



Before leaving on vacation, I was somewhat sad that I wasn't going to continue on in 1 John for the next couple of weeks. I'm extremely grateful for David, Ben, and Mark and their clearly gifts to preach, but I was a little bummed to not be the one preaching because I have been absolutely loving preaching through 1 John. John's practical wisdom and pastoral care has been incredibly refreshing to me.

When I got back from vacation and began to work this past week, I wanted to remind myself of what passage I was going to preach, and I saw 1 John 5:16-17. I read the verses and thought to myself, "What in the world does this mean?!" In transparency, my excitement deflated a little bit. I then thought of Mark's illustration about John's writing style with this book. It's like spaghetti. Everything touches everything and can be a little confusing. But I went a little further in my mind when I thought of these two verses. We're not only dealing with spaghetti. We're dealing with a knotted-up necklace. We're not just dealing with shoelaces that are knotted-up. We're dealing with a necklace that seems like it could break if we're not careful.

Maybe as you heard these verses read earlier, you were confused, too. And, you might feel tempted to just say, "Well, let's skip these verses and move to the end of the letter," but I've learned through the years and hundreds of sermons I've preached that when I tend to feel like I don't know where a text is going, God often shows me the importance of what he's saying through study and the Spirit's guidance, and I end up getting excited to preach the text. And I'm here today with that drive and excitement to preach.

Because of the confusion of these verses, let's read them again right now to make sure we get them in our heads: 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.¹

So, we have our Bibles open and we're looking at this necklace. **What is the sin not leading to death? And how could a Christian brother or sister be given life if they already have life? Also, what is the sin leading to death – and why wouldn't I pray for someone if they've committed the sin leading to death? And, is John saying that a genuine Christian brother or sister could commit the sin leading to death? Meaning, can they lose their salvation? And, what is the point of these verses?** How does this fit in John's spaghetti recipe? Do you see how confusing these two little verses can be? Well, let's look at the knot and see where we need to pull first.

As with any knot, you want to find the first place to pull that will relieve the tension. In this text, let's remember that we always need to know the broader context. I think it's actually really important than

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:16–17.

we read verses 14-15. That helps us to understand why John is talking about prayer in these verses. In these verses, we read, “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.**”² These are beautifully powerful verses. The holy, righteous, all-glorious God comes to those who trust Jesus as their Savior, and he listens to our prayers. He communes with us. And, he doesn’t just hear us. He listens with the purpose of answering us. If we ask according to his will, he will answer us. Now, just as Mark stated last week, there’s so much that can be said of these verses. We can go down a lot of rabbit trails and try to answer questions like, “What is praying according to God’s will?” “Why doesn’t it seem like God answers this or that prayer?” But I don’t think God wants us to necessarily ask these broader questions. When we do that, we miss the forest for the trees. Meaning, John has a main point. He writes to give assurance – not to confuse us more. And, he’s writing to tell this hurting small group of Christians who have been confused by false teachers and friends that God actually listens to and will answer them! They’re privileged. And, if we trust Jesus, God listens to us as well! He answers our prayers, too. How amazing.

Now, we come to verses 16-17, and we see why John is talking about prayer. What John does in verses 16-17 is give one qualification on praying according to God’s will. He emphasizes both the power of prayer and also when *not to pray*. This past week, when thinking through the title of the sermon, I originally thought, “What kind is it?”, referring to evaluating between mortal sins or sins that don’t lead to death. But the emphasis of John here is on evaluating whether we ought to pray or not pray for someone. Yes, God answers our prayers as they align with his will. But we need to know that sometimes our prayers are not in line with God’s will – even when we think they may be.

