



A Sin Unto Death

A Study of 1 John 5:16, 17

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Book 4 of the John Teague Series

John Teague, ThD

A Sin Unto Death

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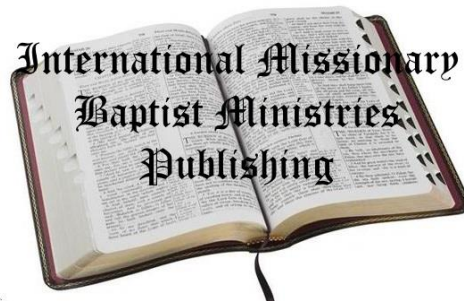
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1 John 5:16-17

16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.
17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

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This eBook is dedicated to Dr. John W. Teague. May his work continue “though he be dead, he liveth.”

Foreword

This is Book #4 of the John Teague Series. Dr. Teague went on to be with the Lord many years ago. He left behind a legacy of manuscripts that were unpublished. This is one of them.

Considerable editing has been done to correct spelling errors, grammar, and format in order for it to be easy to read.

We are but the servants; to God be the Glory.

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Introduction

We will be examining the interpretations and explanations that abound regarding 1 John 5:16-17. Every imaginable sin has likely been named through the years as the sin unto death. Usually, the foulest of sin is selected as that sin unto death.

Which sin is the sin unto death? Is it murder, incest, rape, sodomy, child abuse or something like idolatry? Is it one of what is commonly called “The Seven Deadly Sins?” Is it the sin of non-productivity, hypocrisy, scoffing at the things of God, carnality, defilement of the body, sexual immorality, or ingratitude? Is it blasphemy against God in general, Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost in particular? This study will endeavor to at least answer some of these questions.

Chapter One

The background to 1 John 3:16

John wrote to defend Jesus against false prophets and give confidence to those who might have been shaken by the errors being propagated.

Gnosticism was already on the rise, and their doctrines encompassed at least two significant errors dealt with by John. 1) The denial of Jesus coming in the flesh. 2) The belief that the purity of the spirit could not be tarnished by deeds of the body.

The Gnostics believed they could practice immorality without it being "sin. "John was concerned that ultimately, following such doctrine would destroy the fellowship that Christians have God.

The themes running throughout 1 John 1:1 – 1 John 5:21

There are several themes that run through the Book of First John. Here are several of them: The nature of Jesus; True fellowship with God; True knowledge of God; True knowledge of salvation (as opposed to the false knowledge of the Gnostics); Abiding in Christ; Being born of God; Love; Walking in the light; The true nature of sin; and Prayer.

The context of 1 John 5:16

Prayer in circumstances of sin not unto death. From the context of the text, it can be seen that there are sins which we commit that do not require our immediate human death. Our sins may be committed in the flesh and/or in the spirit. There are many injustices and crimes that are perpetrated which allow for the offending party to make restitution and/or to serve time as the consequence for the sin - for which death is not the required remedy.

The Word of God states Jesus is willing to forgive those who speak against Him.

Matthew 12:31a, 32a: "Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men:... And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him:...."

There were times that the Lord forgave the Israelites for worshipping idols - though they did bear the consequences for those actions - which sometimes included being led into by other nations.

When we commit sins that are not unto death, we must be very thankful that God forgives a broken and contrite spirit.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We must also be thankful that God prescribes a just remedy our sins.

Hebrews 12:6 *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

Fellow believers are to pray for those committing sin not unto death. *"If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he [God] shall give him life for them that sin not unto death"*.

Let us consider in circumstances of sin unto death by a fellow believer. *"If anyone sees his brother committing that is not a sin unto death."* The term brother is reserved for other Christians. John says that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves the child (I John 5:1). That is, such a one is my brother. He, like me, is a member of the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The proposition of this study is that "sin unto death" as recorded in 1 John 5:16-17 is limited to Christians, and cannot refer to apostates, unbelievers, false believers, make believers, hypocrites, liars and the such.

Various views concerning the phrase "sin unto death" as found in 1 John 5:16.

