

## **“SIN UNTO DEATH”**

**1Jno.5:16,17**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. Various translations to help us see what is actually said in these two verses.
  - a. KJV – read the text
  - b. Berry’s: The Interlinear Literal Translation: (16) “If anyone should see his brother sinning a sin not to death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for those that sin not to death. There is a sin to death; concerning that I do not say that he should beseech. (17) Every unrighteousness is sin; and there is a sin not to death.”
  - c. Chas. B. Williams: (16) “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not lead to death, he will ask and God will grant him life; yea, He will grant it to any who do not commit a sin that leads to death. There is a sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. (17) Any wrongdoing is sin; and there are sins that do not lead to death.”
  - d. ASV: (16) “...sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and God will give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request. (17) All unrighteousness is sin: and there is sin not unto death.”
  - e. ESV: (16) “...committing a sin not leading to death...give life to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death. (17) ...there is sin that does not lead to death.”
  - f. Weymouth: (16) “...sins which are not mortal...sins that are deadly...”
  - g. Moffatt: (16) “...sins which are not deadly...sins that are deadly”
2. This is what it says. But what does it mean? It’s our purpose to learn this by diligent Bible study, rightly dividing the word in according with the context, both immediate and remote context concerning the matter of prayer for sin and its forgiveness.
3. First of all note this: According to 1Jno.5:16,17 certain matters are very plain.
  - a. There is:
    - (1) “Sin not unto death”
    - (2) “Sin unto death”

- b. Prayer is advised to be offered for the one and life is promised for the brother who is guilty, or he will be forgiven.
  - c. Prayer is not advised for the other.
4. All agree this has been a difficult text. Perhaps it has been made more difficult than it really is – first by ignoring context (both immediate and remote) and then because of so many and varied unsubstantiated theories that have been advanced.
- a. Sin such as the following that some have claimed are the “sin unto death.”
    - (1) The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit mentioned in Mt.12:31,32; Mk.3:28,29; Lk.12:10.
    - (2) Any great sin or enormous sin as men classify sin; such as: murder, idolatry, adultery, etc.
    - (3) Some sin which brought fatal disease on the sinner.
    - (4) A sin to which the law of Moses assigned the death penalty
    - (5) Some grievous sin which God determined to punish with temporal, physical death; such as:
      - (a) The case of Ananias and Sapphira, Ac.5:1-11.
      - (b) The case of Herod the king, Ac.12:20-23.
    - (6) Crimes against civil law which magistrates had no power to pardon.
    - (7) Sins committed after baptism.
    - (8) Sins not pardoned in this life but after death in purgatory.
  - b. These will be considered in detail later and by a process of elimination refuted one by one.
5. In spite of it being considered a difficult text, remember the matters we mentioned about the text that are very plain.

## II. DISCUSSION

### A. NOTE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF 1JNO.5:16,17, THAT OF VV. 13-17.

- 1. V.13, John’s purpose in writing these things unto believers – those who are true believers on the name of the Son of God – That ye may know:
  - a. “That ye have eternal life.” Cf. 1Jno.2:254,25; Tit.2:1; Rom.8:24,25.
  - b. “That ye believe (continue to believe) on the name of the Son of God.”
- 2. Vv.14,15, the confidence and assurance resulting from knowing this and having his continued faith in the Son of God.

- a. V.14, “that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us.” Cf. 1Jno.3:22.
    - (1) The “anything” is limited or qualified by “according to his will.
  - b. V.15, and that knowing this, “we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”
  - c. John goes from the general in V.14 to the particular in V.15.
    - (1) 1<sup>st</sup> there is the assurance that God hears whatever, anything, the true believer asks according to his will.
    - (2) 2<sup>nd</sup> there is the assurance that God grants the particular petitions that may be so requested.
    - (3) What he is affirming is the fact of the genuine believer’s consciousness of being heard when he prays in faith in accordance to God’s will.
  - d. This definitely limits access to the prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God to the obedient believer, the faithful, penitent follower of his Son Jesus Christ. Cf. Psa.66:18; Prov.28:9; Jno.9:31; 1Pet.3:12.
3. Vv.16,17, John’s further assurance of the right and/or duty of intercessory prayer for erring brethren in accordance with the principles of brotherly love, including certain limitations to be recognized and applied in the matter, which brings us to our topic “Sin Unto Death,” for which we are not advised to pray, and the purpose of our study, which is to determine what “sin unto death” is or what it means to be guilty, or who is guilty of such sin, and if so, why and how!

**B. FOR PURPOSES OF CLARIFICATION AND TO AVOID POSSIBLE MISUNDERSTANDING OF THIS TEXT, WE OFFER DEFINITIONS OF WORDS AND PHRASES FOUND THEREIN.**

- 1. “Anyone” or “any man” (V.16) – any believer, any faithful Christian. Cf. Gal.6:1.
  - a. The context demands this definition.
    - (1) John is addressing believers, V.13.
    - (2) The believers are the ones who have confidence in prayer, V.14.
    - (3) Believers are the ones who are promised their prayers prayed in harmony with God’s will will be heard, V.15.

