

1 John 5:16-17

1 John 5:16-17 says,

^{1Jn 5:16} If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead to death*, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin *not leading to death*. There is sin *leading to death*. I do not say that he should pray about that. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin *not leading to death*.

We come to a very difficult passage to interpret. Theologically there is a very wide range of various interpretations surrounding these two verses, so it will be very important that we remain very careful in our handling of these verses. The first observation is that the two verses are a part of the final close-out verses that John is providing from v14-21. It is what we would consider to be his closing statements. At first these two verses seem a little disconnected from the overriding content of the entire book, but in reality they actually act as a bookend to reinforce all that John has been addressing. It should be more than evident that these two verses are dealing with something that John considers to be extremely spiritually dangerous in a person's life. However, since he has not specifically provided a definition of what this particular sin or sins actually may be, it makes it much more difficult to actually discern. That is exactly the reason why there are so many different ideas and interpretations about this "**sin leading to death**".

The first observation that is important to see is that John is talking about a person who is considered to be someone's "**brother**" (v16). There are some who interpret this to be a physical brother as opposed to being a spiritual brother, but it does not appear from the overall context of **1 John** that he would be talking about a specific family member. This word generally denotes a shared fellowship that people have based on the fact that they have something in common. They could be from the same tribe, same country, the same church fellowship, or from the same actual family.¹ So, the word can be translated both literally and metaphorically based on the actual context in which the word is used. John uses the word "**brother**" 13 times and the word "**brethren**" four separate times. For instance, **1 John 2:9** says,

^{1Jn 2:9} He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now.

In each of the 17 cases in which John uses the word, it does not appear that John is talking about someone's physical family brother. Notice **1 John 3:14** where both forms of the word are used.

^{1Jn 3:14} 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.

Obviously, in this verse John is not talking about someone's actual physical brother, so it appears that we are on solid ground to interpret **1 John 5:16** as a fellow **believer** who is committing a particular sin that does not lead to death. Their sin certainly may have other negative side effects, but from a physical perspective it is not something that someone is doing that could actually kill them if they persist in it. This is really a very crucial element because if John is addressing only believers, then that would rule out a good number of various interpretational options that have been proposed. However, we have to recognize that John has spoken about unbelievers who left the fellowship. For instance, **1 John 2:18-19** says,

1Jn 2:18 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. ¹⁹ 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.*

The second observation that is important to notice is that even though John does not identify the sin that leads to death (v16), it seems fairly evident from the context that John's readers understood what he was addressing. It is just an assumption on my part, but it would seem that if they actually did understand this particular sin that John may have previously addressed the issue in his pastoral dialogues with them. Whatever John is referring to is very serious, and it is not something that any believer should take lightly. It is something that John considers to be a very genuine issue. The Bible gives several examples of apparent believers that committed grievous sins and God actually took their life. For instance, [Acts 5:1-11](#) provides the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Apparently, they brought a gift to give some of the saints that were undergoing persecution, but when they brought their gift they lied to the Holy Spirit and to the church about the exact amount for which they had sold the land. When Ananias actually heard what Peter was communicating, he fell down and died. The same exact thing happened to his wife when she came to the church. Just like her husband, she lied as well and fell down and died. One of the areas that we mention quite often is relative to ungodly conduct that was performed in the New Testament church during the Lord's Supper. [1 Corinthians 11:27-30](#) says the following,

1Co 11:27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. ³⁰ For this reason many *are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*

When Paul says that “**many sleep**” he is specifically referring to the fact that many had died because they treated the Lord's Supper in a profane way. Obviously, from a practical perspective it would be somewhat difficult to actually qualify who was and who was not being chastened by the Lord, but still it is something that must be taken seriously. I personally know of a couple where the wife was the church treasurer and over a period of several years both she and her husband embezzled nearly \$80,000 from a local church. They used the money to build a swimming pool, a huge deck, and go on exotic golfing vacations. The church finally caught them in what they were doing and within a year the lady was diagnosed with breast cancer and died very shortly thereafter. The husband who was a fairly athletic individual had a major heart attack and died within a couple of years of his wife's death. Their daughter was killed in the interim period in a terrible automobile accident. All of that could have been coincidental, but suffice it to say that it is not a good thing to lie to the Holy Spirit, to be irreverent with that which is sacred, or to deceptively embezzle large sums of money from God's church. Honestly, the list could be endless. It is clear from [Hebrews 12:3-11](#) that when a believer repeatedly moves outside of the known will of God for their life that because God loves them that He will discipline them as necessary – and v11 of that passage says that it is never “**joyful for the present, but painful**”.

