

Praying for Sinning Christians

By Don Green

sermonaudio.com

Bible Verse: 1 John 5:16-17
Preached on: Sunday, July 5, 2020

Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

Well, this morning we have a most unusual message on prayer. I've titled it "Praying for Sinning Christians" and our text comes from 1 John 5. This is our next to last message in our exposition of 1 John. It started in the midst of our separation and disruption during the restrictions that we were under, and now we come to the concluding aspect of this letter over the next two messages.

John has written as I've said many times, he wrote with a trifold purpose as he expresses very clearly. He writes to promote our joy, he writes to promote holiness, and at the end he makes it clear that there is an overarching purpose with which he wrote to promote assurance of salvation in the true people of God. Look at verse 13 with me, verses 13 through 15 actually. He says, "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." And then he goes on to say in verse 14, "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 it is very important for you to understand the flow of thought that he is developing at this stage of the letter. He has said many things about the Lord Jesus Christ and the certain impact of regeneration on those who believe. It produces love in our hearts, it produces holiness in our lives, and it produces true faith in Christ and those are overwhelming spiritual realities born of the Holy Spirit that utterly transform us, and it is the purpose and intention of God that every true Christian would know and understand, have a confidence and a certainty that those things are real in his life, and that he is genuinely on a path that leads to heaven, and that he belongs to Christ, and that all of his sins have been forgiven, and that he has eternal life never to be lost. Now that's verse 13. Where he goes from there in verse 13 to verses 14 and 15 is that that undergirds and it feeds a confident prayer life, a trusting prayer life that prays to God with an understanding that, "My heavenly Father hears what I say to Him; that my heavenly Father is favorably disposed to me," and that somehow in a way that we cannot fully trace, God does things in response to our prayers that he otherwise would not do. How that works out with his sovereignty and his eternal decrees, you know, we'll just trust him for that. We just know that Scripture says that the effective prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much. And so that motivates us to pray, it encourages us to pray and it gives us a sense that there is a reason and a purpose for me to be on my knees praying to God throughout all of the mountaintops and valleys of life, and that my life just becomes

an ever-increasing source of continual communion with him not only with my prayers on my knees but with a prayerful disposition, a prayerful attitude of dependence on this God who has saved me, my heavenly Father who will certainly carry me through all that life could ever bring to me whether personally or in the society around me. So there is this sense of confidence that flows from assurance that yields itself over into a dynamic prayer life is the intention of God for each one of us. This is not the prerogative of just people in ministry. This is not the prerogative of scholars. I won't go there. This belongs to you as a believer in Christ that God would have you know this kind of confident consistent prayer life. It's a wonderful thing to contemplate.

Now transition here, a little bit of a bridge here for you to understand. Throughout this letter, John has also been speaking about the importance of loving the brethren. If you look at the 1 John 2:10, for example. 1 John 2:10 he says, "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling within him." You could go to 1 John 3 and in verse 16, for example, 1 John 3:16, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." It says in chapter 4, verse 7, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Chapter 5, verse 2, "By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and observe His commandments." Stay with me here. I think this is really critical to understanding what the primary text in verses 16 and 17 here today. One of the dynamics that the new birth places in the heart of a true Christian is a love for other Christians, a desire to seek their well-being, to be concerned about others within the body of Christ, not simply how my faith is working out in my own sphere in the privacy of my own heart. There is that approach to Christianity that becomes very self-centered, "God, help me with my problems. God, what is Your will for my life?" And there are Christians that just seem to draw a circle around themselves and they place themselves at the center of their Christian existence and everything focuses around what God is doing in them, for them, how they want God to help them. Well, understand that in light of this emphasis on love throughout the course of 1 John, that could not possibly be the intention of God for the way that we live out our Christian life, could it, because there is this others focused dimension in Christian living that is obviously central to the purposes of the new birth. God saved you to reproduce, to replicate his own character in your life; that communicable aspect of his nature, his love, his mercy, that that would be manifested in you in the way that you live within the realm and within the scope of the relationships that God has given to you. Christ was the most unselfish man who ever lived and whoever will live. The ones and he sought the well-being of his people at the cost of sacrifice to his own life, he laid down his life for us. What more could he give? Well, then, understand that when he saves us, he means to reproduce that in us and it means that we have a similar attitude of seeking the well-being of the people of God as one of the core reasons that we exist as Christians, and I'm grateful for the many of you that show that kind of care for the people of God in the way that you live and the way that you show, you know, initiative in seeking out the well-being of others.