So, what John does here is something very pastoral. He shows the struggling Christians that there are times to *stop* praying about someone. That might sound shocking – and, honestly, it still sounds shocking to me – but I can’t ignore what John says here. I think that as we walk through this, we will actually grow in sobering encouragement. So, with all this backdrop, and with the knotted-necklace in our hands, I want to give you the main idea of the sermon today: **Christians must pray with discernment and trust in the Lord.** In these verses, I see a two-fold purpose in John stating that we need to decipher who we’re praying for. First, John wants us to grow in our own discernment as it relates to people who are parading a false message about Jesus. Second, I believe John wants the believer’s trust to increase in the Lord. Let’s start with the discernment piece:

1. Christians must pray with discernment.

Again, let’s read verses 16-17: 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. ³

What you might think John would say is that if you see a brother committing a sin, pray for them and they will be given life. That’s not what John says. He qualifies the type of sin. It’s a sin not leading to death. And in case you didn’t get that point. He again says, “to those who commit sins that do not lead to death.” And then he emphasizes that there is sin that leads to death, and then he goes so far as to say that he’s not talking about praying for the one whose sin leads to death.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:14–15.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:16–17.

At this point, we feel the knotted-necklace and say, “What are you trying to emphasize here, John? Why does it matter if we know whether someone’s sin is to death or not?” And then we’re tempted to ask if John is rating sins. Do some sins lead to Hell while other sins just lead to purgatory or some other lesser consequence?

It’s because of a passage like this one that we have the Roman Catholic teaching of mortal and venial sins. In Roman Catholicism, there are certain sins that guarantee you go to Hell. Other sins just need purgatorial cleansing. But that can’t be what John means because in chapter 3, John says “⁶No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.”⁴ This passage makes a clear statement that practice of sin means you do not know the Lord. John said earlier that sin is lawlessness and to practice lawlessness is to be against God. So, the view that there are some sins that guarantee you go to Hell, while others don’t, doesn’t fit with John’s teaching. In addition, in verse 17, John emphasizes the point that all sin is wrong. All wrongdoing is sin. But he adds, “But there is sin that does not lead to death.” At this point, we just know that there are two types of sins, and John is not saying you can be a relatively good person and get out of Hell because you haven’t committed the horrible sins.

Now we can ask what these phrases actually mean. What is the sin that leads to death and the sin that doesn’t lead to death. Fitting with the apostle John’s writings, I think what John is speaking of here is sinfulness that is embraced to the extent that there is an overt rejection of the genuine Jesus. Think about the context of this letter. John continually is comforting these Christians that they know and embrace the truth, in contrast to the false teachers who deny Jesus. Instead of believing who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do, they make up a different version of Jesus. And, they do this after having been introduced to the real Jesus. But not only are they denying the Christian community. They’re creating their own beliefs that war against the truth.

As a result, we can say that these people are obstinate in their sinfulness. For whatever reasons, they want to believe what they want to believe about Jesus in order to elevate self. They’d rather live in lawlessness than under God and his good law.

This view fits with Jesus’ teaching about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 12, we read about religious people who ascribe the works of Jesus to Satan. Jesus’ life and actions were of such spectacular degree that to say he was working for Satan is to throw out all evidences of who he is. The people adamantly rejected Jesus and thus they committed what Jesus says is the unforgivable sin. The Spirit has made his work known. The people knew it, but they rejected Jesus. And to reject Jesus means you will die. John records Jesus’ own words when he wrote in his gospel, “²⁴**I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.**”⁵

The sin that leads to death is not simply rejection of Jesus, but it **seems to be a type of settled rejection after having all information and awareness and then seeking to work against Jesus**. At this point, you may think, “Wait, isn’t that the apostle Paul?” Actually, no. Paul says he sinned in ignorance. That word does indicate he was willingly ignorant, but clearly he wasn’t as knowledgeable as the religious leaders who interacted with Jesus.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:6.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 8:24.

Even as I say this, I don't know how helpful this definition is for us practically speaking. Can I know for sure if/when someone has crossed that threshold? I'm not sure. But what John does say is that people, even in this life, can cross that threshold. They can become so hardened that they're past the point of no return. That can happen – and if you're here today living in sin, rejecting Jesus, this should be a warning to you. If you sense the conviction of the Spirit – now is the time to respond. Turn to the Lord Jesus, ask for forgiveness, find healing. Because there can be a time where the conviction of the Spirit goes away. And, it could forever go away. What a terrifying reality.

