ask God to do what you yourself cannot do, which is to increase their sanctification and enable them to overcome remaining sin in their lives. You will be a far more effective Christian and a far better assistance to one another in our spiritual lives if rather than being a spiritual nag and saying, "You shouldn't be doing that," if your immediate response becomes one of going to God in prayer and saying, "Father, I see them. Please give them life. Please enhance their sanctification. Please turn their heart and soften it so that they will be in a position better to live for you." That's the idea.

Now when you pray like that, this passage is teaching us that God will move in response to your prayer so that that sinning believer will, in fact, turn from sin as part of God's overall faithfulness to hear us when we pray. You have in the gift of prayer that God has given to us, the gift of prayer that God has given us before his throne, you have enormous power for spiritual good in the lives of other believers, and I daresay that none of us do all that we could to take advantage of that, and when we get consumed with our own life circumstances in prayer, we are neglecting the brothers that we supposedly love and the force that we have for good in their lives by asking God to turn them spiritually into greater, more sanctified believers than what they are right now. We really have to get beyond our self-centered approach to praying and our consumption with our own circumstances to look beyond ourselves, beyond our immediate circle, and say, "What are the believers around me going through? I see them struggling in sin. Ah, I need to pray for them." Right there is the engagement of battle that needs to take place. We have to pray for one another and we have to pray for one another seriously at a deep profound level, praying for them out of a sympathy that knows what it's like personally to struggle with indwelling sin, to try to overcome temptation, and sometimes fail. You know, if you know that by experience and you see your brother like that, then you say, "O God, I must intercede now for him. Please help him, Father, and I pray this knowing that if I ask according to your will, you hear us, and that if you hear us, I have the request that I'm asking. I have the request of seeing this brother advance in Christ."

Why would we not pray like that all the time? Could it be that the fact that we don't is a reflection of our own spiritual lack and our own spiritual poverty? Could it be that we all

need to grow in this manner? I think that's part of the reason why John points this out to us because notice what he says, he says, "If you see this, if anyone sees his brother sinning like that, he will ask and God will give life." It's expected. This is the expected response when we see those occasions of sin in those around us, and we are happy to pray this way, we are joyful to pray this way because we want to use prayer to benefit others and to benefit them spiritually.

Now, this kind of praying follows the model of Christ. Let me illustrate this for you. Turn back to the Gospel of John, if you would, John 17. Jesus is praying in his high priestly prayer, John 17:13. How did Jesus pray to the Father as he has prayed for his disciples? Look at the way he prays in verse 13, he says, "now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." So Jesus in the midst of his own trial, in the midst of facing the cross within 24 hours, knowing fully that that is what is about to come, even in the midst of that kind of trial, he is praying for his disciples. He is praying for those around him and I am so encouraged and challenged and rebuked all at the same time by the way that he prayed for them. "Father, I pray for their joy. Promote joy in their lives, and not just joy, Father, but my joy, and not just my joy but, Father, made full in them. Father, I pray for their joy." Verse 15, "Father, keep them from the evil one. Father, I know that they will be tempted. I ask you to keep them from the evil one. I ask you to preserve them." He is interceding for them in light of the spiritual challenges that await them. On the positive side, give them full joy. On the negative side, keep them from the evil one.

You can see this illustrated more specifically if you turn over back a Gospel to the Gospel of Luke in chapter 22. Luke 22 where Jesus is, again, with his disciples, soon to go to the garden of Gethsemane, and he calls out Peter, calling him by his former name in verse 31 and he said, "Simon, Simon," chapter 22, verse 31, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Knowing full well that Peter was about to deny him with curses three times, Jesus nevertheless prays for him. "Father, help his faith not to fail. Father, once he has turned, may he strengthen his brothers. Work in his life to overcome this sin and temptation. Work in his life to sanctify him further once he has come back." That's the Lord's model of prayer. This is the spiritual maturity that is laid out before us as well. You see, what John is saying here is that your prayer life should be a means of facilitating another believer's walk with the Lord; that the Lord would guide him away from sin and into the paths of righteousness; away from discouragement and despair and into full joy.

