

Prayers That Give Life 1 John 5:16, 17

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One of my favorite analogies is “The Bible is like a pool of water which is shallow enough that children can wade, and deep enough that elephants can drown.” This means that many of the truths of scripture are clear and simple and can be understood even by children. Other parts of the Bible are so magnificently complex that even the finest scholars cannot fully grasp the truth God is revealing through His word. For the past several months we have been on a journey through the book of 1 John. Most of the time we have been able to wade through clear, though sometimes chilling, truth. The basic message of John’s letter can be summed up very simply. When someone is born of God, a genuine Christian, he or she believes Jesus is the Son of God, loves other Christians, and seeks to obey God’s commands. John would certainly agree with the Apostle Paul’s insistence that salvation is by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ alone. Yet, he sees those three things as signs or indicators someone’s professed faith is genuine faith. I don’t think this truth is always easy to accept, but I think it is fairly easy to understand.

Today, however, we come to a passage which seems to be very dark and deep water. We are going to explore 1 John 5:16 and 17. To be frank, I was tempted to skip this text and move on to the concluding paragraph of the letter. Yet, I don’t think that is what God has called me to do or even what you pay me to do. As a pastor, the Lord has called me to teach, “The whole counsel of God,” including the parts that are not easy to understand. As a congregation, I think one of the things you ought to expect is that your pastor will not just remind you of the clear teachings of the Bible, lead you through the shallow water, but that he will also help you swim into the deeper, more difficult parts of God’s word. That is part of my job.

Now, I realize some of you are a little bit nervous about going out into deeper water. Perhaps you don’t know a whole lot about the Bible, you find much of it hard to understand, and when I say this is a difficult text, your inclination is to not touch it with a ten-foot pole.

If that is where you are coming from, I want to encourage you to stick with me and listen closely because I do believe the Lord has valuable and practical instruction for all of us in this text. Let’s pause and pray that we will hear, understand, believe and apply the truth the Lord has for us today.

***1 John 5:16, 17** If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not bring death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn’t bring death. There is sin that brings death. I am not saying he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin that does not bring death.*

I see three important truths in these two verses.

Number one, it is proper for us as Christians to be aware of other’s sins. Now, we need to be careful here. In Matthew 7:3-5 Jesus tells us we should not be concerned about a speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye when we have a log in our own. He is warning we must not try to ignore our own sin by focusing on the failings and faults of others. We should never follow someone around, trying to catch them committing a sin. I remember a story from a few years ago about a Baptist pastor in North Carolina, who went to a restaurant that had scantily clad waitresses and a rather shady reputation. A newspaper reporter was interviewing customers, and the next day the pastor’s name and very positive comments about the restaurant appeared in the paper. The next Sunday he resigned from his position, but said it was “not because of the restaurant incident, but because he was disappointed that more people were not attending the church.” Folks, I don’t think that was true. This man not only made poor choices on where to eat dinner, but had a hard time telling the truth.

Now, I am certainly not suggesting our deacons go to the seedier bars across the Range and take pictures of any church members who are there. Yet, when we become aware that a Christian brother or sister is involved in a particular sin, we should not simply ignore it and pretend everything is okay. Oh, I know this goes very much against the grain in our culture. When

we become aware someone is using illegal drugs, is having an affair, or is stealing from his workplace, the most common response is, "I am not getting involved. It is not any of my business." Most folks actually think that is a virtuous attitude. However, I hope most of you would agree, that if a close family member, a sibling, or a child, is using illegal drugs, or having an affair, or stealing from his work place, that kind of *is your business*. And when our Christian brothers and sisters, fellow church members, do those type of things, it really is kind of our business as well. There is no virtue in closing our eyes and pretending things are not happening. If we really love someone we care when that individual is making wrong and destructive choices.

So, the questions is, when we know another Christian is involved in sinful behavior, what should we do about it? Well, we should certainly not use it as gossip material. I can almost hear the phone call, "Hey, Mary, I had to call you right away this morning. You will never guess who I saw come staggering out of the bar with this man last night." Friends, God hates phone calls like that. Nor should another person's sin cause us to think we are somehow "better" than that individual. Our motivation of how we react to that individual should be love. 1 Peter 4:8 tells us that love covers a multitude of sins. However, love doesn't mean we ignore the sins of others. In his commentary on 1 John, Puritan Pastor John Cotton said, "God requires that if we see our oxen and donkeys fall down under their burden, we should help them up. If we see a Christian brother going astray or sinking under the burden of sin, how much more should we help him?"