The third observation is that [1 John 5:16](#) says two distinct and different things about those for whom prayer could be made. If we see a fellow believer committing sin that does not lead to death, then we are encouraged to pray for them and it appears that if our life is in alignment with [1 John 5:14-15](#) that

God will work deeply in the life of the one who is sinning against God. That is an incredible promise that should be a great encouragement for every believer to continue and to endure in prayer for other believers who are struggling with some sin in their life. John does not give us any kind of timetable for how quickly God may work in the person's life, but God does appear to promise that He will grant them His grace to overcome that particular sin. On the flip side of that promise, we want to notice that when somebody is committing "**sin leading to death**" that we are not necessarily to pray for that individual. The last sentence of the verse does not forbid or command someone from praying for them, but obviously John did not sense that it would provide any benefit. So, what must be gleaned from this verse is that there is a certain kind of sin or sins that lead to death, and there is certain kind of sin or sins that do not lead to death. [1 John 5:17](#) says as a reiteration of this,

1Jn 5:17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not *leading to death*.

The fourth observation is whether the word "**death**" refers to a physical death, a spiritual death, or a combination of both. In the first part of v16 when John talks about seeing a brother "**sinning a sin that does not lead to death**", it appears that he is specifically talking about physical death. The reason is because it is not possible for a believer to die a spiritual death. There are many sins that obviously do not incur "**death**" as a consequence. If that were the case, then nobody would survive. If someone is greedy, they are not going to die because of their greed. If someone is haughty, they are not going to die because of their pride. If someone is difficult to get along with, they are not going to die because of that difficulty. We simply need to pray for those kind of sins that we may notice in someone's life.

However, in the second use of the word "**death**" where John says that "**there is sin leading to death**", the word "**death**" could mean a physical death, a spiritual death, or both. If someone had a tendency to drive about 100 mph on secondary roads, I would imagine that disobeying the law in such a manner would most likely lead to an early death, and if they were lost, when they died physically they would also die spiritually. However, it would not be good exposition to the context and the nature of this warning to conclude that that is what John has in mind.

Now, from a biblical perspective all of this leaves us in kind of a spiritual quandary in determining the sin or sins that can actually lead directly to physical death. It is something that is so serious to John that he says it is not necessary to even pray about it. What makes this even more difficult is that in v16 the word for "**sin**" is in the singular person in both of its usages. The NIV, AMP, and NASB actually say "**a sin**" to help identify that is in the singular person and not the plural person. That makes it appear that John is only describing one particular sin. However, in his first usage of the phrase "**sin**" or "**a sin**", it does not seem that John is only referring to one particular sin, but rather to any kind of sin other than that kind that may lead to death. However, in the second use of the word "**sin**" or "**a sin**", it could easily be one particular kind of sin. Exegetically it seems that John's first use of the word "**sin**" is referring to any variety of sins that a **believer** may commit at any time, but they are not of the kind of nature that would lead to a physical death. In John's second use of the word "**sin**", however, John is speaking specifically of a particular sin committed by an **unbeliever** that does lead to death, and specifically to spiritual death as opposed to physical death.

What seems apparent based on the fact that John is refuting the false doctrines of the Gnostics is that they are the ones to whom he is referring in this passage. His entire letter has been a theological discourse

to counter the false teaching that the Gnostics had perpetrated on the young church. Based on [1 John 2:18-19](#), it seems that the specific unbelievers that John is addressing are those who went out from the fellowship because the fellowship would not accept their false teaching. The Gnostics entered into the fellowship as professing believers, but they left the fellowship as condemned unbelievers. It has to be appreciated that John was the last surviving apostle and that his teaching was authoritative and from God. However, the Gnostics were demeaning the person of Christ and they had utterly denied that the Incarnation even took place. They had developed a phantom Jesus that did not actually die on a cross. Just saying those words makes it very simple to appreciate that these people were not actually saved. They were exposed to the greatest biblical teacher on the planet at that time, and they were doing their very best to undermine everything that he was teaching and in the process overthrowing the faith of the young church. They can be likened to the Pharisees and Sadducees who reached such a point of unbelief in their life that when Jesus Christ or the apostles performed undeniable miracles, even raising people from the dead, they took counsel how they might kill Christ and kill the apostles. It appears that this is exactly what John was addressing relative to the Gnostics - false teachers teach false doctrine and birth false believers.