That's the way that we are supposed to pray for one another and you pray that way even though you are doing this privately in your own prayer closet, as it were. Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will be happy to reward you." This isn't a manner of

praying that we come in on Sunday morning and we announce to one another. This is the faithful burden of your heart in your private prayer before God, that you would be interceding faithfully for other believers. There is no pride of recognition that accompanies this but you are happy to pray this way because you know it's what God calls for. You are happy to pray this way because you love the one for whom you are praying. And the truth of the matter is that a lot of our family relationships would get a whole lot better if we focused on this rather than confronting one another about sin and nagging one another, "You're still like this after blah blah years. Blah blah blah. I'm frustrated and irritated." Okay, if you're frustrated and irritated and the person is actually sinning, okay, let's see you go to prayer about it. Let's pray about that and trust the Lord to honor his promise to give us what we ask because that intercession has effective results.

So you have the expectation of effective intercession. This is what we do as Christians when we see other believers in sin, but there is an exception to it that he goes into. This leads us to our second point: it's the exception to effective intercession. You have the expectation of effective intercession, if you see your brother sinning, ask, God will give him life, God will restore him. So you pray that way but John goes on to say there is an exception here. In this overall context of confidence, of answered prayer, of the spiritual dimension to our prayer lives, John gives this very interesting and difficult to understand exception at the end of verse 16. Look at it with me, he says,

There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

Now, this is obscure and commentators differ widely over its meaning, and I was reminded of something as I was reading the different ways that commentators have treated this and I want to give you a little insight to reading commentaries if you are of a mind to do such things. When you come to a passage where there are widely divergent views and supported in different ways, watch out, in fact you can almost expect commentators in the midst of that to deny the complication of it by saying something like, "It's perfectly obvious what John means here." Well, it's not perfectly obvious and the fact of the matter is if it's perfectly obvious, you could just explain it without, in a sense, pounding your fist on the desk saying, "This is obvious." Well, if it's so obvious, why are there so many different interpretations about this? Why is it so difficult? And you know, people say, "Well, it's clear that this is what he means." Well, it's not clear what he means and you're only saying clear in order to cover for your own lack of ability to be fully persuasive on your own view. So the fact that a commentator tells you, "This is perfectly clear," doesn't mean that it actually is, you just kind of have to look beneath the surface there and realize that this a writing convention, not necessarily a manner of explaining exactly what the passage means. This is a difficult passage and I'm not going to pretend that it's clear when it isn't.

Now, what are some of the possible views? We're talking about the exception to effective intercession. He's obviously making an exception here. He says you see a sin not leading to death, ask and God will give him life, but then he qualifies it, he says there is a sin

leading to death; I don't say that you should make request about this. So he's made this broad statement, God answers prayer, God answers prayers when we pray for sinning believers, but then he steps back a bit and says, but realize that there is a sin that leads to death and I'm not really talking about that.

What are some ways we can understand this? Well, this is a sub point. Possible views, views which I don't personally believe are accurate but here are some possible views. First of all, some say that when John talks about the sin that leads to death, he's referring to the Old Testament classification of sins that would require the death penalty: blasphemy and adultery and things like that. But there is nothing really in the context of 1 John to support that. He hasn't been going back and forth on the application of Old Testament law so I don't find that view very persuasive.

Others think that John is referring to a sin that leads to eternal spiritual death. Eternal spiritual death, so some have suggested that it might be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Look over to the Gospel of Mark for just a second, Gospel of Mark 3, beginning in verse 28. Mark 3:28. This is what some have suggested as a possibility of what the sin unto death might be. Mark 3:28, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin -- because they were saying Jesus had an unclean spirit." So obviously there is no forgiveness for this. It's an eternal sin. Maybe that's the sin leading to death that John is talking about.

Turn back to 1 John now. Still others think that perhaps when he talks about the sin of death, and this is a more persuasive possibility, John is speaking about the false teachers that he has been refuting throughout the letter, those false teachers who abandon the faith, then they are pursuing a course that leads to spiritual death. Look at chapter 2, verse 22. Stay with me here. Chapter 2, verse 22, John says, "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son." So in the context of 1 John, these people believe that John is referring to the false teachers who were once inside the body but they have left and departed and now they are denying Christ. That is the sin of death in the context of the letter of 1 John and that's a view that several more recent commentators would hold to.