- b. If this were unlimited, forgiveness (life) would come or be given as a result of an alien sinner's prayers. But –Prov.15:29; 28:9; Jno.9:31.
- 2. "See his *brother*" (V.16) – a fellow believer, a fellow Christian.
  - a. Again, the context demands this definition.
  - b. Again, if this were unlimited – applied to one and all – alien sinners would have and could have forgiveness (life) in answer to prayer. But – Ac.22:16; Cf. Ac.8:18-24.
- 3. "Death" (Vv.16,17) – second or eternal death, spiritual death; a death that is spiritual in nature rather than physical. Cf. Gen.2:17; Rom.6:23; Eph.2:1.
  - a. Eternal life had just been mentioned in Vv.11-13.
    - (1) It's reasonable for a writer to make an abrupt transition from eternal life to eternal death. But—
    - (2) It's unnatural and abrupt to change from eternal life to physical death in a context such as this one.
  - b. Furthermore, the N.T. does not teach that any sin necessarily brings physical death to the one who commits it.
- 4. "Life" (V.16) – spiritual life, restoration, forgiveness, exemption from eternal death to which the sinner was exposed.
  - a. It's not physical life, because:
    - (1) Physical death does not necessarily result from an individual's sin.
    - (2) Hence, there is no propriety, no reason at all, to promise physical life in answer to prayer for one who has sinned.
    - (3) If so, those who sin not unto death and are given life as a result of a believer's prayer on their behalf could live forever in the flesh, or as long as they were prayed for. But—1Cor.15:22; Heb.9:27.
- 5. "A sin" (Vv.16b,17b, KJV) – simply sin; no particular or specific one.
  - a. ASV footnote gives: "sin" instead of "a sin"
  - b. Much confusion has resulted from the use of "the" in the expressions "the sin unto death" and "the sin not unto death." It has cause some to think that:
    - (1) "Sin unto death" must of necessity be one specific sin for which no forgiveness is possible; or that it is limited to one certain and specific sin for which no forgives is possible.
    - (2) But it is not so in this text!

**C. NOW TO OUR PROCESS OF REFUTATION AND ELIMINATION OF SOME ERRONEOUS OPINIONS WHICH HAVE BEEN ADVANCED DUE TO A MISUNDERSTANDING OF 1JNO.5:16,17, WHICH WE DO IN ORDER TO HELP US ARRIVE AT THE PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHO THE ONE IS THAT IS SINNING “SIN UNTO DEATH” AND WHY.**

1. “Sin unto death” is not, can’t be, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit spoken of in Mt.12:31,32; Mk.3:28,29; Lk.12:10.
  - a. It can’t be because of the difference in *application*.
    - (1) The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is of *universal application*.
      - (a) In Mt.12:32: “but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him...”
      - (b) In Mk.3:29: “But he (any he) that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness...”
      - (c) In Lk.12:10: “...but unto him (any him) that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven.”
    - (2) While “sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is limited to, pertains only to, children of God – a brother in Christ.
  - b. It can’t be because of the difference in *extent*.
    - (1) The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is limited to one specific sin, that of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, which means:
      - (a) As a noun, to rail against, slander, to use speech injurious to the Holy Spirit.
      - (b) As a verb, to speak reproachfully of, to rail at, to speak evil of the Holy Spirit.
      - (c) As an adjective, speaking evil, slanderous, abusive, a blasphemer of the Holy Spirit.
    - (2) “Sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not limited to one specific sin, and says nothing about blaspheming the Holy Spirit.
2. “Sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not limited to some great or enormous sin as some claim, as men sometimes classify sin; such as: murder, idolatry, adultery, etc.
  - a. We know this because the Corinthians had been guilty of such sins as these, yet were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God, 1Cor.6:9-11.