One view regards it as some specific sin that is so terrible as to be unforgivable, such as suicide, murder, idolatry, or even adultery. This view (which has been held by many through the Christian centuries) gave rise to the Catholic distinctions between mortal and venial sins. This is, perhaps, why some versions translate this as "sin which is mortal" and "sin which is not mortal." This translation is unquestionably wrong and has no foundation to support it. To translate the passage thusly is nothing short of compromising with Catholicism. It should never be translated "mortal sin" for it has nothing to do with the question of salvation. There is no merit whatsoever in Scripture for distinguishing between mortal and venial sins - sins which can be forgiven (venial), and those which can never be forgiven (mortal). Scripture makes no such distinctions. As a matter of fact, "sin unto death" is not any one specific sin. It is a particular type of sin that brings physical death. Sin unto death does not always bring immediate death. Sometimes death may be prolonged.

Other views are that the sin unto death is a specific sin, namely:

It is the sin of murder. John pointed out that hatred is tantamount to murder; and murder is a sin which leads to the death penalty. Thus, one should not pray that a murderer be released from the death penalty.

Wrong: Paul consented unto the death of many, yet God forgave him and called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Moses and David also were involved in murder; yet both are acclaimed by Christ as having been tremendous servants of God. Neither Paul, Moses or David lost salvation, and none went to hell. Sin unto death has nothing to do with whether a person goes to heaven or to hell.

It is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:22-32).

22Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw. 23And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? 24But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. 25And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: 26And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? 27And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? therefore they shall be your judges. 28But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. 29Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house. 30He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad. 31Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. 32And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

Because of the Lord's language that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven; some have surmised that this is the sin unto death.

Wrong: The sin of blasphemy can be committed only by the unregenerate. No genuinely born-again believer can commit this sin for in so doing salvation will be lost and God would be made a liar. The truly born-again believer is neither an unbeliever nor a make believer. Blasphemy can only be committed by those who have made a profession of faith but have never entered into new birth in Jesus Christ. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Blasphemy has to do with spiritual death while sin unto death as used in 1 John 5:16 is not spiritual death. Some call blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, "apostasy."

It is the sin of apostasy. The apostate has heard the truth and even embraced it, then renounces what he knows to be true. This is similar to Hebrews 6 and the apostasy described there. In this view, the Gnostics had departed from truth and accepted a teaching that would condemn them. Thus, it is impossible to bring them back. It is not a temporary fall, the transgression of a commandment, nor is it to be overtaken in a fault. An apostate actually blasphemes the name of the Lord Jesus and the truths of the Christian faith. An apostate may blaspheme against Jesus and still be forgiven.

It is a sin persisted in, with a refusal to repent or confess it. Once repented of it is no longer unto death.

Wrong: Moses repented yet God took his life.

It is a special form of sin which God brings judgment upon immediately. For example, God's punishment of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 might be such a sin. This is partly correct and partly wrong. All sin unto death does not bring immediate death; but it does bring certain death.

It is a presumptuous sin, committed with full knowledge by the believer. The sin not unto death is a sin committed in ignorance, and for which one will be forgiven. Sin unto death is blatant sin with no regard for the clear, precise, explicit instructions of God.

Correct: The sin unto death is a particular type of sin --- it is not a particular sin.

The correct view, views death as used here as physical death. There is sin that a Christian can commit which will result in God taking him home in physical death. Certain examples of this sin unto death are given in Scripture which, if one studies them carefully, will reveal that particular element that is able to turn many sins into sin which is unto death.

All wrongdoing is sin and all unrighteousness is sin. Do not misunderstand that sin is sin, but there is sin which has a certain element about it, a certain characteristic which will result in physical judgment bringing physical death.

The implications of 1 John 5:16.

The text implies that when we pray for a brother or sister in Christ who has committed a sin - not unto death, our prayers for that brother or sister should be that God will give them life - that is, that God will allow them an opportunity to repent of their sins and that the brother or sister will properly respond with a broken and contrite spirit thus being returned to fellowship with God. It also implies that believers are under no command to pray for the brother committing sin unto death.