Now, let me say that those views are not unreasonable. The false teacher view is particularly attractive in some ways, and that's why I say they are possible views of this passage, but when it's all said and done, I think that those views are mistaken. I don't think that John is talking about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit here. I don't think he's referring to false teachers in this context. Those things are deadly sins, they do lead to spiritual eternal death, eternal destruction, but that's not the question as to whether those sins are like that. The question is what is John talking about here? What is he talking about in this context?

Go back to verse 16, chapter 5, verse 16, as we've taken a little side view, a little side tour of the possible views of this passage. Look at verse 16 with me again. He says, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death." He's talking about the

brother. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death. He's referring to a Christian there. Look at the way that he uses the term "brother" elsewhere in the letter. Chapter 2, verse 10, just a quick and incomplete word study of "brother" here in the book of 1 John. Chapter 2, verse 10, John says, "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him." It's a reference to a Christian. Look at chapter 3, verse 14, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren." Not our biological siblings but our brothers and sisters in Christ. We love the brethren. "He who does not love abides in death." Chapter 4, verse 21, "this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also." The brother, the brother, the brother in the context of the body of Christ.

Now go into chapter 5. We go to chapter 5 again, keeping all of these things in mind, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God." This whole paragraph opens with, he makes it clear who he is addressing, "I am addressing those of you who believe in the Son of God, the name of the Son of God, those of you that have eternal life and now if you see your brother" – look, he's talking about Christians here, he's talking about the body of Christ here – so it seems to me that the context is that he is talking about Christians who sin and when he talks about the sin leading to death, notice in verse 16, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death," then he says, "There is a sin leading to death," notice that he doesn't change the subject. He doesn't say, "There are people outside of Christ who commit sins that lead to death." He doesn't say that. He's just continuing on the same train of thought where he has been addressing Christians, life in the body, and how we pray for other believers.

Now, if that's true, my whole interpretation of this passage, I'm free to acknowledge, hinges on my understanding of the word "brother" there. If you disagree with that, you're not going to agree with my interpretation of what follows. But if that's true that he's talking about a Christian sinning unto death, then the sin unto death cannot be blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It can't be because that's an eternal sin that Jesus says isn't forgiven. It can't be referring to false teachers who abandon the faith. John says in chapter 2, verse 19, those people were never Christians to begin with. They went out so that it would be shown that they were never of us. So he can't be talking about false teachers, he's not talking about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, and so what does he mean when he talks about the sin that leads to death as an exception to effective intercession? Well, sub point B here. We looked at possible views, now we're going to look at the preferred view. Sub point B: the preferred view, and what John is referring to here as I understand the passage and other good commentators, it's clear. Okay, good. You're tracking with me. That's awesome. That's just so awesome that you caught that and realized what I was doing. The preferred view, thank you for that amen. I hope that gets picked up on the tape. The preferred view here in my judgment is that John is referring to the physical death of a sinning believer. He's looking at the physical death of a sinning believer.

Let's step back for a moment here. I'll put my glasses back on so that we can look at the big picture. We need to keep a big picture in mind as we consider what he means here. God takes holiness seriously. That's the big picture here. 1 John 1:5, "God is Light, and

there is no darkness in Him." God takes holiness seriously because he himself is holy, and he takes the holiness of his people seriously. Matthew 18, as you well know in this church, Matthew 18 gives us a process by which we deal with professing Christians who sin in the church and there is a process of increasing confrontation to deal with that sin so that holiness would be provoked rather than sin being tolerated in the church. God has established that; Christ established that as a means of protecting the purity of the body. Holiness is serious to God. That's important.

Now, with that in mind, remember Hebrews 12, and I want to take you to Hebrews 12 here. Hebrews 12:5, please turn in your Bibles so that you can see this on the page of your own Bible even as I read it. Hebrews 12:5. You must remember that God takes sin seriously and he disciplines his children. Chapter 12, verse 5 of Hebrews says, "you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.'" Look down at verse 9, just for the sake of time, "Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." Verse 11, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Here's all I'm saying: God takes holiness seriously and he disciplines his children when they fall short of his holiness. Believers that start to stray into sin are going to feel the providential rebuke of the hand of God with painful circumstances or rebuke from the Scriptures or confrontation from other believers. They are going to feel a pushback which comes from God to slow them down in their sin; to turn them away because God takes holiness seriously.

