

What to Do When a Brother Sins

1 John 5:16-17

The Queen Mary was the largest ship to cross the oceans when she was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a World War she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California. During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were removed. They needed to be scraped down and repainted. However, they crumbled when placed on the dock. Virtually nothing was left of the 3/4-inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. Most of what remained was more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away. On the surface of those massive columns, everything seemed ship shape, but the reality of their condition was far different from their appearance. The most amazing thing was that they had made it so far and lasted so long without falling catastrophically upon the decks and passengers below. The strength of their surface sufficiency had brought them through years on the tempestuous seas. Neither the tossing of the waves or the crashing of the winds had brought them down. Surface sufficiency survived the storms, but they failed under inspection.

Many believers have much in common with the Queen Mary's smokestacks: they have surface sufficiency. They look okay on the outside and may have looked good for a long time. However, the weight of years and the trauma of life's storms weaken them to the point that they eventually collapse in a cloud of rusty dust. A long marriage ends in bitter divorce. An addiction takes its final toll. Ethical blunders result in financial ruin. Moral lapses payoff in public disgrace. It is tragic to watch a believer fall into sin but it happens all the time. The question what do we do for our brothers who sin?

Now before we get into the details of verses 16 & 17 I want to remind you of the relationship of these verses to what John has said right before this. He has been talking about answered prayer and praying according to the will of God. Now he then gives us these two illustrations, one which is in the will of God, one which is not. The "sin which is not unto death" is the kind which permits a concerned brother to ask God for deliverance from that sin for an erring brother and the will of God is to grant that request. The "sin which is unto death" is the kind to which God has already determined upon a certain response and no prayer is going to change his mind. Therefore, it is useless to pray. That is why John gives this illustration.

So the first point I make about these verses today is:

I. Pray for Each Other (vv.16-17).

Prayer for each other is what is most important here. Here is the simple point: if we see another brother, another believer in Christ, sin, we should pray for them first. All too often, prayer is the last thing we do for someone caught up in sin.

Our human nature usually wants to do one of three things when we see a brother in sin:

1. **Tell someone else.** Gossip about the individual. Now this response is obviously wrong. By doing that we just add our sin to their sin. We must be careful that when we share prayer requests that we do not slip into gossip. It is better for you simply to pray.
2. **Confront them.** We sometimes want to confront the individual immediately. That can get a bit dicey. When confronting someone in sin, it is

important to pray first, and get the Lord's guidance on how to approach the person. Jesus says to be careful about this. **"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** (Matt. 7:3-5). And Paul gives this word of warning for those considering confronting a brother in sin, **"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."** (Gal 6:1).

3. **Ignore it.** Maybe the worst thing we could do is to just try to overlook it completely. This is wrong too, since your silence may be a silent approval to that individual. The loving thing is not to ignore the sin, but to pray for the person. We are to, **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."** (Gal 6:2).

John tells us here to pray for the individual. Notice the words in verse 16, **"he will ask."** The NIV says, **"he should pray."** First thing. Maybe after you have prayed the Lord will then put it on your heart to approach the individual. But pray first. It's a lot easier to approach someone knowing you prayed about it, you have asked God to examine your own sin and motivations, and God is in control.

John says that God will bless the prayer you pray for a brother caught up in sin. I think God will bless this kind of prayer, when we pray in humility, gentleness and out of love for that sinning brother. Love for one another has been a major theme of this whole letter of 1 John. And I think it must be a key to our prayer for each other as well.

John says here that our prayer can rescue a man from losing his testimony and possibly his life. What if before we could remove anyone from our church membership or Sunday School rolls we had to prove that we had persistently interceded for them in prayer for at least as long as they had been missing?

II. Sin to pray for.

A. Sin that is not unto to Death.

1. Three times in these two verses, John tells us there is **"sin not leading to death"** or literally, **"sin not unto death."** Probably most of our sins as believers fall into this category. Sometimes we sin out of ignorance or ingrained habit. We are to **"confess"** these sins and receive forgiveness and cleansing (1:9).

2. You might ask, **"How do you know a sin is not a sin leading to death?"** You are still breathing!

3. V.17 says, **"All unrighteousness is sin."** All sin is harmful and destructive, but not all sins lead to immediate death.

B. This Sin Requires Our Prayers.

1. As I said, the heart of these verses is not so much about sin as it is about prayer. John says, **"If anyone SEES a brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ASK and He [God] will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death."** When we SEE we

are to ASK in prayer for God's help.

2. If I had a terrible illness but had not been to a doctor, what would you do? If you loved me you would make me an appointment, drive me to the hospital and do everything to ensure my health. Why then when we see a fellow believer caught up in sin do we say, **"It's his business, not mine?"** We have that attitude because we do not love as we should.

3. Tony Evans says this verse means that when we see a brother caught in sin we are to **"tell God on him!"** We are to pray for him that he does not go too far. We are to pray that the brother who is **"sinning a sin which does not lead to death"** in order that his sin does not become a **"sin leading to death."**

III. Sin Not to Pray For.

A. Some Sin Leads to Death.

1. John says clearly in verse 16, **"There is sin leading to death."** And he says he is not urging us to **"pray about that."** So what sin is so serious that John says prayer is unnecessary for it? What is **"sin unto death"**?

2. First let me say that the Bible teaches that sin always brings about death. Rom.6:23 says specifically, **"For the wages of sin is death."** To paraphrase, **"*Because we 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. So there are two kinds of death: physical death and spiritual death. Death is always a separation. Physical death is separation of the soul or spirit from the body. Spiritual death is eternal separation from God.

Now the critical question here is, to which kind of death is John referring when he calls this a **"sin unto death"**?

