



1 John 5:16-21
What is Intercessory Prayer?

There was a season of church history when people moved out to the deserts and to monasteries to try to get away from others and focus only on God. But you know what? It didn't work. It didn't produce the holiest people. It didn't solve the world's problems. It didn't bring Jesus back, because this isn't what God ever had in mind. Remember, He has called us to love God AND love our neighbor.

This is one of the fascinating aspects of Christianity: it's not just about us and God, it's also about us and each other. God created marriage, God created family, God created the church, all these relationships we have, God gave them to us and put us in them, and He's given us the privilege of watching over the people He has connected us to. We're supposed to be spiritual fathers and mothers, spiritual brothers and sisters to one another – we're supposed to be connected to one another and care about each other.

And if we see someone we know and love caught in the muck and mire of sin, we're supposed to launch a recovery mission for them. This morning, as we finish 1John we'll be looking at the subject of intercessory prayer which is, asking God to do something powerful in the life of someone else for the purpose of helping that person. It's what most of our prayers for other people are.

1 John 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.

Now, before we can even get into the how and why of interceding for others, we have to deal with this issue of sin that leads to death and sin that doesn't lead to death, because if you were paying attention, that probably stood out to you and made you go, "huh!?!"

Well, you're not alone. One scholar of Biblical languages I consulted confessed in his commentary his, "utter inability to understand this verse" except in part, and that, "The rest of the verse is an enigma to him, and he will not attempt to offer even a suggestion as to its possible interpretation."¹

The truth is, there's a lot of speculation on what this means and I've tried to summarize that and it's included at the end of this sermon for you to look at later if you're interested, but here are my personal thoughts on this after looking at all the other sources.

¹ Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Vol II. The part Wuest claims to understand is that "the sin unto death is the denial of the incarnation, and that it is committed by an unsaved person who professes to be a Christian."

Do you remember all the way back in **1 John 1:9**, John said, “if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Rom 10:9 says something very similar: “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

It seems to me that the sin leading to death must be something someone is not repenting of.² I believe it's *denying* Christ in your heart and with your tongue, what we also see mentioned in Scripture as the unpardonable sin.³

After all, how can you be saved if you reject the Savior? Do you expect God to save people against their will? Do you expect Him to kidnap them and run off to Heaven with His hostages? Of course not.

I think these are the same category of people John speaks about earlier in his letter when he makes reference to those who “went out from us because they were not of us.” The ones John will say in his next letter that we shouldn't even allow into our homes (2 John 10-11). People like this know the truth but consistently and intentionally reject it.

So how should we respond to them? Well, notice that John carefully words things so that he never forbids us from praying for them, but he's not going to blame you for cutting your losses at some point either. Jesus warned us about casting our pearls before swine, so don't get into debates or arguments with these people, don't feel obligated to respond to everything they say or do. Don't spend 80% of your time and effort solving a 1% problem.

In fact, we've given enough of our time this morning to this tiny minority; so let's move on to the overwhelming majority of cases where we *are* called to pray for people.

What is that supposed to look like? How do we do that? Well, notice what John says: if anyone sees a brother sinning, let Him ask, that is, let Him pray, let him intercede.

Long before you ever say anything to the brother, or to anyone else about the brother, pray. Ask God to help them, ask God to protect them, ask God to guide them or wake them up or whatever the case may be, ask God to take action before you do anything else. And then, God might tell you to get involved. He might say, “Great, I'm glad you saw that too, because I want you to do something about it.” Or He might tell you, “I know, keep praying.” Either way, our initial reaction to the sin we see in the lives of others should always be to pray. You can do more than pray after you've prayed, but you can't do more without praying.

² Grammar Geeks might be interested to know that in 1 John 5:16 “sees” is a single act, not a continuous viewing. In other words, this does not appear to be a habitual sin someone is struggling with.

³ This presents a difficulty because it speaks about brothers sinning – does this mean that a Christian can lose their salvation? Stott suggests that John's reference to ‘brothers’ was a loose term, more of the idea of the ‘brotherhood of man’ and sees here a reference to the false teachers who have gone out from the church, those John previously identified as being anti-Christ.

There's a long history of intercessory prayer in the Bible.

- Abraham interceded with God for Sodom (Gen 18:23-32)
- Job regularly interceded for his children (Job 1:5)
- Moses interceded for the people of Israel (Nu 16:20-22; 21:7; Deu 33:6-17, Ps 106:23)
- Later, the prophets did the same thing: Ezra, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Amos, to name a few
- So did king David (2 Samuel 24:17) and king Solomon (1 Kings 8:29-53)
- And the writers of the Psalms Asaph (80:83) and Korah (85:1-7). They all interceded with God for Israel.