God disciplines his people. I think that's the overall biblical context that underlies what John is saying here. There is a sin that leads to death. God disciplines his people but unto death? I mean, physically dying as a result of the discipline of God? Is that what Scripture would teach? Yeah, in an answer. You remember Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira. They came and they lied. Let's look at the passage here, Acts 5. We'll have to go through these two or three examples rather quickly so forgive me in advance. Acts 5, the believers were selling property, bringing it to the apostles and donating the proceeds for the good of the whole church, and you know the story, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, kept some of the money for themselves and then told the apostles that they were giving them the full price and Peter said in verse 3, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, wasn't it yours? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Where are you coming in here lying to us about how much you are actually giving? You have not lied to men but to God." Verse 5, "And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it." A couple three hours later, Sapphira met the same fate.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 5. Peter told Ananias, "You just lied to God." Dead. 1 Corinthians 5:1 where gross immorality was pervasive inside the walls of the church, Paul said, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst." God takes holiness seriously. Why haven't you acted on this? Paul says, "For my part, I have already judged him who has so committed this as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Paul says and this is very sobering, we are on very holy ground here, Paul says the time for praying is over. It's time to purge this sin out of the church and so I am handing this man over to Satan so that his flesh will be destroyed. Pretty serious stuff.

Look at 1 Corinthians 11 in a place where many people wouldn't expect to find the Lord's discipline ending up in death. Verse 28 in the context of taking the Lord's supper, chapter 11, verse 28, he says, "a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." Using a metaphor for death. Some of you have died as a result of the casual flippant way that you approach the Lord's table. "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world." So this discipline happened so that you won't encounter the eternal judgment that those in the world experience.

Now, taking those three passages together, the one from Acts and the two in 1 Corinthians, what I want you to see is that the sin that led to death in those instances, it was not one specific sin that they had committed but rather all of these situations, it reflected a defiant believer who had deliberately insulted the holiness of God. There was a defiance in the face of the holiness of God and it resulted in physical death to them.

Now, go back to 1 John with that little context in mind, in 1 John 5, and we'll see if we can't wrap this up. What does John say about that kind of sin? There is a sin leading to death, he says, "I do not say that he should make request for this." Notice that John does not forbid prayer in these situations but he is telling us not to be surprised if that kind of intercession in that particular situation doesn't turn out like you had hoped. You see, he has inculcated to us in verses 13 through 15 to expect God's answers to our prayers which are according to God's will. Our working assumption if John didn't give us this qualification, this exception, would be, "Well, I'm praying to see the holiness of God manifested in this person's life. That surely is consistent with God's will and, therefore, I expect that result to be manifest, some point, in response to my prayers." John says, "You can't take it that far." Yes, God hears our intercession favorably but – oh, follow this because I think this is so helpful – God hears our intercession favorably but he reserves to himself his sovereign prerogative of divine discipline. We do not override God's sovereign prerogatives as he deals with individual believers in the body of Christ and in

God's wisdom and judgment and by his sovereign prerogative, even though we are praying for this person, God may bring them to physical death despite the way that you've been praying. That's very sobering and all of a sudden when you realize that when we are praying and engaging in prayer in this level, this is really serious stuff. This is sobering serious principles that the word of God brings out for us.

Why does John say that here? Why does he allude to this kind of divine sovereign prerogative of discipline for a sinning believer here? He is doing it for this reason: he is guarding you through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he is guarding you from discouragement and despair. When you pray for a sinning believer and that person somehow dies without visible repentance, you should not think that God has broken his promise to always answer these kinds of prayers to you. You should not think that God has failed you. On a human personal level – follow me here because some of you have lived through this – you should not think that you didn't pray enough. This relieves you from the sense of guilt that comes from saying, "If only I had prayed more than maybe this wouldn't have happened. Maybe the result would've been different." No, what John is saying here is that God will not always do what you want in these kinds of extreme situations. You would prefer to see repentance, God very well may prefer to see death in order to remove that blight from the body of Christ and to vindicate the holiness of his own name.