The common ground upon which sin unto death grows.

What, then, is the element that turns ordinary sin into this kind of sin? It is the element of wanton, presumptuous action in the face of clear knowledge that it is wrong. It is willfulness, a willful presumption to pursue something when you know that God has said it is wrong. That is sin unto death, and the result is physical judgment. It is persistence in a determined course of action when you know that God has said it is wrong. That presumptuous persistence constitutes sin unto death.

Throughout the letter of First John, we are taught again and again about the necessity of not merely having a RELATIONSHIP but also FELLOWSHIP with God. Being saved brings ETERNAL life and ETERNAL relationship; but intimate fellowship brings ABUNDANT life and ABUNDANT blessing. NEVER FORGET that the key to avoiding sin unto death is unrelenting, uninterrupted FELLOWSHIP with God. That statement needs to be repeated. NEVER FORGET that the key to avoiding sin unto death is unrelenting, uninterrupted FELLOWSHIP with God. John gives four principles that will fan the flames of intimate fellowship with God.

Know the Destructiveness of Sin (vv.16-17). Most sins do not lead to immediate death; however, all sin brings death. In vv.16-17 John writes three times of "sin not leading to death" and once of "sin leading to death" as well as our responsibility to pray for those caught in sin.

Sin always brings about death. Rom.6:23 says specifically, "For the wages of sin is death." To paraphrase, "Because sin we die." In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen.2:17). At the Fall, Adam immediately died spiritually but his sin also eventually brought about physical death.

Here in 1 John 5, the apostle wants us to know that although all sins cause physical death eventually, there are some sins that cause immediate physical death. Some believers die before their time. They disobey, rebel, and refuse to hear the voice of God to the point they no longer serve His purposes on earth, so He takes them home to heaven. This doesn't mean He doesn't love them; it means they have cut short their usefulness and He can no longer use them.

Above all God desires FELLOWSHIP with His children. If we won't fellowship with Him here on earth, He may take us home early so He can have fellowship with us in heaven.

There is much preaching and teaching today on God's love, yet there is little preaching and teaching on the severity of God's love. God loves us so much He refuses to let us throw our lives away. He will not let us destroy our lives and the lives of others, so He takes us home first. We need to know not only the love of God but also the warnings of God and the severity of His judgment!

You might be tempted to think, "I know this is wrong, but I'm only hurting myself." That's not true. As a believer you are not only related to God but to all His family; therefore, sin hurts Him and the rest of His family.

1 Corinthians 12:26 *"And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."*

Three times in these two verses, John tells us there is "sin not leading to death." Most of our sins fall into this category. Sometimes we sin out of ignorance or ingrained habit. We are to "confess" these sins and receive forgiveness and cleansing.

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

You might ask, "How do you know a sin is not a sin leading to death?" The answer is: "You are still breathing!"

Know that "***All unrighteousness is sin:***" 1 John 3:17. All sin is harmful and destructive. The question might be asked, "Does this still happen?" Yes! We often do not recognize causes of suffering and death because we are not aware of the circumstances.

In the examples that will be mentioned in Part 3, the sins are not the same. What then turns an ordinary sin into "sin leading to death?" The common thread is premeditated disobedience and rebellion in the face of God with the clear knowledge that it is wrong.

Although death does not always come immediately every Christian must know that sometimes it does. Not all sickness and not all premature deaths are because of willful sin, but some are.

"***All unrighteousness is sin, ...***" That which stands between a sinner and fellowship with God is their sin. Fellowship is made possible in redemption and maintained through confession, 1 John 1:9. However, there are times when confession comes too late and repentance is not accepted.

Know the physical and spiritual outcome of sin. Know what the Bible has to say about sin.

It must first be stated that all sin, from the merit and legal sense of it, that is, as God has judged, is unto death. The first part of verse 17 declares that "***All unrighteousness is sin***". And we know that by our very nature we are all unrighteous.

1 John 5:16-17 ***There is a sin unto death....and...there is a sin not unto death.***

Therefore, God has judged that because of our sin, we have missed mark of righteousness.