But there is sin that doesn't lead to death. I would say if you still sense the conviction of the Spirit, and you respond with humility and prayer, you aren't experiencing the sin to death. I've talked with people who have wondered if they committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, and the fact that they're scared that they may have reveals a sensitive conscience. John said in chapter 1 that if you confess and agree with God about your sinfulness, he is faithful and just to forgive. Someone who embraces the sin to death is someone who does not acknowledges their sinfulness.

Now, again, how does this fit with John's teaching to these people? They're struggling. They're confused about the people who've left. John tells them that God listens to them in their prayers. And here John delineates between two types of people: those who do not sin unto death and those who do. Who fits in these categories? I think the false teachers who went away from them because they really weren't of them fit into the sin unto death category. But there are others who haven't sinned unto death. Why is this helpful for the struggling Christians? If you've ever gone through trauma or abuse, you know what it's like to feel confused, manipulated, gaslit. You can constantly feel like you're the one in the wrong. You're the crazy one, and your thinking can be completely enveloped by that person, those people, or that church. Your prayers can then become extensions of your worries and fears, and as a result, instead of your prayer life being a time of casting your burdens on the Lord, it becomes a time of rehashing your worries and confusion. John wants the Christians to know who's who. God wants us to know the difference between the false teachers and true believers. Why? Because it'll affect how we pray and how we commune with God. That leads us to the next point.

2. Christians must pray with trust in the Lord.

The knot still remains, but hopefully we know what not to think and maybe a little more on what to think so we can get rid of the knot. Let's read verses 16-17 again before going further: 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.⁶

The context and purpose of the letter is extremely important. Pray and God hears your prayers. He answers your prayers! But there are some prayers he won't answer. For example, if you pray for someone whose sinned the sin to death, your prayer won't be answered. Does that sound shocking? It does to me. But this isn't unheard of in Scripture. In Jeremiah 7:16, God commands Jeremiah not to pray for Judah. Listen to the words: **“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.”**⁷ Doesn't that sound similar to John's words here? The only difference is that John doesn't explicitly say “don't pray for the people who've sinned the sin unto death. He just says that he's not talking about praying about that. That said, John

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:16–17.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Je 7:16.

seems to lean towards recommending *not* praying for those individuals. Why? If someone's heart is completely hardened against the Spirit, God's already made his judgment over them. Their future condemnation is sure.

Think of Jeremiah hearing these words. God tells him not to pray. We Christians know that prayer is the lifeline. And if we hear that we aren't to pray for something, we feel a sense that all is lost, don't we? But at this point, you could also begin to feel out of control, and you could begin to judge God. Two questions. First, **were you ever in control?** No. Do you feel like just because you pray words that you're in control? I hope not! Prayer is not communion with God so that you can be more powerful than God or even be at the level of God. Prayer is communion with God, and an aligning of our wills with his. That leads me to the second question: **would you be willing to trust God if he said, "Stop praying for that person, that spouse, that false teacher/abuser?"** By the way, this doesn't mean that if you stop praying you definitely know that they've committed the sin unto death. Maybe that person is more like a Paul. But I think sometimes to stop praying is trust the Lord that he is in control. God is the judge. You need to stop giving all your mental, emotional, spiritual, physical energy to those people or that person.

There have been many times in my counseling of people, I'll hear people's struggles with something or someone. They feel so overwhelmed and they're exhausted and confused and trying to figure things out, and they are still acting as though everything depends on them. What begins to happen is that because of their continual fight, the situation becomes worse. And I say to them, "You need to have a funeral for that." Some people have literally had a funeral service of their own. Others take it purely symbolically. My point is that they cannot revive something that is dead. If God wants to revive it, he will. But you need to be at a point where you say, "God, I recognize this is all in your hands. I'll stop fighting and I'll rest in your sovereign and good control." As a result, I've heard stories from people who have experienced both the sorrow and freedom that brings. They're resting in the Lord, waiting on him instead of constantly trying to depend on themselves. I think this idea is similar with John here about prayer.