Then, when Jesus came along, He was the ultimate and model intercessor. Before He went to the cross He told Peter that Satan had been asking to sift him like wheat, but Jesus told Peter, **"I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail"** (Matt 22:32). Now, that's pretty cool, isn't it? Knowing that Jesus is praying for you? But it wasn't just the disciples He prayed for.

Later, on the cross, He prayed, **"Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing"** (Luke 23:34). That's kind of a big deal, isn't it? Can you imagine understanding later in life that you actually were the one who held the spike in one hand and a hammer in another and splattered the blood of the Son of God, who was actually shedding that blood for your sin? How could you live with yourself? It would drive you mad. Only it wouldn't, because Jesus prayed, out loud, for everyone to hear, "Father forgive them." He hung there, actively dying, still caring about others.

And today, right now, He is at the right hand of God still making intercession, only now, it's for us. Paul writes with incredible conviction in Romans Chapter Eight:

Rom 8:33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is God who justifies.*
34 Who is he who condemns? *It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*

And make a note of

Heb 7:25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Christian friends, do you know and understand that Jesus is praying for you? Ask a Muslim if Allah is praying for them. Ask if Mohammed is praying for them. Ask a Hindu if any of the gods are praying for them.

Ask a humanist atheist if the universe cares about them. If they're honest and truthful, they'll say no. They know they're absolutely nothing, just an infinitesimal speck on a blip of insignificant rock floating through space for a nano-fraction of the ages. If there is no God, you mean nothing in the grand scale of things.

But if you accept the Bible, God not only knows what's going on in your life, He cares. His Son is praying for you, and the Bible is calling others to pray for you too. Especially when you fall.

Gal 6:1 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. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

and

James 5:19 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

And so, in the pages of the New Testament we find Christians praying for other Christians and also for non-Christians. We find Paul praying for the churches,⁴ for Israel (Rom 10:1), and telling Timothy to pray for the government (1 Timothy 2:1).

But not only did Paul pray for others, he depended on people praying for him. The clearest example of this is in his letter to the Philippians where he says something that has been simply stunning to me for years. Paul wrote this letter to the church to give them an update on what's been going on in his life. It's like he's updating Facebook page, he hasn't seen them in a while, so he want's to let them know what's going on, and he tells them about the rough time that he's having. But he also knows they're praying for him, and notice this: he believes that because they're praying things are going to turn out OK.

Phil 1:19 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

Friends, I don't fully know what to make of that!!! He's leaning on two things – the prayers of the people in the church at Philippi AND the Holy Spirit. Now, if he just said, "I know I have the Spirit of Jesus Christ, I know I'll be fine" I think I could handle that, but no, he says, "**I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.**"

There really is something to us praying for one another. Things happen when we pray that might not happen otherwise. Don't ever give up on praying, don't think it doesn't matter. If you're tempted to feel that way, come right back here to Philippians and chew on this for a bit, it will set you straight and get you back to praying.

But what, exactly, should we pray?

That's a great question to ask, but the first thing we need to remember is that this is prayer, not magic, it's not making a wish. There are no special formulas, and there's no strange Biblical mysticism either – there's no obscure passage over in Ezekiel that you need to discover and latch onto.

⁴ Cf. Romans 1:9; Ephesians 1:16, and others.

Instead, we just pray. We *talk* to this great God that we know, and pray according to His will, that people would know Him and live for Him instead of wrecking their lives with selfishness and indulgence.

And then, in light of all that, we take a two-fold approach, we pray offensively and defensively, we push AND pull spiritually.

The number one and most important thing, but the thing we most often overlook, is that we go on the offensive - we pray that God would give the other person a greater vision of Himself, and that they would delight more in Him than anyone or anything else. Every sin can be retaliated against with a greater view of God. In fact, we tend to slide into sin when God seems distant and small compared to our wants and desires.

So, pray that God would be immediate, and real, and enormous to the person you're praying for. Pray that God would make Himself known in their lives. Pray that they would see Him and know Him for who He really is. I honestly can't think of a sin that would win in a head to head faceoff with God. If you could truly see and appreciate and understand God, what would you choose over Him?

This is something we should be praying even when things are going well. You've heard it said that the best defense is a good offense, right? Keep steamrolling in the right direction, maintain the initiative and momentum and you don't need to worry so much about stumbling and backsliding. So, pray for people, intercede for people offensively even when things are going well.