So, friends, out of love, we must not ignore when a fellow Christian is sinning, but instead John says, (number two), we are to pray for that individual. **5:16a** *If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not bring death, he should ask, and God will give life to him.* Frankly, it is not easy to know what "God will give life to him" means. Because John uses the term brother, I assume he is referring to a situation where another Christian, someone who already has eternal life, has fallen into sin. John Stott, in his commentary, suggests the word "brother" has a broader meaning here and refers to any human being. If he is correct, that gives the text a

different meaning. However, I think "brother" designates those who at least claim to believe in Jesus. I think the phrase "give life to him" involves a Christian being restored to a right relationship with God, which is the source of spiritual life. This will involve the sinner confessing his sin to the Lord and seeking forgiveness and help.

Now, John doesn't mean there is a magical prayer. For example, let's say I learn that my friend Joe, even though he is a Christian, has a problem controlling his violent temper. So, I pray for him. Does that mean Joe will automatically gain control of his temper? No. The process of restoring life to someone always begins with prayer for that person, but seldom ends there. We certainly should not pray for someone, and then gossip or gloat about their sin. Usually, the next step involves me talking to Joe. Not easy, but if I really care about him, it is something I want to do. "Joe, I noticed that you lost your temper the other day. I have seen that happen pretty often. I am not trying to embarrass you, but you know that is not the type of reaction that honors the Lord. Is there some way I can maybe help you get control of your anger?" Folks, whatever I do or say needs to be motivated by love for Joe, needs to follow the guidelines God gives us in the Bible, and should always be preceded by genuine prayer. It is only the Lord who can turn human minds and hearts to Himself.

I think John's main point is simply if we become aware that a Christian brother or sister is falling away from the Lord, is entrapped by some sin, then we should pray for that person. We need to pray not just for each other's physical health, but also for one another's spiritual health. When we see someone stumble and fall, we need to use our prayers to help them get up. I think that should be clear to all of us. But then the Apostle John throws us a curve ball. He says, "When you see someone sin, pray for him or her, *unless it is a sin that brings death.*" **5:16b** *There is sin that brings death. I am not saying he should pray about that.* This is truth number three, there is a type of sin that results in death and when someone commits it we should not even pray for that person. *What in the world does that mean?*

Some folks, Roman Catholics, think John is referring to "mortal" or "deadly" sin. Traditional Roman Catholic theology says some

sins are “venial” which means God can simply forgive them, while others, like the “Seven Deadly Sins” (pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth) cannot be simply forgiven. They will lead to eternal punishment, unless penance is done to make up for the sin. So, it suggested that here John says pray for others who sin, except if they are committing “deadly” sins. I think that view misses the boat in two important ways. First all sin, is inherently “mortal” or “deadly.” **Roman 6:23b** says, “*The wages of sin is death.*” **James 2:10** says, “*If you keep all of God’s commands except one, you are guilty of breaking the entire law.*” Those guilty of breaking the entire law certainly deserve God’s wrath. God cannot simply ignore any of our sin. It is all very serious. Payment, satisfaction or atonement must be made for all of it. Second, that atonement cannot be made by doing community service, performing religious rituals, or any other work of penance someone may be assigned. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can atone for sin. **Romans 6:23** *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Others suggest John’s point is that certain sins lead to physical death. They note, that in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead because they lie to the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 11 we learn some of the folks in that church died because they abused the Lord’s Supper. So, according to this view, John is saying, “Don’t pray for someone who has physically died because of their sin, or in other words, don’t pray for dead people.” Now, I agree that praying for the dead, which is encouraged in some traditions, is inconsistent with what the Bible teaches. Yet, the words and logic in this particular text doesn’t seem to address this issue at all.

What then is the sin that leads to death? What sin is so severe that it invariably leads to spiritual death, to hell, and that if you see someone commit it, there is no reason to even bother to pray for that person? Well, what seems to make the best sense to me, is that John is talking about the same things that Jesus was in **Mark 3:28, 29** (NLT) *I tell you the truth, all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences.* Now, many folks have read those verses at some point and

been very much afraid. Maybe you have wondered: Have I committed that sin? Have I blasphemed the Holy Spirit? I remember one fellow who probably asked me a hundred times, “Pastor Dan, do you think I have committed the unforgivable sin?” Well, let me alleviate some anxiety by repeating the answer I always gave him: If you are concerned about the unforgivable sin, you *haven’t done* it.