Sometimes we need to focus our energies elsewhere. Now we can get to John's main point: the command is to pray for those who haven't committed the sin unto death. But there was a lot of confusion about the sin unto death; so, we had to answer those questions before we could get to what we should actually pray about. Again, we can focus our energies in prayer on things that God tells us to stop praying about – and we need to focus on the things that are actually clearly in God's will. Are you rehearsing and rehashing and "praying" your worries over and over again to God or are you actually focusing your prayers on your brothers and sisters who need your prayers? This takes trust in the Lord. **Trust the Lord with those who have denied Jesus. Trust the Lord that he will work through your prayers for fellow believers.**

So, what does it mean that they have sinned not unto death. The idea of death here seems to mean that their sin doesn't lead to eternal death. In other words, this matches John's teaching throughout this letter about Christians. We cannot persist in sinning. We confess our sins. We grow in community with believers. We grow in loving God and loving others. But, again, we sin. When we sin, that doesn't mean we're condemned again or that we've lost our salvation. We're still on our way to Heaven, but the sin is still sinful. So tells us to pray for our fellow believers. There may be an indication that this believer is stuck in sin because John also says that God will then give life. I don't think John is saying that the person will be re-saved, but instead that the person will be reinvigorated in the salvation they have. Jesus himself says that eternal life is knowing God. When we sin, we reject knowing God and

experiencing him. We turn to things around us to satisfy and fill us. We become intimate with the creation instead of finding our freedom and hope in the Lord.

John calls us as Christians to pray for those who are God's children. They're our brothers and sisters in Christ. This confused group of Christians who are still feeling the aftershocks of false teachers and a group of friends leaving because they've rejected Jesus, might still have their focus on those people, and John says, "Focus on praying for one another." When you see each other sin, pray for each other.

Ventura, the application comes to us as well. Pray for each other! Do you pray for each other here? Did you know that's praying according to God's will? And, did you know that God will answer our prayers for each other? Look at verse 16 again: ¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life⁸ More literally, in the Greek, John wrote, "he will ask and he will give him life." The word for "God" isn't in the text. Of course, we know God is the one who answers the prayers, but I actually think John is emphasizing the power that God gives through our prayers. This is like James talking about the prayer of faith saving a brother. John says that God has given us a gift. We can wield the gift of prayer and give our brothers and sisters life. Do you know the privilege you have in praying? This past week, I experienced it when someone reached out for prayer. I prayed for them on a couple of occasions, and they texted me later stating their gratitude for the prayers.

Now, the answers don't always come that fast. But **will you trust that the Lord 1) tells you to pray for your brothers and sisters, 2) that God answers your prayers, and 3) your prayers matter for our brother's and sister's good in this life.**

Christians must pray with discernment and trust in the Lord. So what are some application questions for us? First, **who gets the attention in your prayers?** Are your prayers just spiritualized worries? Or, are you praying for your brothers and sisters, knowing God will work even through your prayers for their good? Second, **who are you trusting in your prayers?** Is prayer another way for you to regain control and feel safe in yourself or are you trusting the Lord and laying your anxieties at his feet? Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't bring this out, **do you believe on Jesus?** In John's audience, the people who remained were believers, but I don't want to take that for granted here. Do you know Jesus? Do you trust him alone for your reconciliation with God and for forgiveness? Did you know that Jesus took the punishment that sinners deserved so that we could be cleansed and made whole and so that we can worship and live for God forever? If you have more questions about that, please come talk to me. Don't let your heart harden to the point of never being able to turn in the future.

Today, as we come to a close in the service, there are many ways to respond. Maybe you need to reach out to another Christian and ask them to pray for you. Maybe you know someone hurting and you can go to them right now and pray for them. Maybe you need to talk to someone and ask them to pray for you to refocus your prayers on God's will. Maybe your response is something else entirely, but I hope you hear God's call to us and that you would live in the privilege given to you to be able to pray and know God answers even you! **Christians must pray with discernment and trust in the Lord.**

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 5:16.