Look at what Paul prayed for the church in Colossae:

Col 1:9 (ESV) And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

We could list all kinds of things that his prayer is not about, but let's focus instead on what it is: first and foremost he prays that they would be filled with knowledge of God's will SO THAT they would live in a way that is worthy of God and pleasing to Him.

Friends, that's a transcendent prayer, a meta prayer, it fits over, under and through every other prayer request we have. No matter the circumstance, no matter what else we need, what we need **most** is to know God and His will **so that** we handle everything else well.

Turn over a few chapters with me and notice that Paul's concern rubbed off on someone else:

Col 4:12 Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the

will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.

This man Epaphras is part of the church in Colossae and he was laboring *fervently* in prayer (think of that wording!) and what he was praying was that his friends in the church would be perfect and complete in the will of God!

There's no request for a situation at work, or with the family, or anything about anyone's health or car. Those are all good things. But do any of our prayer requests look like this? How many of our prayer requests involve God's will as the starting point? Honestly, not enough. It's not natural.

Our natural inclination is to ask for what we want, not to seek out what God wants; especially when life hurts, we just want out of the pain. But friends, we have to remember that life is a battle of wills - the flesh, men, and the devil all have wills.⁵ In any given situation in life, whose will triumph? For a Christian, the answer must be: God's. And so, when we pray for ourselves and others, we must pray offensively for God's will to prevail.

And then, we have to acknowledge that there times when God's will does not prevail and sin is prevalent instead. So when you see problems in someone else's life, when you see sinful choices and behavior, sinful patterns setting in, then by all means keep praying offensively, but pray defensively as well.

Pray that they would taste and see the rottenness of sin; that they would remember or understand it where it leads. Pray that their sin would disappoint them and leave them hollow and empty and that they would know it.

And pray passionately, pray fervently, pray like eternity is on the line and souls are stake, because they are. Pray like you care, because you do. Don't worry about following some formula, this isn't magic, you don't have to get the spell just right. Just pray. Talk to God. Ask Him to do something. And express your frustration, your concern, your fear. Be real with God. But then let Him be real with you too, and listen to what God says in response.

Because ultimately, no matter how much or how long we pray, it eventually comes down to this: does the individual really want to change? If a man sees a doctor, and the doctor gives a diagnosis and treatment plan, but the man rejects the plan and doesn't follow through, why should God divinely heal? Why should God force the man to receive help? As one commentator noted, "It is often the folly of man which frustrates our prayers and cancels the grace of God."⁶

And so, there may actually come a time when God tells you to stop praying. It has happened to me, and to others I know. You feel this burden, you feel this love, you have this deep gut wrenching concern for someone else. You cry for them. You wake up in the middle of the night

⁵ John 1:13; 2 Tim 2:26

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 2nd Ed., 117.

thinking of them. You see where the choices they are making are headed and it grieves you. And so you pray and pray. You cry out to God, you try making deals with God, but nothing changes because the person won't change. And then, one day, God says, "Stop." Stop praying for them.

And you think, "How could that be?" God, why would you say that? But He's said it before. He told the prophet Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 7:16 "Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you."⁷

When a patient in the hospital takes a sudden turn for the worse, when their heart suddenly shuts down, the doctors and nurses will run what's called a code – they pull out all the stops, do everything they can to revive the patient – all their efforts and intention are focused on this one individual. But not every code ends well. Their best efforts can't always bring someone back.

So, at some point, the presiding doctor has to make a call to stop the code and everyone has to step back and walk away, often feeling frustrated, depleted, they gave it their all, but at the end of the day you can't save everyone. The same thing happens spiritually. We can't save everyone, no matter how hard or how often we pray. At the end of the day, it still comes down to just them and God.

Fortunately, this is rare, but it does happen. God won't strive with people forever. He is patient, He is persistent, He is gracious and merciful, but an end does come.

Now, we need to be careful about looking at a situation and deciding that someone has brought the eternal, irreversible, wrath of God upon themselves; love should always make us hope for good and yet, there is a line.

And if you're asking if you've personally crossed it, you haven't – the fact that you care is proof that you haven't, but don't mistake God's patience for His permission – deal with the sin in your life, and do it now. Jesus Christ is calling out to you and making intercession for you at the right hand of God. Your name is being spoken in Heaven. Think about that. Think about it, and turn from your sin.