Romans 3:10 ***As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:***

We have also been judged to die for our sin of unbelief if we do not by faith receive Jesus Christ as Savior.

Romans 3:23 ***For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;***

Romans 6:23a ***"For the wages of sin is death."***

Galatians 3:10 ***For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.***

Examples of sins not unto death

Consider Young Christians. Look again at what John said, "If anyone sees his brother committing sin which is not unto death...." This type of sin arises largely out of ignorance

with no understanding of the implications of it, and no awareness of how bad it is. Of sin not unto death, it is said, ***“he will ask, and God will give him life...”***

Young Christians often stumble into things they are not aware of. They do not understand what they are getting into, and they do not realize the danger. If you see your brother committing that kind of sin, ask of God, and God will give life for those whose sin is not unto death. God will withhold the judgment of physical weakness and grant opportunity for the renewal of life.

Note King Hezekiah. You can see that in the Old Testament in the case of King Hezekiah. During a very unwise moment Hezekiah allowed the King of Babylon to send visitors into his palace to investigate all that was going on and to see the riches of the palace.

The prophet Isaiah warned Hezekiah that these men only wanted to see how much money he had and whether or not it was worth sending an army to take it. Isaiah said, “You have sold yourself into the hands of the Babylonians.”

As a result of that King Hezekiah received a sentence of death from God. God told him to prepare himself, to get everything ready, because he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, prayed, and beseeched the Lord. Hezekiah’s prayer of confession and repentance was heard. God stopped the prophet Isaiah as he was going out the door, having delivered the sentence of death, and said, “Return to the King. I have granted him fifteen more years of life.”

As a sign that it would happen, the sundial in the garden went backward ten degrees. That is an example of God granting for those who do not commit a sin that is unto death. Repentance reverses the judgment. Those who willfully determine to go in a way that is wrong commit sin which is unto death, and when they do God says do not pray for that.

Chapter Two

Observations

Introduction

Before deciding not to pray for a brother, be sure that all other options have been exhausted. The context of 1 John 5:16 is prayer and for whom to pray and whom not to pray. Indifference is not an alternative. Every believer is mandated of Almighty God to look to the good of fellow believers.

“If any man see his brother sin a sin . . .” is an interesting statement. The phrase is an indication of the responsibility that belongs to every believer. Look to the good of other believers. The phrase no doubt considers that everyone will have opportunity to see a brother sin. The deeply rooted reality of the phrase is that no believer can see a brother sinning with indifference, amusement, or contempt. The underlying expectation of 1 John 5:16-17 is that everyone who is born of God, loves the brethren as previously considered in 1 John 4:21, *And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.*

Fulfilling the law of Christ necessitates being so troubled about a sinning brother that his restoration is sought immediately and diligently, Galatians 6:1. In the event the brother refuses reconciliation, your love for him demands that he be removed from fellowship and turned over to Satan that he may be buffeted and later returned to fellowship.

Because it is not given to any believer to see the heart of another, we can only inspect the "fruit" (or lack thereof). The farther a believer appears to wander away from God, more "bad fruit" will be observe. We wonder about the truthfulness of that believer's profession of faith; we may even be tempted to ask, "Is this person really a Christian" but we can go no farther than that. Our dealing with such a brother does not affect salvation; our dealing affects fellowship.

Until such time as fellowship must be broken, we are under Divine compulsion to be praying diligently that God will reconcile the brother to Himself so that *"The evil one does not touch him."* 1 John 5:18

An important contextual element in 1 John is that the one born of God "does not sin", 1 John 3:9; 5:18. How is the "does not sin" phrase reconciled to the phrase "see a brother sin?" How is the "does not sin" phrase reconciled to the phrase "he that sayeth he hath no sin is a liar?" Is this a contradiction of Scripture? "Sin," in the present tense, indicates that one who is born of God does not continue in sin (not that the child of God is flawlessly perfect).

The sin we see a brother commit is not a habitual sin but is rather an isolated event. The consequence of that sin can be relatively minor or so terrible that the sinning brother is removed by death.