Two Views:

1. Spiritual Death.

First, let's examine the view that this is spiritual death. At first view, this might seem to make sense. In John's letter here the word life almost always refers to spiritual life, to eternal life. Look back up to verses 11-13, **"And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."**

"Life" in those verses obviously means spiritual life. Back in 1 John 3:14 he also speaks about spiritual death, **"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death."**

But here comes the problem. In verse 16 the one who we see sinning is a brother, **"If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin."** So the one sinning here is a brother, a fellow believer in Jesus. Can a believer experience

spiritual death? NO. The Bible nowhere talks about a true believer, one who has crossed over from death to life, ever crossing back over from eternal life to spiritual death. Jesus said, **"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."** (John 5:24).

The only way that this could be referring to spiritual death, eternal separation from God, is if the **"brother"** here is not a true believer. And certainly John and the church to whom he wrote had experienced false brothers, false believers. There had been false brothers who had been teaching false doctrine in the church. John goes so far as to call them **"anti-Christ"**. In 1 John 2:18-19 he says, **"Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us."**

In this case the **"sin unto death"** would be the same as the **"blasphemy of the Holy Spirit"** that Jesus said could not be forgiven. This is what we call apostasy, someone who has made a profession of faith in Christ but turns away and ultimately comes to the place where he actually blasphemes the name of the Lord Jesus and the things of Christian faith, denying them completely. Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 and other passages make clear that such an apostate is in a terrible situation. He has committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the flagrant rejection of the testimony of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ, and that is unpardonable.

But it is equally clear that kind of sin can never be committed by a genuine born-again Christian. It is only committed by those who have made a profession of faith but have never entered into new birth in Jesus Christ.

In this case, it would do no good to pray for such an unrepentant and faithless person. God will not forgive and grant life to someone unless they repent and believe. That is great news if any of you think you may have committed some unforgiveable sin. No sin is unforgiveable if it is repented of. John has already said in 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."**

2. Physical Death

Is there Biblical evidence for such a view?

a. Some Examples of Sins Leading to Death.

1. Num.3:4 tells of the first two sons of Aaron, NADAB and ABIHU who **"died before the Lord when they offered profane fire before the Lord."** They deviated from God's will in worship.
2. Num.16 tells of KORAH who led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. God caused the ground to open up and swallow him and all who followed after him.
3. Num.20 says that even MOSES rebelled when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God had required. He said, **"Hear now,**

you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" God said to him in v.12, **"Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them"** (cf.20:1-13). He didn't die immediately but he did die shortly.

4. Joshua 7 teaches that ACHAN rebelled when he violated God's command not to take anything from the destruction of Jericho. Israel was defeated at Ai because he hid a beautiful garment, some silver and a wedge of gold under his tent. He was stoned and his body burned.

5. 2 Sam.6 speaks of UZZAH who dared touch the Ark of the Covenant as it was being moved. V.7 says, **"Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God."**

Now you might say, "yes, preacher but all that is in the Old Testament, didn't things change in the New Testament?" Well, let's look.

6. Acts 5 tells of ANANIAS and SAPHIRA who lied to the apostles about money that they received from the sale of some land. They fell down dead one at a time for their lie.

7. 1 Cor.11 teaches that some in the CORINTHIAN CHURCH profaned the Lord's Supper. V.30 says, **"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep."**

b. Some Sins *Still* Lead to Death.

Notice that in all these examples it was not the same sin, by any means. It was simply sin which results in the judgment of physical death. What then, is the element that turns ordinary sin into this kind of sin? I think if you look at these examples together you will see what it is. 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 God has said it is wrong. This is sin unto death, and the result is physical judgment.

Now it does not always come suddenly. It did with Ananias and Sapphira, it did with Achan, but it did not with Moses, and it did not with the Corinthians. With them it came in stages: first it was weakness, then sickness, and finally death.

Some might say, **"Pastor, do you really believe that this still happens?"** Yes! We often do not recognize causes of suffering and death because we are not aware of the circumstances.

John 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 from the earth. This doesn't mean He doesn't love them; it means He can't use them.

Death does not always come immediately but sometimes it does. Not all sickness and not all premature deaths are because of willful sin, but

some are. That's why we need to be serious about sin, to confess it immediately and receive forgiveness and cleansing.

There is much preaching today on God's love, yet there is little preaching on the severity of God's love. God loves us so much He refuses to let us throw our lives away. He does not want us to destroy our lives and the lives of others.

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

John says in verse 17, "**All unrighteousness is sin.**" Sin is serious. Deal with it now.

Sin Requires Our Prayers.

What are we to pray? We are to pray that God will do whatever it takes to restore our sinning brother.

When we earnestly pray for our erring brother, that person may receive an extra measure of God's grace because of the faithful prayers of those in fellowship with God.

I am spurred on to pray because of the glorious promise in verse 16 that God will give life to him in answer to my prayers. Intercession is not trivial, it is used by God to turn people around.

I want to close this morning with an admonition to all of us to become more regular and more expectant in prayer; and to urge all of us to become more sensitive to the spiritual welfare of the brothers and sisters around us. Let us be diligent in praying for each other's spiritual and emotional and physical well-being. God has much he wants to accomplish through us in answer to prayer. I can't help but feel we are on the verge of a new breakthrough in power and fruitfulness at New Covenant. And it will come through a new surge in prayer.

And in honor of Father's Day, one final admonition directed to those of us who are fathers, myself included. Let us, together with our wives, labor in prayer for our children. Paul said, concerning his spiritual children in Gal. 4:19, "**My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you...**" There is nothing more important than Christ being formed in our children. Our prayer lives need to reflect this priority.

Take Job, for example. Scripture says he was an upright man and Job "would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of his children; for Job said 'Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually."