

## Praying for Sinners

1 John 5:16-17

Pastor Tom Anderst

March 16, 2014

What do you do when you see someone else doing something wrong? It depends on a lot of things. Will their actions impact you or someone else? Trying to open one of those combination locks by spinning in the wrong direction is a lot less serious than driving down a one way the wrong way. It depends on how well you know the person. If some stranger walks around with a wardrobe malfunction, you might just look and frown or smile. But if it's your child or parent, you'll say something. "You've got your shirt on inside out again Edgar." Your response will also depend on what kind of a person you are. If you're an extrovert you may have no problem approaching someone about something they're doing wrong. But if you're shy or more of an introvert, you might not say anything unless they're about to drive over a cliff.

But what if you see another Christian committing a sin? What might be your first response? What have you done? How has it gone? Most of us do not have to imagine situations like this. We live them. Sometimes we see those near and dear to us sin. Sometimes we see others in the church family sin. Or we know someone who once claimed to be a Christian now living a lifestyle that God would call sinful. Maybe you can think of someone in your life right now that you've seen sin recently or even this past week. How do we respond to them?

There are unhelpful ways to respond – We can point fingers, turn a blind eye, initiate gossip (whisper) or bask in a feeling of superiority (chest filled up). But how might God want us to respond? **When we see others sin, we must first bring them to God in prayer.** That is one of the most positive, helpful, God glorifying ways we can help one another and especially with those who have left the church and their faith. For the past couple of weeks, we've been talking about the need of every Christian to grow as a disciple of Christ and as a disciple maker. We've recognized that two thirds of young adults in Canada who attended church as a child no longer do so. Half of those no longer identify themselves with the Christian tradition in which they were raised. But what's our responsibility towards one another when we sin? What about those who have left the church? How can we help them?

The Apostle John addresses this in the last verses of his first letter. He wrote the letter to encourage shook up Christians. Many others had left their churches claiming to have some new knowledge and the truth. So John writes to help those who remained. He gives them markers to assure them of their right standing with God. Now he concludes the letter with some final instructions, kind of like your Mom would give you on the way out the door.

Last week we saw John discuss confidence in prayer for those who know they have eternal life. We learned we must pray according to the will of Jesus and that God hears our prayers. Now he continues with the theme of prayer concerning other Christians who sin. I pray that today you will see God's heart for those who stumble in sin and His invitation for us to join Him in restoring them through prayer. But we will also see the seriousness of sin and our need to be watchful when exposed to it.

### **1<sup>st</sup> John 5:13-16 (ESV)**

[13] I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. [14] And this is the confidence that we have toward 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 that we have asked of him. [16] If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. [17] All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

**How should a Christian respond when he/she sees another Christian sinning?** The answer, according to John, is the same as our imaginary situations earlier. **It depends** on the type of sin the person commits. **If they sin in a way that does not lead to death, we must bring them to God in prayer and He will give them life.**

Notice a couple of things. John calls Christians to pray about sins they SEE their brothers or sisters doing. So this is not a sin we hear about from someone else. This is something we see. John says one of our first responses must be to pray for them. That doesn't mean that we may never have to speak to them about this. But it does point us to immediately go to God with this information. Think how much more productive and helpful it is to immediately pray for a person who sins rather than telling someone else about it. Ask God on behalf of the person.

Other New Testament passages about the sins of others also place great emphasis on the care necessary in response. In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus says "Judge not lest you be judged. Be first to take the log out of your own eye before you comment on the speck of sin in another's eye." So any Christian who sees another Christian sin must first examine him or herself for sinful attitudes or behavior in their own life. They must confess any sin to God and then humbly approach the sinner. Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18 guides the one who has been sinned against to go to the offender and show his fault. So there is a discretion involved in dealing with sin. If the person doesn't listen, then Jesus goes on to say take two or three witnesses; if they still don't listen tell it to the church. But notice there is this sense of care, responsibility and humility necessary when we see a brother or sister in Christ sin.

But what type of sin does John refer to? He says “those who commit sin *not leading to death*.” **What is a sin that does not lead to death (5:16a)?** Sin that is not high handed rebellion against God. Some argue that this passage talks about minor and mortal sins. So, minor sins can be forgiven. But mortal sins must be atoned for in some way or else the sinner loses eternal life. But the New Testament does not provide us with lists of sins that are major and minor.

John may be influenced by the Old Testament distinction between unintentional sins and intentional sin.

(Leviticus 4:2; 13, 22, 27; 5:15-18; Numb. 15:27-31; Deut. 17:12)

#### **Numbers 15:27-31, ESV**

**27** “If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. **28** And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. . . . **30** But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. **31** Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.”

**So sin, which does not lead to death, may be like the unintentional sins** described here. Such sin is still possible for believers. We sometimes yield to temptation. Yet it is not the deliberate high-handed fist-shaking rebellion against God sin. It is violation of some law or command.

We may get a further clue by considering the word death. **What death is John thinking about?** Well, he’s just talked about eternal life. He wrote so they might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that they have assurance of eternal life. So wouldn’t he be talking about eternal death here? That is, the **spiritual death of separation from God for eternity**. So the true Christian *cannot* commit this kind of sin. But he or she *can* commit the unintentional or ignorant of God’s law sin. We can yield to temptation occasionally but soon return to the Lord in confession.

When we see a brother or sister commit that kind of sin, we’re supposed to bring them to God in prayer. The one who sees sin must make request or petition on behalf of the sinner. They don’t point fingers, turn a blind eye, initiate gossip or bask in a feeling of superiority. They pray for the person. John promises that God will respond by giving the sinner life. God will keep that person in his fellowship despite their sin. God will ensure that person does not lose eternal life.

Jesus offered this kind of prayer for Peter at the Last Supper. Jesus shares with Peter how he’s prayed for him.