Those are the general principles here. Now watch this. It could be no other way. Therefore when John tells us in verses 14 and 15 – watch this and look at your text – it

could be no other way, in light of all of the momentum of love that has led up to this purpose statement, when John says in verse 14 that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us, beloved, do you understand, do you see the inevitable thing that has to be in mind here is that John has in mind that we would use the gift of our access to God to seek the well-being of the people of God when we pray. It is not simply for you to seek the well-being of you as you pray to God, there is to be an ever-growing, ever-expanding sense as you pray that you are seeking the well-being of the people of God when you pray, and that it's not simply, "God, help my day," you're thinking increasingly more and more about the others that you know, the people within the body of Christ, the people that you know that need Christ.

So God has given us this great privilege of access to him where he promises to hear us and to respond when we ask things according to his will. That means, then, when you marry that with the principle of love that is woven throughout the entire letter of 1 John, that he obviously intends us to use this gift of prayer to seek the well-being of the people of God when we do. If you think about a newborn infant, a newborn infant is necessarily self-centered in their approach to life. That's all that they know. They have needs and they demand their needs be met and we happily do that for them, don't we? But as they grow, that self-centeredness has to yield itself over into concern for others around them until actually when they become full-blown adults the idea is that they're actually seeking the well-being of others that are under their care. All of you that our parents have gone through that transition to one degree or another. At one point the circle of your existence depended upon and was built on people caring for you. Now as parents, it's changed and you're caring for others, you're caring for the ones that have been given to you in your family. Well, understand beloved, by that same principle, that newborn Christians tend to be self-focused and that's okay because, you know, they're just learning, they're starting out, but what God intends for us to do is we transition into being concerned about caring for the others that are around us rather than having that self-centered focus in our life. When, therefore, we think about the area of prayer, prayer then simply becomes one area in which this is applied in our lives and we apply that principle of love and seeking the good of others in the way that we pray.

Now alongside of that, this is all by way of introduction, alongside that general principle we also carry another aspect of understanding to our realm of prayer, is that we understand that the condition of a person's spiritual life is more important than the condition of their physical life; the blessing of God in their heart is more important than the blessing of God upon their body. And so we are seeking, we seek for people to come to a saving knowledge of Christ, "God, save this unsaved person that I know, that I'm concerned about. Work, grant them new life." We pray that way yet further within the body of Christ we understand that God's purpose for his people is that they would grow in sanctification, that they would grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, 2 Peter 3:18, Philippians 2:12 and 13 where he says, you know, God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. And so we start to see the world through different eyes, we start, God has given us, as it were, spiritual glasses that give us the ability to see the way things ought to be spiritually and what top priorities and what the importance of things are. The best thing that I can do for you in prayer is to seek God's

work to improve your sanctification, to build you up in Christ because if you're prospering materially and yet you are devolving more and more into sin in your life, what good is that? And so while I might pray for your prosperity as well, my greater concern as your pastor in prayer is that you would grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ; that the Lord would sanctify you in the truth; that God would lead you safely into his heavenly kingdom, whatever else might happen here on earth in your life.

So beloved, it's in that perspective and from that understanding that we say this, is that true assurance motivates us to pray, it motivates us in love to pray for others, and it motivates us with a spiritual perspective to pray for their spiritual growth, to pray for each other in sanctification, and as we do that, we are confident that God is hearing us favorably because we are asking for things that are according to his will. It is God's will that we would grow in Christ. It is God's will that we would be sanctified. And so we understand and have confidence that as we pray in this way God is producing results even if we can't see the process by which he does it in the hearts of men. And as we do that, we understand that we are doing this because the Christian life is marked by love and it is marked by the pursuit of holiness not only me personally but in seeking that you say to yourself, "I'm seeking that for those around me as well." It means this, it means that one of the dominant motivations for which we pray is that we are praying so that others would receive the spiritual benefit of our intercession. We want that because we love them more than we love ourselves. We know what's good for them as it's revealed in God's word and so we're praying for God to do that in their lives, and if we would stand, as it were, off in the corner watching God do work in his people and we see people enjoying the blessing of God and growing spiritually and pleasing God with their lives, manifesting a love for his word, a love for souls and a love for holiness, we can stand back in the corner and watch that happen and just rejoice over what God is doing because it was never about us to begin with. It's about seeking the purposes of God being manifested in the lives of his people.

That helps us have the frame of mind in which we should approach this passage here this morning, 1 John 5:16 and 17 and we're going to break this message into two parts. The first title or the first point, you could say, is the expectation of effective intercession. That's a lot of syllables, isn't it, simply meaning that we expect God to answer our prayers for others, we expect our intercession for others to be effective, and then secondly, the exception to that, the exception to effective intercession, and by the time we're done here today, we're going to be greatly encouraged to pray for others and yet at the same time we are also going to be greatly sobered and humbled and realizing the seriousness of the topic that we have addressed here today. This passage goes everywhere in a way that is remarkable.

Let's consider, first of all, the expectation of effective intercession. So when we pray as we've already said, we seek to see other Christians advance in holiness. We want to see other Christians grow in the faith and that's what John is saying here in verse 16 in the first half of the verse. It seems a little obscure at first but when you understand the flow of thought that has led up to it in the way that I've explained it here, it all makes perfect sense. He says in verse 16,

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.

What's he talking about here? This passage is very practical for our relationships as Christians. As we walk through life together as a body and you're actually a part of the body, not simply stepping in and stepping out in a superficial uncommitted way, as we walk through life together as Christians, we start to see something, we start to recognize something. You know, it becomes obvious that you and I have different areas of sin that we struggle with. We have areas where we fall short in, and rather than accusing each other of hypocrisy and, you know, and becoming the ultimate hypocrite by accusing everybody else of being a hypocrite, we view those things through the lens of love, we view those things in sympathy. When we know that someone struggles with a particular temptation or is having a particular trouble in a family relationship, let's say, our response to that is one, there is a response of love and concern, and then we say, "Oh, you know what? I have access to God and God has power to help them, and God says that He will help. If I ask Him," in verse 14, look at it there with me, "If I ask anything according to His will, He hears us." "Well, well, God, if You hear me, I want You to know that out of a spirit of love I want to come and bring So-and-so before You because I know they're having a hard time and, Father, they've stumbled into sin and I pray, God, that You would help them and that You would sanctify them and that You would cleanse them, and that You would turn their mind so that they would see the loveliness of holiness and hate sin and separate themselves from it. God, do that for them. It would glorify Your name, it would manifest good fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Lord, I know that's Your will. God, do that then." And I'm praying for them along in that kind of way, in that kind of spirit so that, look at it there in the middle of verse 16, you see somebody committing a sin, somebody's struggling in their spiritual life not leading to death, we'll talk about that in a moment, he shall ask. He'll ask who? He'll ask God and God will for him in response to his prayer give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. Beloved, that passage shows us that we have an enormous spiritual resource for each other that is simply waiting for us to actually take advantage of, for us to seek the spiritual well-being of our fellow believers.

So we ask God to soften their hearts against sin. We pray that God would by his Spirit help them live out their new life in Christ. Watch this, we avoid harsh judgments against them. We avoid gossip with others. We avoid frustration with how slow they seem to be to recognize things. We set aside all of those kinds of carnal responses and instead we go to God humbly and ask him to increase their sanctification, to do a work of the Spirit that would conform them more closely to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we ask that – watch this – why do we do that? You've got to keep all of this in your mind. We ask it because God hears our prayers. We ask for others because we love them, because God has placed that principle of love in our hearts in the new birth, and we ask for spiritual blessings because we understand that the physical will pass away and we want to see the enduring fruit of the Holy Spirit borne out in their lives. What John says here is very clear and the momentum of this carries us all of the way through and, frankly, changes the way

that we pray, from the self-centered way that perhaps we've been conditioned over the years to do, to see a whole different realm and a whole different reason for why we pray to God and why we pray for one another. And what this passage tells us there in verse 16 when it says "God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death," it says that God will over time move that sinning believer to turn from sin. He'll change their desires or he'll bring such painful discipline upon their lives that they have no opportunity or alternative but to repent. And here's the thing, beloved, it is part of God's faithfulness to us to hear us when we pray like that, and we pray for our part, for our motivation, we pray this way so that our prayers will be a service to the people of God. "God, You take care of me however You see fit. I've got more important things to pray about than my personal situation, God. O God, there are these people that are just walking in such evident coldness of heart and, God, I've prayed for them so often and I don't know what to make of them, God. I don't know if they're in Christ are not, they're so cold and indifferent to You but, God, I pray to You and pray that Your Spirit would pour down Your blessing upon them and You would do what is ever necessary to turn their lives to Christ and that they would manifest fruit in keeping with repentance. God, I pray that You would do that. God, I see my grieving brethren, I see them suffering under the weight of their family sorrows and they're on the verge of utter discouragement and despair. God, won't You help them? Won't You be gracious to them? God, what does it matter if I've got a work problem, this is far more important." And so it changes the way that we pray.

Now notice something. I like to say this and I haven't said this for quite a while. When we think and when we talk, when we study God's word about prayer in this way, what I want you to see is that we are talking about a far better realm of concern in prayer than simply measuring the amount of time on the clock that you spend praying. "You know, I prayed 20 minutes today." Well, so what? How did you pray? For whom did you pray and what did you pray for them about? No, I mean, we're not here trying to watch the clock and measure, you know, measure it like we're an hourly employee getting paid for how much time on the clock we pray. It's not about that kind of superficial external stuff. This is about a whole heart disposition, about an entire transformation of what motivates us before God and how we use this gift of prayer that he's given to us. That's why we pray. That's what we care about and what I want you to see is this in a couple of passages, this is the model of praying that Christ showed us, it's the model of praying that Paul showed us

Look over at John 17 just to illustrate this for a moment or two. John 17. Jesus in his high priestly prayer is praying for his people shortly before his crucifixion and he says in John 17:13, praying to his Father and 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." "God, I pray that they would have spiritual blessings, the very joy of Mine I pray, Father, that You would replicate that in their hearts so that they would have that. Father, I realize they're going to struggle," verse 14, "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." And so he prays for us. He says, "Father, I don't ask You to take them out of the world but that You would keep them from the evil one. Give them joy. Protect them from Satan, O God. They are not of

the world even as I am not of the world," verse 17, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." You see Christ praying for the joy of the holiness and the spiritual protection of his people there. That illustrates and shows what we're saying here this morning.

Look over at the book of Philippians. Look at Philippians 1:9 and you see the Apostle Paul praying this way as well, and actually we'll start in verse 8 for the sake of time. Paul says, "God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." He is praying out of the spirit of love for them, a reflection of mature Christianity. He loves them, he's manifesting the fruit of the Spirit that the Apostle John has been speaking about throughout our letter, and it just overflows in what he writes and how he prays for them. So how does he pray for them, then? Verse 9 and this is a common feature of Paul's letters, he gives a prayer report that is always along lines like this. He says in verse 9, "And this I pray." Ah, how do you pray for me, Paul? What is your prayer for me? He says, "I pray that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. I pray that you would grow in the spiritual virtue of love; that you would grow in spiritual virtues of discernment and righteousness; that you would be sincere and blameless until Christ comes having been filled to the full with the fruit of righteousness, that your life would do nothing less than be a manifestation of glory to God. That's how I pray for you," he says. In Luke 22, we don't need to turn there, I'm just multiplying the illustrations here. Jesus said to Peter on the eve of his crucifixion, he said, "Peter, I've prayed for you, that your faith may not fail."

