

Series: John's Letters

Title: Struggling with Sin

Text: 1 John 5:16-21

Date: June 20, 2021

Verse 16

In verse 18, John gave his readers instruction regarding how to restore a fellow believer who had fallen into sin. He said, "If anyone sees a fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn't lead to death. There is sin that leads to death. I am not saying he should pray about that" (John 5:18). John's words seem confusing at first glance. Considering the context of his original audience will help us unlock the meaning of his words.

The first-century churches of Asia Minor were being impacted by a false teaching that boasted of perfectionism. The Gnostics claimed they had no sin (1 John 1:8 and 10). As a result, many believers within the church were confused regarding the principle of indwelling sin. Earlier in his letter, John gave instruction to help individual believers deal with sin in their personal lives (1 John 1:9). In our current verse, his intent was to help his readers deal with public sin within the congregation. He encouraged a healthy process of confronting sinning believers for the goal of restoration. His words were likely based on Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:15-20, instruction with which most churches were familiar by the time of John's writing. John knew local congregations needed an atmosphere of accountability and encouragement when it came to sin.

John outlined how the church could handle two different types of sins within congregations. First, he talked about a "fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death." The individual in view was a born-again believer. The type of sin committed was one that didn't "lead to death." What type of "death" was John talking about? Some think physical death was in view. Certainly, sin can result in immediate physical death. Scripture gives witness that such is true. Think of the example of Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:7) and the incident with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

Though sin can result in immediate physical death at times, John's words seem to speak of a different issue. It seems his focus was on spiritual death, the death spoken of in Revelation 20:14 — "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." The apostle referenced this type of death earlier in his letter (1 John 3:14). Jesus spoke of it in John 8:51, saying, "Truly I tell you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." Spiritual and eternal death can be prevented by taking heed to Jesus' truth.

So what was "the sin that leads to death"? To answer that question, it is best consider the words of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, our Lord said, "Therefore, I tell you, people will be forgiven every sin and blasphemy, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31). According to Jesus, a rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life is the one sin that leads to spiritual death. Jesus' words were uttered in reference to Pharisees who claimed His works were of Satanic origin (Matthew 12:24). Our Lord meant to say that one who rejected His claims was eternally doomed. Because he or she "blasphemed" against the Holy Spirit's work, he or she was placed in an "unsavable" state.

It is still possible for people to commit the sin that leads to death. One commentator has said, "People who deny the reality of God's presence in Jesus' ministry have nowhere to go when they need forgiveness for their sins."¹ The author of Hebrews seemed to make an allusion to the sin that leads to death when he said: "For if we deliberately go on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:26).

¹ Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Volume 2, Mark*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 96.

The heretics of Asia Minor were guilty of the sin that leads to death. They had heard the gospel message. They were acquainted with the apostles' claims concerning Jesus. They knew the truth, but they rejected it. Their rejection resulted in spiritual death.

The true believers in Asia Minor were not susceptible to the sin unto death. They had responded positively to Jesus' claims. They hadn't rejected the work of the Holy Spirit. However, they were still susceptible to sins that didn't lead to death. All believers, even the most consecrated, are not impervious to indwelling sin (1 John 1:8-10). Consequently, the fellowships in Asia Minor needed to know how to assist believers who stumbled and struggled.

In reference to believers in sin, John said members of the church needed to pray. He said, "he should ask, and God will give life to him." The word translated "ask" is one that was often used of prayer in the New Testament (Matthew 6:8, 7:7; James 1:5; 1 John 3:3). Indeed, the very context of our current verse used the word to speak of prayer (1 John 5:14-15). In one way, John's words in 1 John 5:16-17 should simply be seen as an extension of his teaching on that subject.

The apostle wanted his readers to stand ready to pray for fellow believers ensnared in sin. Instead of talking about such individuals behind their backs, the church needed to talk to the Heavenly Father about such individuals. The Lord could use such faithful intercession to produce a powerful result. When the church prayed, erring believers could be restored to "life." The word rendered "life" referred to the abundant life (John 10:10) one experienced through abiding in Christ (John 15:5). Believers who become sidetracked by sin cut themselves off from the full experience of the Christian life. Repentance can bring renewal.

The church was to pray so that backslidden brothers and sisters could be restored. They needed to regain a spirit of vigilance and adopt a readiness to help those who were struggling with sin. Paul encouraged such an atmosphere of accountability and encouragement in the church. He said, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit,, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted. Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

Verse 17

John concluded his discussion regarding the restoration of a sinning believer by saying, "All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death" (1 John 5:17). His words were intended to clarify what he said in verse 16. He did not want his readership to be flippant toward sin that did not lead unto death. As a result, he reminded them that "All unrighteousness is sin."

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit may be the only unpardonable sin, but that does not minimize the heinousness of other sins. All sin is an affront against the holy character of God. It involves a twisting and perverting of God's righteous standards. Believers in Asia Minor needed to be on guard against thinking some sins were insignificant. Their struggle against heresy had perhaps caused them to overlook certain transgressions in the fellowship.

Verse 18

Verses 18-21 are traditionally regarded as the conclusion to John's first epistle. In verse 18, the apostle said, "We know that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but the one who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18). The reference to being "born of God" was a clear reference to regeneration (John 3:3). John spoke of that aspect of salvation on numerous occasions in his letter (1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 5:4).

In verse 18, He referenced the subject in order to encourage his readers. He wanted them to be sure of their standing in Christ. Once again, he wanted the true believers of Asia Minor to know they were spiritually safe and secure (1 John 5:13). He gave them frequent encouragements regarding to their spiritual standing (1 John 2:12-14 and 4:4), because he knew heresy was discouraging them. To provide a final consolation, he spoke of the way in

which “God keeps” true believers. The language picturesquely portrayed the Lord personally preserving the redeemed.

The apostle was well-acquainted with the doctrine of the preservation of the saints. Within his writings, he made frequent reference to the preserving work of Jesus in salvation. In his gospel, he quoted our Lord as saying, “This is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me but should raise them up on the last day” (John 6:39). His gospel also detailed the way in which Jesus prayed that the church would experience the preserving effects of salvation (John 17:11-15). In his apocalypse, John recorded our Lord’s promise to the church at Philadelphia regarding perseverance (Revelation 3:10). He spoke of the same theme in our current text in order to encourage believers who were being discouraged by devious doctrines.

John emphasized the security of God’s children by speaking of the way in which “the evil one does not touch” them. The word rendered “touch” is one that meant “to lay hold of or to grasp rather than a mere superficial touch...here the idea is touch to harm.”² It meant “to lay hold of someone in order to harm him.”³ The apostle wanted his readers to stop doubting their salvation. He knew that truth concerning Christ’s preserving work would provide them with great spiritual strength and security. In the face of gnostic accusations, the real Christians in Asia Minor needed to remember that Christ kept them in His hand. The super-spiritual claims of the self-righteous within the church were fraudulent. No one could rob the true believers of the life they had received.

² Robertson, 245.

³ Rogers and Rogers, 599.