Well, we need to move on and finish the chapter this morning, so look back with me at 1John:

1 John 5:18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

The word touch here is more like 'latch onto.' The enemy of our souls is real, and he can tempt you, he can bring things your way, but if you are in Christ, he does not control you. You have a choice.

⁷ See also, Jer 11:14; 14:11

In fact, John says you will not sin. Now, that's a pretty strong statement, but as we've said several times before in 1John, the idea is that you don't persist in sin, it's not habitual, it's not what defines you. Instead, you guard yourself, watch yourself, watch your step. Watch where you go and what you do. Keep yourself away from things that are not helpful and righteous. Life will expose you to enough difficulty and dirt without you intentionally choosing to add more.

And, don't just think of yourself, think of all the others that you'll be able to help, to intercede for, if you're strong spiritually. Think of all the people you'll be able to pray for and speak to.

19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of the wicked one*.

20 And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Friends, once again, look at all the things we KNOW. We don't wonder. The obedience and submission to God in our hearts and lives proves that we have been rescued from sin, we are born again, and we are secure in the God who has saved us. So now one last warning:

21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

Actively guard yourself from things that would pull you away from all of this. An idol doesn't have to be a statue made of stone or wood, it's anything that calls you away from God. Stay away from those things and give yourself whole-heartedly to God instead.

This is the life we're called to live. This is the life that leads to eternal life. This is the life that needs to be proclaimed to the world, and the life that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ need to be reminded of. And God is calling you to help them – to pray for them, so guard yourself, worship our God and keep yourself from things that would pull you away from Him.

Friends, this is all serious business. Eternity is real. Heaven and hell are real. Sin and judgment are real. Temptation is real. But so is Christ. So is God. So are forgiveness and grace and hope. So, if you see someone sinning, pray for them. And if you find yourself sinning, ask someone to pray for you. Jesus is already doing it, but He's calling other people in your life to pray too. Be honest, be open, share your struggles and your needs.

Paul knew everything would work out through the prayers of others and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. So don't neglect this powerful, awesome opportunity we have to make a difference in the lives of others and for others to make a difference in us.

Let's pray.

Possible Interpretations of the ‘sin that leads to death.’

Some have seen this verse and devised a whole system that divides sin in two categories: mortal and venial. You may be familiar with those terms, venial sins can be forgiven; mortal sins can't, according to some counts there are seven of these ‘deadly sins.’ The problem is, the Bible doesn't offer us any charts or lists to make such a distinction, they're categories developed by men.

Some see another division between sin, which they define as something you did wrong, but you didn't know it was wrong, you're cruising along at 55MPH, and suddenly the speed limit drops to 45MPH, you didn't see the sign, so you keep going at 55. You've sinned, but you didn't know it. It's possible to do the same thing spiritually, there are plenty of people who know very little about God who have no idea about all the ways they're offending Him. And that would be different compared to what is sometimes called transgression – that's knowing that something is wrong and still doing it anyway. So, some people say the sin leading to death is any transgression you intentionally commit. The Old Testament actually made these distinctions, but we don't see the distinction reinforced in the New Testament. So I don't think this is the best interpretation.

There's a third camp on this issue, and they say that the sin that leads to death is when you commit an actual sin that leads to physical death. And this is something we see throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament you see Nadab and Abihu, the sons of the High Priest in Israel, and they come and try to worship God the way they want but not according to the format God had clearly given and they suddenly fell dead. Or you see Korah who led a rebellion against Moses and miraculously died.

In the New Testament we see the same. In Acts 5 (vss 1-11) Annanias and Sapphira fell down dead for lying about what they had done. Paul writes a letter to the church in Corinth and makes a reference to people who were sick because they had taken communion in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 5:5; 11:30). James (5:15-16) also talks about sin playing a role in our physical illnesses at times, and says not only should you should ask the elders to pray for your sickness, but you should also confess your sin.

So, there's no denying that in ways that I don't fully understand, spiritual sins can impact our physical lives, even leading to death at times. I have no reason, Biblically, to doubt that those things still occur. But, I don't think that's what John is speaking about here. After all, we all still sin at times – whether it's hypocrisy, anger, lust, fear, whatever, we all stumble. The miracle is that God doesn't strike us all down dead instantly. Really, if you think about it, what right do any of us have to keep living?

The miracle is the fact that God keeps open a pathway to repentance, that when we have sinned, there is always a way out. There is always a way to turn around, always a way to repent. Life comes with a great big spiritual reset button powered by the blood of Christ.