So beloved, I want to step back here. I want you to ask yourself an honest question and ask yourself where your life of prayer measures into what Scripture shows us about these things. It's pretty convicting, isn't it? This exposes how selfish we often are. It exposes how worldly and earth-centered we often are. We're praying about ourselves so often and we are praying for our own material comfort and our own earthly comfort, and the word of God confronts us today in that selfishness and explodes the whole paradigm of that and says there's a whole different way that you should be using your access God. In love you should be praying for others and you should be seeking the highest of spiritual benefits for them as you do with the promise, with the expectation, with the understanding that as you pray that way for others, God will answer and God will bless them according to what you request because he hears us in whatever we ask. And if it's the will of God for his people to grow in grace, well if I'm praying for his people to grow in grace, you know what's going to happen? God's going to be abundantly answering my prayer, our prayer, your prayer. And the believing heart wants the purpose of God accomplished, the loving heart wants to see it manifested for the sake of others. That's the expectation of effective intercession. Part of me wants to stop and close in prayer just so that we wouldn't lose the effect of that but we'll just trust the Spirit of God to seal that to us and move us into a different compartment of the text that is in front of us, and that brings us to the exception to effective intercession, and while the first section has been aspirational, it's given us that after which we should aspire in prayer, this next section

gives us something of a warning. It gives us a clarity of mind that these things are not be trifled with and you see that in the exception to effective intercession, point 2 for this morning, and in this we find an encouragement when our prayers are not answered as perhaps we had hoped.

Look at the end of verse 16 with me where John says this, he says,

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

Now John here, let me just explain in an overview sense what John is doing here. The whole context about this is assurance and effective prayer. Don't lose sight of what the main purpose of this passage is as we approach what John is giving as an exception. This is an obscure passage. It is intriguing to speculate on what he's talking about, and when you realize that he's talking about sin that leads to death, there could be a way of approaching this in a carnal way that says, "I want to know what that is," but loses sight of the whole broader perspective of the passage. This is not the rule, this is not the main point of the passage, it's an exception to the greater principle that he is laying down, but we need to deal with what it is because God has put it in his word for us to understand. But understand this as I'm about to unpack this, understand that what John is saying here is that our prayers do not always turn out in the way that we had hoped. That's his point here as he speaks in this passage that is rather obscure.

Now Bible interpreters, Bible commentators differ widely over what the sin that leads to death might be. There are a number of different opinions over what that might be and so I want to just lay out for you a few possible views, not that this is what I believe but just so that you can understand how others have understood this passage, okay? So these are possible views. They could be right. I don't think that they are but these are possible views that will help us get to the meat of what John, I think, is actually saying.

Some people say that the sin that leads to death is referring to Old Testament passages that have the death penalty attached for certain kinds of sin, for adulterers, for disobedient children to their parents, other things, and so they say, you know, you look at Scripture and you see the Old Testament requiring death for those kinds of sins and that's what John means here. Well, I appreciate the appeal to the Bible but there is nothing in the context of 1 John that points us to that understanding. He's not talking about Old Testament application of things, especially here in this context. Nothing is there to support that interpretation. It makes us want to look for something else.

Perhaps others have suggested, perhaps John is referring to the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Look over at Mark 3. There is no forgiveness for this sin. Mark 3, beginning in verse 28. I'll give you a moment to find it. Mark 3:28 says this, 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."

Well, that's a possibility that we'll come back to in a moment. Go back to 1 John. We've said, well, the sin that leads to death, maybe it's the Old Testament, maybe it's blasphemy against the Spirit. Here in 1 John, John's been talking a lot about false teachers, maybe it's the false teachers that will eventually face spiritual death. Look at chapter 2, verse 22. You have false teachers, 1 John 2:22, "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." Well, you know, if you deny the Son like that, it's obviously there will be no forgiveness for that if you don't repent.

And so among those three possibilities and I'm sure there are others, those views, my friends, they're not unreasonable views. Good men hold to them and because the passage is obscure, it's wise for us not to be overly dogmatic in our position on it but I will say that I think those men are mistaken. I think all of those views are incorrect. Old Testament, blasphemy of the Spirit, false teachers, I don't think that's what John's talking about here as I will show you. Blasphemy and false teaching are not his concern in this context. Whatever else may be true about those sins elsewhere, it's not John's point here. That's what we're concerned about this morning and let me take you back to verse 16 so that you can see why we believe that.