Let me give a brief explanation of what I think this unforgivable sin involves. If you disagree with my understanding or have questions, I would be glad to talk about it with you later. I believe the unforgivable sin is a malicious rejection of Jesus Christ, even though that person knows Jesus’ claims of being Lord and Savior are true. That is what the Pharisees were doing in Mark 3. With their own eyes they had seen Jesus fulfill all sorts of Old Testament prophecies. Yet, they chose to attribute His work to Satan, rather than to the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus calls it blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Those who commit the unforgivable sin have no regret for what they have done. They are like the people described in Romans 1:32 who not only continue in their evil ways, but cheer on others who do evil. I don’t believe anyone who is a Christian or who wants to become a Christian has committed the unforgivable sin. In fact, I think a genuine Christian is incapable of doing so.

Why then does John speak of a brother committing the sin that leads to death? Well, to be precise he does not. We are to pray for the brother who commits a sin which does not bring death. John doesn’t specify who the people will be committing the deadly sin for which we should not pray. I think the people John believes have committed the unforgivable sin were the false teachers, maybe Gnostics, who, though at one point were connected with the church, now rejected Jesus. As we saw earlier in the letter, these people had at one time been considered Christian brothers and sisters, but in reality, had never been actual believers in Jesus Christ. Again, these were people who from their own experience knew Christianity was true, but out of selfish motivation chose to oppose the Lord Jesus. John apparently thinks that praying for such people is a waste of time.

Okay friends, I hope you have stuck with me and have been able to stay afloat in this deep pool and have grasped the basic points John

makes in these verses. So, what are the implications for our lives today?

**Number one**, this relates to our last point—in theory, it is proper to give up on some people who are rejecting the Lord Jesus. If someone knows all about Christianity, but doesn't want anything to do with it, maybe we just need to let them be a not even waste our prayers on that individual. Frankly, that seems very harsh. It reminds me about what Jesus said, "about shaking the dust off your feet" and going somewhere else when people don't want to hear what we have to say. Yet, even in that situation I would still be inclined to pray for the person. However, I think John's logic is clear. If we know someone has committed the unforgivable sin, it doesn't make much sense to pray for that person because his or her fate is already sealed. No, God will not punish us for praying for someone like that, but our prayers won't do any good. That is what I believe is true...in theory.

I wonder, however, if we can ever be certain someone has committed the unforgivable sin. I find often times those who reject Christianity do so because they don't really understand it. I know people who went to church when they were growing up, but got the impression Christianity was all about keeping the rules and now they want nothing to do with the Lord. Friends, those people have not committed the unforgivable sin. We need to pray God will open their eyes and lead them to truth and repentance. Frankly, I don't know anyone of whom I would say, "This person has clearly committed the unforgivable sin and I will not even pray for God to bring them to faith in Jesus." Until we are certain someone has committed the sin that brings death, I suggest we pray for him or her.

**Number two**, those who know in their head that Christianity is true, but have not yet put their trust in Jesus Christ, are on thin ice. They are in grave spiritual danger. Maybe some of you would say, "Pastor Dan, I am just not sure about this Christianity stuff. I am not even certain there really is a God." Or maybe you would say, "Yes, I would like to be a Christian, I would like my sins forgiven, but I just cannot believe it is as easy as you say. I cannot believe 'trusting in Jesus' is all it takes." Well, friend, if

either of those reflect your thoughts and attitude, I would love to have a conversation with you, but you are not really who I am talking about right now. If, however, you know Christianity is true, you believe Jesus is God's Son and Savior, but you don't like that, you wish it wasn't true, you want God to leave you alone and let you live as you want, *then I am concerned*. I am not saying you have committed the unforgivable sin, but I fear that if you persist in your rejection of Jesus Christ, your heart will harden and one day it may be too late. The Bible says, "Today is the day of salvation." Friend, if the Holy Spirit is drawing you to the Lord Jesus, if you know it is time to place your trust in Him, I urge you to do so today! This morning! Find me after the service, if I am talking about you.

**Number three**, do not forget the main point of this text. All of our discussion of the unforgivable sin can cause us to miss John's main point. If you see someone sinning, someone turning away from the Lord, pray for him or her. In fact, here is what I would like you to do: Identify one person you know who professes to be a Christian, but has kind of wandered away from the faith. Maybe they are not attending church any more, maybe they have gotten caught up in a sinful addiction, maybe they are doing just fine on the outside, but you know their love for God has grown cold. Identify that individual and then commit yourself to praying for him or her. Do so every day this next week. Pray that God would be drawing that person to Himself. And remember, **James 5:19, 20** *My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

Friends, it is not easy to really care about the spiritual welfare of others. What is easy is to become judgmental and condemning or gossip about people. Many of us struggle to keep our own soul healthy, and we don't really have time to think about anyone else. But love, genuine love, the love of God flowing through, causes us to do some unusual things. One of them is to care about the spiritual welfare of others, to really pray for those folks, and to do whatever we can to help them trust and follow Jesus. May the Lord help us do that today and in the days ahead.