So the specific sin that results in spiritual death in [1 John 5:16](#) is referring to the blatant apostasy of the Gnostics who were opposing John, his teachings on the person of Christ, and outrightly denying the very person of Christ Himself.² They were denying the Incarnation and the Atonement, and they had no qualms about leading other people into their apostasy. They literally refused to believe in Jesus Christ as the only begotten of the Father and the only One who could save them. If we examine the Scriptures, what is found is that the sin of unbelief in Jesus Christ is the only unforgiveable sin in the Bible. It is the one sin that when a person permanently commits it, it actually seals their spiritual destiny. As a believer, as a teacher, and as a pastor I have no idea where that point takes place in a person's life, but what I appreciate biblically is that there is that place of unbelief that a person places themselves into from which they may never return. Obviously, John thought that the Gnostics had reached that place and that there was no value in even praying for them. It was that settled in his mind.

Now, someone is going to ask about what is often called "the unpardonable sin" spoken of in [Matthew 12:31](#) which says,

Mt 12:31 "Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men."

Without going into a detailed exposition of this theological issue, God has provided three primary witnesses relative to the salvation that can only be gained through faith in Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, God the Father was the witness. He performed miracle after miracle and created a nation from one individual. He sent the prophets and constantly declared the way of salvation, both to His people and to the Gentiles. If during that particular era of the Old Testament a person rejected the testimony of God the Father, then there was no other witness for them and no way for them to be saved. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ was the witness. He did everything possible to authenticate the reality of who He was. He raised the dead, He healed the sick, and He performed miracle after miracle after miracle. No one had ever spoken like Jesus Christ spoke. No one had ever displayed the glory of God in a greater way than did Jesus Christ. If during that particular era of Scripture a person rejected the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son, then there was no other witness for them and no way for them to be

saved. In the church age, the Holy Spirit is the witness. After the ascension of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit was given to authenticate all of the Scriptures and all of the testimonies of God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Today men have the Bible, and the Holy Spirit is constantly authenticating, validating, and confirming the reality of God's truth and God's means of salvation. In [John 6:44](#), the following is specifically spoken of about the ministry of the Holy Spirit,

Jn 6:44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.

God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son have given the Holy Spirit to draw men to Christ, and if they reject that work of God during the church age, then there is no other way to be saved. If a man or woman rejects the wooing and pursuing of the Holy Spirit in bringing them to Christ, then they cannot be saved because there will be no more witnesses provided. They will have committed the unpardonable sin of unbelief and will die in their sins as those individuals who rejected the only Person who could save them – the Lord Jesus Christ.

The real question to ask at this point is a very simple and practical question. The question would be *"Who are the people who are not guilty of this unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit?"* The answer to that question is really very simple. The answer is that those individuals who are afraid that they have actually committed this unforgivable sin of unbelief against the Holy Spirit are obviously not guilty of having committed it. To be afraid and fearful of the fact that you may have committed this sin is the actual proof that you never have. The people who are guilty are those who would never have any kind of conscience about rejecting Jesus Christ. They would be people like the Pharisees who cried out **"Crucify him crucify him!"** They actually attributed His miracles to the devil. When someone is besieged and assaulted by doubts, fears, and corrupting thoughts that the enemy places into their mind about Jesus Christ, it simply means that they have never committed the unforgivable sin. It is the individuals who have no concern about whether or not they have committed this grievous sin, individuals who blaspheme the truth of God's Word, and who assault the very person of Christ - they are the ones who have committed the unpardonable sin, and they will die in their sins without Christ.³

I saw a billboard on I-20 that encouraged celebrating what they called an "Atheist Christmas". The organization that sponsors the billboard is urging Americans to skip church this Christmas and that Christmas is a fairy tale. Their catchy phrases are as follows - "Atheist Christmas – the more, the merrier!" "There is no God. Don't Believe Everything You Hear." "Go ahead and skip church. Just be good for goodness sake." "You KNOW it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason." "Don't believe in God? Join the club." I am assuming that some of these poor souls have committed the unpardonable sin. Thank God that He is merciful and longsuffering!

ENDNOTES

¹ Zodhiates, 80.

² Harris, 232.

³ Lloyd-Jones, 678.

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