Look at 1 John 5:16. Who is it that is committing this sin? Forget what the sin is and ask the question who is committing it because that's John's emphasis here. Verse 16 he says, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death." Oh, it's a brother, you say. It's a brother. Chapter 2, verse 10, the brother is one who abides in the light. It's a true Christian. Chapter 3, verse 14, the brother is one who has passed out of death into life. It's a true Christian. Chapter 4, verse 21, the one who loves God should love his brother also. Watch this, my friends, John has been using this term "brother" throughout the letter to refer to Christians. Well, a Christian doesn't perish eternally like the one who blasphemes the Spirit does. A Christian is not a false teacher who is denying the true Christ. That's not what true Christians do. We're not talking about Old Testament things. It has to be something else. Now just a little brief 30 second lesson in biblical interpretation here. When you consider views that are just obviously wrong, it causes you to look for something else that could perhaps explain what the true interpretation is.

Now that's a lot to take in and so let's just take a breath together, shall we? Everybody take a deep breath, catch up with one another here so that we're able to deal with the question that John, I think, is actually dealing with and to understand that what he is dealing with has a serious sober application for every one of us here today, not simply in the way that we pray for others but for some of you in the way that you are living.

Let me tell you, it's a sad story in one respect, someone that Nancy and I knew in California, a sweet young girl who came over to help us move as we were preparing to come to Cincinnati. A call for help went out. She was the only one who responded and we had the sweetest of days with this young woman who named the name of Christ. She served us. She cared for us and won her way into the affections of our heart and I've never forgotten her or lost my gratitude for how she served us and by extension this body of believers in Cincinnati with her humble service to us in those days. It was many years

ago. Well, as life unfolds and we moved away, we kind of lost track of her. What we found out was that she had gotten involved in some philosophies that were destructive and her life started to move away from that confession that she had made and that she had been making over the course of her life, and as happens with false teaching, the false teaching led her into sinful relationships and her life spun out of control in a way that had to be a great grief to her parents, and her life ended thousands of miles away from home in a horrific car accident and she died at a young age, and that was the aroma, the testimony of life that she left behind. What happened to her? I can't at all speak to any ultimate conclusions about that. You know, was her confession of Christ real? How then do you explain the subsequent life that she lived? What do we make of the sudden death that she died? Sober questions. This is real life, right? You probably know other stories like this from your own experience and what we find here is this, is that in the realm of professing Christians these kinds of things happen, and put yourself in the shoes of her grieving parents who no doubt, I have no doubt pleaded with God to turn her and the outcome was the phone call in the middle of the night that they received. How are we to think about these things clearly and sympathetically and avoiding the judgmental spirit that so often enters into times like this? Well, I believe that this passage gives us a window of insight into it.

Look at it again with me in chapter 5, verse 16 where John says, "There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this." What is John talking about here in the whole overall context? I believe that John is referring to the fact that there are sinning believers who God brings physical death to as discipline for their defiant sin against his holiness. Let's look at the bigger picture here. According to 1 John 1:5, look at it with me here. 1 John 1:5 says "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." God is light. Beloved, brothers and sisters in Christ and those of you who are not in Christ even though you may say that you are, here is what we must understand and come to grips with at this point in Scripture: God is holy and holiness matters to him. It may not matter to the world at all and it is certainly a lesser priority than a lot of other things in the professing Christian church but it matters to God who is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is filled with his glory. Holiness matters to God even if it doesn't matter to men. In Matthew 18, God gives a pattern for the church to deal with known sin within the body of Christ. Approach him privately, take two or three with you. They don't repent, tell it to the church. They don't listen to the church, excommunicate them, put them out because the holiness of God must be respected within the body of Christ and known flagrant sin cannot be tolerated. We call them to restoration. We call them to repentance but if they hard-heartedly refuse, they have forfeited their place as a recognized believer in the body of Christ. It's as plain as day, Matthew 18.

Look over at Hebrews 12 with me. You just need to turn back a few pages from 1 John to Hebrews 12, all of this building to a really important conclusion, beloved. Hebrews 12:5 where the writer of Hebrews tells his readers, "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 received.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if

you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore," verse 9, "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?" Watch this, verse 10, "they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in His holiness." God disciplines his people so that they will share in his holiness. Holiness matters to God. He does not save us and leave us to pursue our own carnal pursuit of ungodliness. Scripture is abundantly clear on that. If you haven't felt the pain of discipline for sin in your life, you've been a Christian any length of time, and Scripture says that's not a good sign because God disciplines his children that we might grow in holiness.

So God disciplines his people. He disciplines them for holiness. Here's the million dollar question, then. Here's the question that is foreign to the spirit of modern Christianity. You say, "Okay, God disciplines his people. I get that, but unto death? God would discipline people with physical death because of their sin as a professing Christian? Is that what you're saying?" What I say is not too important but what Scripture says is really important about this point and the answer of Scripture to that question is: yes, that is exactly what God will do if the occasion prompts it.

Look at Acts 5. I'm going to give you three different illustrations, proof sof what I just said and it's critical for us to stay with each other here. Acts 5 in verse 3. After the day of Pentecost, the congregation of believers, they were selling their property, bringing the proceeds to the apostles so that it could be used for the advance of the church and the ministry of needs all around among the body of Christ. Chapter 5, verse 1, "a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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." He came into the gathering of the people of God with deception on his heart, in his heart, and practiced it in front of the entire body and spoke to Jesus' appointed apostles and said, "Here's my gift." "Peter said," to him, 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, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?" You didn't have to give this. You could have done with that whatever you wanted. It belonged to you and yet you come into the people of God and you lie about giving the full price that you received for it. Look at the middle of verse 4, "'Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.' And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it." A little while later his wife came in, did the same thing and it was the same result. He died for his sin in front of the people of God.

Look over at 1 Corinthians 5. Acts 5, 1 Corinthians 5. The Apostle Paul writing to this very carnal church said in verse 1, 1 Corinthians 5:1, "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." There is incest within the body of Christ and you haven't dealt with it. What's the matter with you people? Verse 2, "You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst." You've allowed this to continue on. The holiness of

God's church has been besmirched and compromised by your failure to exercise church discipline upon this ungodly situation. Paul says in verse 3, "For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, I've already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, and 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." It's better for this man to physically die under the infliction of an assault of Satan than for him to continue compromising the holiness of the church in this way. Better for him to die in this life and to have his soul preserved for heaven than another alternative. He's saying this and it fits perfectly with what John has said. What Paul has said here is, he says, "Look, the time for praying is over. This evil must be purged out of the church."

One more in an area that you wouldn't expect it. 1 Corinthians 11:28. In the realm of the Lord's Supper, this commemoration of the Lord's death on behalf of his people, that sacred recollection of the sacrifice that our Lord made for us where we are sacredly called to remember him with holiness, with reverence, with love and gratitude, recognizing what he has done for us, that he loved us and he gave himself up for us, and as a result of his act of self-sacrifice, we are saved. A holy, holy, holy moment in the life of the church. Paul says in verse 28. Before you take of communion, "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." He's talking about physical death there. They have died as a result of their sacrilegious approach to the Lord's table. Verse 31, "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."

Okay beloved, we've laid it all out here and here's what I want you to see now. Holiness matters to God. God takes his holiness seriously and he takes holiness among his people seriously and he disciplines them in order to promote it. What we have seen in Acts and in 1 Corinthians are sins of lying, immorality, and irreverence, all of which invoked the judgment of the physical death penalty from God as a consequence of his professing people violating his holiness in a number of different ways. This passage in 1 John 5, turn back there with me, as we let Scripture interpret Scripture, then, what we see is this, John is saying there is a sin leading to death among the brethren. He's not trying to get us to speculate about what that one sin is as if it were only one sin and we can kind of snicker in back as we watch to see if it happens or not, or with a morbid curiosity try to guess at how far somebody has gone. That's not the spirit of this passage at all. As we let Scripture interpret Scripture, we see this, his concern is this, beloved. Here's his concern. Here's what should concern each one of us as we look at our own lives. The concern here, what's at stake here is this, it is a defiant believer who deliberately insults the holiness of God with sin in their lives. It doesn't have to be any one kind of sin, it's a pattern of sin indulged in over time that shows a loss of respect for the holiness of God.