Notice here, John really doesn't give us much detail about this. He doesn't give us an idea, he doesn't give us qualifications to say, "Here is how you can recognize when a person has stepped into that realm." And we need to learn from that. We need to be humbled here on this holy ground. John does not tell us about the sin that leads to death – follow me – John isn't telling us this so that we can evaluate how far someone has gone into sin and then decide whether we should stop praying for them or not. That is not the point of this discussion at all. If that was the point, he would have clarified and then he would've said, "Once you recognize this, I forbid you to pray this way." He doesn't say that. He simply is saying, he's giving a gentle qualification saying, "I'm not saying you should make request about that one way or the other." What he is doing here rather than giving us a weapon of judgment to make against other believers, he is giving us an instrument of protection for our own spiritual confidence which is the whole context of verses 13 through 17. He is protecting our confidence by telling us in advance to expect sometimes different answers to our intercession than we otherwise would have expected and he's saying, "When you see that different answer, don't let your confidence be shaken. Understand that there are limits. God has reserved a sphere of prerogative to himself that even your prayers don't enter into but you can still trust him the same because he's always acting according to his holiness and goodness when he deals with his people."

That's the idea and so we are expected to pray when we see believers in sin. We pray for them to repent. We pray for God to work in their lives, to enlarge the sphere of their spiritual capacity so that they would walk in greater holiness, but as we do that, we realize that there may be times where we see an unexpected answer and we don't get to see visible repentance before that person dies, physically dies. John says, "God orders

things this way so don't let that shake your confidence. There are limits to God's promise to respond to these kinds of prayers." That's the exception.

Now, final comment here on verse 17. He has taken a tangent into this exception and now he brings it back in verse 17 to close the thought of the paragraph. He says,

17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

What he's saying here is, "I've made a distinction between sins that don't lead to death and sins that do." He says, "Don't make the mistake of thinking that some sins aren't serious, then." He says, "All unrighteousness, comprehensively speaking, all unrighteousness is sin, and so don't get careless about other sins simply because there are some sins that lead to death. All unrighteousness is sin, and a true Christian tolerates no sin in his life." We don't grade it and say, "Okay, this isn't so bad so I can make room for this." No, all unrighteousness is sin to be expelled like a cancer from the body. So he gives this final assertion, there is a sin not unto death, simply to bring us back full circle to the encouragement to pray. All sin is serious but it's not beyond the reach of prayer. We need to intercede for the saints.

So as we respond to this passage, our concern should not be curiosity with the exception, we need to see the big picture of what John is saying, and what he is saying is that our prior lives should be marked by fruitful intercession for fellow Christians because we ourselves have an assurance of eternal life. If you see a Christian in sin, if you see someone in your family dealing with sin and their sin begins to grate on you, don't get discouraged or frustrated by that, don't let yourself give into a fleshly response, the godly response is to love them and to pray for them. Take advantage of your favored position with your heavenly Father in order to benefit your brothers and sisters in Christ. That's what this is teaching us. We pray at a serious level about serious things for brethren whom we seriously love, and when we do, this passage promises us that God will answer our prayers and bring about a spiritual result that is good and fruitful and will be pleasing to you and pleasing to the one for whom you have prayed.

Speaking of which, let's pray.

Father, as we come before you today, we thank you for this difficult passage. We respect your holiness as we come before you. Father, as we come, we love the brothers and we realize that each one of us fall short in one way or another. Father, I pray for each one under the sound of my voice. I pray for them as they deal with sin in their lives, some having come in here harboring it and holding onto it. Father, I pray that you would grant them repentance and a spirit of life that would cause them to have a softened heart and to turn from it. Father, help us all to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May this all be for your glory and for our eternal good, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Praying for Sinning Christians

1 John 5:16-17

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The apostle John is drawing near the end of his message. As he concludes his epistle, he reiterates the privileges of eternal life.

Read 1 John 5:13-17.

Assurance motivates us to pray. God hears us favorably. But prayer is not selfish or superficial. So how do we pray?

John says the Christian life is marked by love and the pursuit of holiness. In light of those broader themes, the answer is obvious.

We pray so others would receive the spiritual benefit.

1. The Expectation of Effective Intercession

When we pray, we should be concerned to see other Christians advance in holiness.

Read 1 John 5:16.

This passage teaches us to expect to see Christians sin and how to respond to it. It is very practical for our relationships as Christians.