It is very important to understand the difference in isolated sin and habitual sin. If one flaunts the commands of God by living in sin as a habit, if he or she practices sin as a lifestyle, the context and tenor of the whole of First John and the rest of the Bible is that that person so living IS NOT a child of God, does not know God and has not been born of God.

In this study we will observe that a sin unto death is not always the same sin; but it is always the same type of sin. Notice that 1 John 5:16 does not use the article "the" but uses the article "a" when referring to sin unto death. The phrase "a sin" speaks of a type of sin, not the sin itself; thus, John is not speaking specifically of the sin of murder, lust, immorality or any other specific sin.

As this study progresses, many examples of "a sin unto death" will be considered from both the Old and New Testaments. Each sin is of a particular type.

A sin unto death does not always bring immediate death

It did with Ananias and Saphira. It did with Achan. It did with Korah and his followers. It did with the children who demanded Aaron make them a golden calf. It did not with Moses. It did not with the Corinthians.

With the Corinthians death came in stages. First there was weakness. Then sickliness. Finally, death.

Perhaps much of the physical weakness among Christians today comes like it did with the Corinthians who were more concerned about fellowship among themselves and with the world than they were with fellowship with God. Do not misunderstand, not all physical weakness comes from misdirected fellowship and not all premature deaths come from being corrupt, carnal, confused, careless and cold as were the Corinthians; but some very likely do.

1 John 5:16 is the declaration that "there is a sin leading to death."

The ramification of that declaration is a clear statement that the most severe degree of discipline by God is the death of His child. It must be recognize that the context of 1 John 5:16 is addressing a situation involving a "brother committing a sin" and is not a reference to damnation of the soul, losing salvation or being cast off as a son of God.

On many occasions, the Scripture records the fact that God does use death as an extreme form of discipline of His children. He does not use death as a means to cast His children into hell; He uses death to end a life of disobedience that other children of God will not be adversely affected by the error of the guilty party. The death of the child of God after having sinned a sin unto death is a stark reminder to other children of God that they must be careful not to be presumptuous at any time in their fellowship with God.

The death of a sinning believer is not primarily brought about as a punitive measure but as a preventative measure. For instance, if you see a brother do something that brings death, and

you see another brother do something that brings death, their death will serve as a preventative message to you that you not die also.

**A sin unto death is not linked to all types of sin.
It is linked to one particular type of sin.**

What did John mean when he said that there is “a sin unto death”? He simply meant that it is possible, very possible, for a believer to sin to the extent that they suffer God’s ultimate chastening, which is physical death. In other words, it is possible for a child of God to sin his life away (not salvation, but his physical life).

When the Bible says that there is “a sin unto death,” it’s not talking about one particular sin. More than once, the question has been asked, “What is the sin unto death? Is it murder? Is it adultery? Is it child abuse? Is it lying? What exactly is “the” sin unto death?”)

The answer is, it’s not just one particular sin. It is the one type of sin that pushes the believer beyond the limits of God’s patience and longsuffering, and causes God to say, “That’s it, it’s time for me to take you out of here.”

Some sins are more consequential than other sins

While sin is sin, some sins are more consequential in that they involve more rebellion. "Sin unto death" appears to be a sin which involves the sinner in ultimate rebellion against God: a condition of disrespect, rejection, defiance, and presumption. We must always avoid such.

Some sins, in individual cases, cut short a person's life span. It is not one special sin but one special type of sin that Scripture has in mind when speaking of a sin unto death.

**Every effort should be made to bring reconciliation of a
brother to the Lord where possible**

When a brother or sister in the Lord falls, it is the responsibility of other believers to come alongside him or her for the purpose of "winning" them back, or seeing them reconciled to God.

However, if they refuse to listen to you, Matthew 18:16 teaches that you don't walk away hurt, but you return with "one or two more" and once again lovingly confront them.

According to verse 17, if they refuse to hear them, "tell it to the church."

If they refuse to listen "even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

This response is clarified for us in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 where the errant brother is "delivered over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"

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