What does John say about praying about that and why does he say it? Look at it with me, verse 16. He says, "There is a sin leading to death. I do not say that he should make request for this." We've dove in really deep and now we're coming up for air to see how all of this fits together. Understand the broadest context of what John said, he's writing to promote assurance of believers. As part of our assurance, we pray and we pray for other Christians. John's big concern here is to protect the assurance of true godly believers. He tells them as you ask and you pray, there will be times where you will encounter sinning Christians and sometimes they might even die, and it's going to look like God has not answered your prayer. John's concern is that your assurance would not be shaken of your own salvation when you see that happen because there are times where God will not answer your prayer for restoration of that person, rather God reserves his sovereign prerogative to vindicate his holiness in a way that makes it stark for all to see. John is not forbidding prayer for obstinate Christians but he's saying your intercession may not turn out like you hope because these sinning professing believers have withdrawn themselves from the realm of the protection of God, they have consciously entered into and injected themselves into the realm of his discipline, and when you defiantly do that, all bets are off about what the future may hold for you. God may take your life if you professing Christ so insult his holiness with a stubborn refusal to repent.

So God hears our intercession favorably but he reserves sovereign prerogative to deal with defiant believers as he sees fit, and when he does that, you as a true Christian, an interceding Christian, you should not think that your prayers have failed, you should not think that somehow it is your fault or that you somehow did not pray enough. This is a recognition that God does not always do what we want him to do. You might prefer to see visible repentance and the restoration of that sinning believer. God might prefer physical death in a way that vindicates his holiness, and when that happens, we step back and we humbly bow before him and we say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. I put my hand over my mouth, O God. You have vindicated Your holiness as You see fit. I can't sort out all of the motivations and understandings of that. I don't even know if that person is in heaven or not now but I just see that someone who was naming the name of Christ, living a life of defiance against Your holiness, Father, they have died now. God, search my heart. Cleanse me from sin that a similar fate might not befall me."

Beloved, look, I don't know what's really going on in almost anyone's life that's in here, right? We come, we interact. I believe the best about you. I hope the best for you but I don't know what's really happening in your life. You do. But you must understand that if you are in that position of being a professing Christian but you are sinning in a defiant way in whatever realm that is expressing itself in your life, I want to warn you, you're in a position of great great danger. God, Scripture says, is not mocked. Whatever a man reaps, this he will also sow. If you are pursuing a life of sin and hypocritically claiming the name of Christ as you do it, I want to warn you there is no telling what might happen to you and God has given you an opportunity here to hear the warning and to repent because he will graciously forgive you, but you should not presume that this window of grace is always going to be open to you. God may come, take the window and close it. This is what Scripture teaches us so that we would respect his holiness and grow in grace.

So John here in this passage, he's not telling us, he's not giving us guidelines to evaluate someone else's life so we determine whether we're going to pray for them or not. No, he is simply guarding our assurance by showing the limits of our prayers. We pray, God's pattern is to answer but sometimes God exercises sovereign prerogative and when he does, we put our hand over our mouth and we worship him in response.

He wraps it up in verse 17 as I will also. He says, "All unrighteousness is sin," in other words, all sin is serious even if they don't all lead to death. We should not trifle with any sin but it's not beyond the reach of our prayer and our intercession for one another. There is a sin that does not lead to death and so we are encouraged once again to pray for one another and to pray for others in the body of Christ as we see them start to stray. Our concern here in this passage is not idle curiosity over the exception of the sin that leads to death, our concern is to be believers who pray for one another because we have assurance of salvation, and as we pray for our fellow believers, we trust God to renew them for his glory and for their good.

Let's pray together.

Our dear Lord, You know the hearts of all men and You know the hearts of everyone gathered in this room and those watching over the live stream. You know the true condition of their life. Father, for those pursuing holiness even though they sometimes stumble, we pray that You would strengthen them and encourage them and sanctify them in the truth that they might glorify You with their lives. For those in a pattern of defiant sin, Lord, we ask You to be gracious to them. We pray that they would repent, Father, while there is time and that You would rescue them, as it were, like a brand from the fire of the destructive path that they're on. And God, for those fellow believers that have watched loved ones, have watched friends, have watched coworkers walk into destruction, Father, I just pray that You would have a supernatural comfort upon them today, that You would strengthen them and help them and comfort them in the wisdom and the goodness and the love of God come what may, and to give themselves over to a full trusting of You that You would reward and honor with the blessed peace of Your Holy Spirit deep within their hearts. We commit these things to You in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thanks for listening to Pastor Don Green from Truth Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. You can find church information, Don's complete sermon library and other helpful materials at thetruthpulpit.com. This message is copyrighted by Don Green. All rights reserved.