We are used to thinking about love responding to believers in physical need. We have physical means that we use to relieve their physical suffering. That is good and right.

This passage teaches us that love also responds to believers in spiritual need. They have fallen into sin. We have the spiritual means of prayer to help them recover.

Out of love for God’s glory and love for the brethren, we should pray that God would soften their hearts against sin and help them better live the spiritual life that He has already given to them. We avoid harsh judgments, gossip, or frustration. Instead, we ask God to do what we cannot do—increase their sanctification and enable them to overcome remaining sin in their lives.

When we pray like that, this passage teaches us that God will move the sinning believer to turn from sin as part of God’s overall faithfulness to hear us when we pray.

We are happy to pray this way because we want to use prayer to benefit others. This kind of praying follows the model of Christ.

Read John 17:13-17.

Father, promote joy in them. Father, keep them from the evil one. Consider also Jesus’ prayer for Peter before he lapsed into denial.

Read Luke 22:32.

Your prayer life should help other believers walk with the Lord, even though only you and God know about it. That intercession has effective results. But there is an exception.

2. The Exception to Effective Intercession

The results of our intercession are not always what we expect.

Read 1 John 5:16.

This is an obscure passage and commentators differ widely over its meaning. What is “sin that leads to death”?

A. Possible Views

Some say it refers to the Old Testament classification of sins that require the death penalty. But nothing in the context supports that. Others think John is referring to a sin that leads to eternal death. So it might be the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Read Mark 3:28-30.

Still others think it refers to the false teachers who abandoned the faith. They pursue a course of that leads to spiritual death.

Read 1 John 2:22.

Those views are not unreasonable. But I think they are mistaken. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and false teaching are deadly sins, but that's not what John is talking about in *this* context.

Read 1 John 5:16.

He says "If anyone sees his *brother* committing a sin not leading to death." That refers to a Christian.

Read 1 John 2:10, 3:14, 4:21.

He doesn't change the subject with the sin that *does* lead to death. So it seems to me that the context is about Christians who sin.

If that's true, the sin unto death cannot be blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It has no forgiveness. It cannot be false teachers who abandon the faith. They were not Christians to begin with.

Read 1 John 2:19.

So what does John mean by "the sin that leads to death?"

B. Preferred View

John is referring to the physical death of a sinning believer.

Let's look at the big picture. God takes holiness seriously. Matthew 18 deals with sin in the church. Remember Hebrews 12.

Read Hebrews 12:5-10.

God disciplines His people. But *unto death*? Yes.

Read Acts 5:3-5.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

Paul says, "The time for praying is over. It's time to purge this sin out of the church." Look at one more.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28-32.

Taken together, these passages depict not one specific sin but a defiant believer who deliberately insults the holiness of God.

What does John say about praying for this kind of sin?

"I do not say he should make request for this." John does not forbid prayer in those situations, but he tells us not to be surprised if your intercession does not turn out like you had hoped.

God hears our intercession favorably, but He reserves His sovereign prerogative of discipline. He may bring death to someone in sin that you had been praying for. That is sobering.

But it also guards you from despair. When someone dies without visible repentance, you shouldn't think God failed you. You shouldn't think you didn't pray enough.

God will not always do what *you* want. You prefer to see repentance. God might prefer death to vindicate His holiness.

John does not tell us about sin that leads to death as a tool for us to evaluate how far someone has gone into sin, and then determine whether we should pray or not.

Instead, he is protecting our confidence before God by explaining the limits of our intercession.

When you get to verse 17, John says you should not think some sins are not so serious simply because they don't all lead to death.

Read 1 John 5:17.

While there is sin unto death, don't get careless about other sin. All unrighteousness is sin. A Christian tolerates no sin in his life.

The final assertion "And there is a sin not unto death," comes back to the encouragement to pray. All sin is serious, but it is not beyond the reach of prayer. We need to intercede for the saints.

Our concern should not be curiosity with the exception, but to cultivate fruitful intercession for fellow Christians because we have assurance of eternal life.

If you see a Christian sin, especially one that is close to you, don't get discouraged or frustrated. The godly response is to love them and pray for them. Take advantage of your favored position with our heavenly Father to benefit your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then trust God to renew them for His glory and for their good.