**Luke 22:32-33.**

[31] “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, [32] but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus prayed in advance for his friend who would sin. Jesus looked beyond the sin to Peter’s repentance and restoration.

God desires that His people to pray for one another when we see sin. God invites us to participate in His restoring work in the lives of people around us. We need God to transform our hearts so that our first response to our sinning brothers and sisters is prayer.

But then we come to the second half of verse 16. It serves a double purpose. It warns those who think that sin is no big deal. It alerts to the deadly consequences of intentional sin that remain unconfessed. John writes “There is sin that leads to death.” So if you think that you don’t have to be concerned about your sin because other people will pray for you and God is forgiving, be careful. There is sin that leads to eternal death – permanent spiritual death – banning-one-from-heaven kind of death.

**What is sin that leads to death? (5:16b)** Some argue that this is the same sin Jesus referred to in the Gospels – the unpardonable sin. Some Pharisees charged that Jesus did the miracle by the power of the devil. “It is only by Beelzebul the prince of demons that this man casts out demons.” In Jesus’ response, he talks about the unpardonable sin. Jesus responds in

#### **Matthew 12:28-32 ESV**

[28] But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. [29] Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. [30] Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. [31] Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. [32] And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

That’s the unpardonable sin from the Gospels. But John has not made any reference to blasphemy of the Spirit. We have seen throughout this letter John emphasize three markers of true Christians that involve faith, obedience and love. True Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; obey Christ’s commandments and love others. So in John’s view someone who doesn’t believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God or doesn’t obey Christ’s

commandments or doesn't love others calls into question their claim to be Christians. If these three lack, they are not Christians, in John's outlook.

Yarbrough writes - If this captures John's drift, then the sin unto death is simply violation of the fundamental terms of relationship with God. To sin unto death is to have a heart unchanged by God's love in Christ. **It is resolute rejection of the true doctrine about Christ, chronic disobedience to God's commandments and persistent lack of love for fellow believers.** That seems more likely to be the sin that leads to death.

John says, "I do not say that one should pray about that. **What is John saying they should not pray about?** Is he saying that we should not pray for someone who demonstrates these characteristics? Is he commanding that we don't pray for those who have turned away from Christ or chronically disobey God's commandments or show no love for others?

I don't think so. But I do think he directs us to really think about what we'd pray about for people committing this sin. If someone is devoted to rejecting Christ, disobeying his commands and failing to love others, should we pray for God to bless them? If someone turns away from Christ and encourages others to join in that rebellion, should we pray for God to just forgive that and grant them eternal life? To ask God to forgive someone who utterly rejects Him is like asking God to set aside His own holiness and make the cross unnecessary. There are some people out to destroy the church and oppose Christ at every turn. You don't pray for their success. You pray for God to minimize the damage.

**Don't ask God to forgive and grant eternal life in their current state of rebellion.**

There is an Old Testament precedent to not pray for people bent on rebellion against God. The prophet Jeremiah kept praying for his nation and their leaders while they willfully rebelled against God's commands. So God responds to this 3 times.

- Jeremiah 7:16, - "As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.
- Jeremiah 11:14, "Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble.
- Jeremiah 14:11, - The LORD said to me: "Do not pray for the welfare of this people.
- Jesus – John 17:9 – I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me for they are yours.

At some point Jeremiah had to affirm the righteousness of God's judgment against them and stop taking up their cause. If Jeremiah kept interceding on behalf of those rebelling against God, he could find himself against God. When you intercede for someone, you take up their cause. When it comes to a rebellious person, there might be dreadful times when we must choose our loyalty. Will we remain with God or will we continue to advocate for the rebel?

Maybe an extreme example will help. Think of Adolf Hitler. He rejected Jesus as the Christ and proclaimed himself lord. He disobeyed every commandment of God that you could think of. He showed a profound lack of love towards fellow human beings. So when thinking about him, would you petition God to forgive him and grant him eternal life? No! You want to see justice. You want him held to account. If we had any indication that there was repentance or admission of wrong on his part, we might have prayed differently. But he was defiant to the end and too cowardly to face justice on earth.

Now the people around us committing the sin that leads to death are not Hitler. But some have rejected Jesus as the Christ, defiantly disobey His commands and fail to love. I think John says, "don't invest time in praying for forgiveness for them in their current state." But we could pray that God will reveal to them their desperate need of Him; that God will through judgment or hardship awaken them to their need of Him.

I was under a leader who I respected growing up. They shared about some problems they had with one of their children. This child kept on getting into trouble and finally went against the law in some serious ways. This leader kept helping the child and bailing them out. Then one day they told us that their child was in jail again. This time they weren't going to bail him out. It was time for him to face the consequences of his choices. We talked a bit about the challenge of making that decision as a parent. They continue to love him and pray for him. Eventually, the son did his time and came out and faced some things including where he was at with the Lord. That parent loved their child but also sided with God in what needed to happen. God did His work to bring that child to Himself.

Some of us might have to take that approach in our prayers with those we love who might currently be committing the sin that leads to death. God is ultimately sovereign and faithful.

John concludes this little exhortation with a wonderful summary verse. It humbles us. It checks us from thinking ourselves superior to others. It points us to our need of the Savior. "All wrongdoing is sin. But there is sin that

does not lead to death.” Here’s a balanced view of sin. It is wrong in the eyes of God. It is an offense against the holy God of the universe. But sometimes we sin unintentionally. Sometimes we sin because didn’t know that was sin. Sometimes we gain victory over temptation. But sometimes we give in. Yet we feel remorse and go quickly to God in repentance. And sometimes this happens to others. When it happens and we see it, we need to pray and ask God to give them life and correction and strength to keep going.

So the next time you see someone you know sin, ask God to help your first response be prayer.