- (1) Possible objection: That was their condition *before* their conversion to Christ, or while alien sinners.
    - (2) Answer:
      - (a) Questions:
        - (1) Is God more merciful and forgiving toward alien sinners than his own repentant children?
        - (2) Is the faith and baptism of the alien sinner more effective than the faith, repentance, confession and prayer of God's erring child?
      - (b) Besides, there was one in the church at Corinth who was guilty of fornication that was not so much as named among the Gentiles, the aliens, but he was forgiven and restored, 1Cor.5:1; 2Cor.2:6-8.
  - b. Also, those who crucified (murdered) Jesus Christ were promised forgiveness, Ac.2:36-38.
3. "Sin unto death" in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not some sin which brought fatal disease on the sinner.
  - a. If it were, we would have to know:
    - (1) Which sin brings fatal disease and which doesn't. But God has given us no such information.
    - (2) Whether the disease will be fatal or not. But, How?
  - b. Besides, we have already shown that physical death is not under consideration in 1Jno.5:16,17.
4. "Sin unto death" in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not sins to which the law of Moses assigned the death penalty.
  - a. If so, I would include:
    - (1) Murder, Num.35:16. But—Ac.2:38; 3:19.
    - (2) Lying with one's father's wife, Lev.20:11. But – 1Cor.5; 2Cor.2:6-8.
    - (3) Neglecting to keep up a dangerous ox, Exo.21:29.
    - (4) A son who rebels against his parents, Deut.21:18-21.
  - b. Besides, the Law of Moses was no longer in effect when John wrote 1Jno. It has been abrogated some 50 years earlier. Cf. Col.2:14-17; Rom.7:4.
5. "Sin unto death" in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not some grievous sin God has determined to punish with physical death.
  - a. Repeat, physical death is not under consideration in 1Jno.5:16,17. We have already established that in our definition segment.
  - b. Though some were punished by physical death in the apostolic age:

- (1) The cases of such were rare. There are only two recorded in the N.T.
    - (a) The case of Ananias and Sapphira, Ac.5:1-11.
    - (b) The case of Herod the king, Ac.12:20-23.
  - (2) Both of these were the result of a miracle, and in the miraculous age of the N.T. church.
    - (a) There is no indication that God is still doing that today.
    - (b) And miracles through human agency have ceased. Cf. 1Cor.13:8-11.
  - (3) Both of those cases were evidently special cases. There is no indication that such was a general procedure even in the miraculous age of the church
    - (a) They were evidently designed to stand as **proofs** and **warnings** to others – both then and now – not merely to punish those guilty.
    - (b) The case in Ac.5:1-11
      - (1) Proved that the power of the Holy Spirit dwelt in the apostles and they could not be deceived.
      - (2) Warned against all such attempts in the future.
    - (c) The case of Ac.12:20-23
      - (1) Proved the error, the sinfulness, of attributing to man the honor belonging only to God, as well as the sin of accepting it. Cf. Ac.14:8-18.
      - (2) Warned against such attributes and its acceptance.
  - (4) Besides, evidently other sins, equally great, if not greater, were not so punished.
    - (a) What about lying to God? Making God a liar? The lying anti-Christ?
6. “Sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not crimes against civil law which magistrates had no power to pardon.
    - a. The fact that “death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is spiritual death, not physical, disproves this view.
    - b. Civil law per se, and crimes in violation of civil law, are not under consideration anywhere or at anytime in the entire book of 1Jno.
  7. “Sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not sins committed after baptism IN CONTRAST to those committed before baptism.
    - a. The no-forgiveness-after-baptism theory is wrong because:

- (1) It contradicts other plain passages:
    - (a) 1Jno.1:7 – the blood of Christ “cleanseth US (children of God who sin) from all sin”
    - (b) 1Jno.9 – “if WE (erring children of God) confess OUR sin, he is faithful and just to forgive US our sin.”
    - (c) 1Jno.2:1 – “WE have an advocate with Father”
    - (d) 1Jno.2:2 – Christ is “the propitiation for OUR sins: and not for OURS only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”
  - (2) It puts God in the ridiculous position of:
    - (a) Showing more mercy to alien sinners than to children of God who sin. But – 1Jno.2:1,2.
    - (b) Demanding that WE do what He will not do. Cf. Lk.17:3,4; Eph.4:32.
  - (3) It rules out salvation and eternal life for any child of God who commits even one sin after having obeyed the gospel and being at that point in time spotless in God’s sight.
  - (4) It demands absolute sinless perfection for the rest of one one’s life after becoming a child of God if that one is to be saved.
  - (5) It denies the very thing John says is possible for the brother sinning not unto death in 1Jno.5:16, his being given life as a result of prayer.
  - (6) It places the Spirit-filled, Spirit-guided apostle John in the ridiculous position of requiring a believer to pray for a sinning brother and asking God to grant him something that God can’t give to one who sins after baptism.
- b. If “sin unto death” equals sins committed after baptism IN CONTRAST to those before baptism, then “sin not unto death” would have to be sins before baptism or alien sin IN CONTRAST to those after baptism, or those of children of God. But –
- (1) John teaches the believer to pray for “sin not unto death,” committed by a brother, one who has been baptized, V.16.
  - (2) And neither John nor any other N.T. writer teaches that alien sinners and their sins are forgiven in answer to prayer. Cf. Ac.22:16.
  - (3) Therefore, the contrast in 1Jno.5:16,17 is not between sins before and after baptism.

8. “Sin unto death” in 1Jno.5:16,17 has no reference to sins that are not pardoned in this life and leaves one in that place and condition the Catholic church calls purgatory after death.
  - a. Think of the essentials necessary to proving the erroneous Catholic doctrine of purgatory – not one of which is even hinted at in the Bible:
    - (1) There would have to be a place and a condition called purgatory. But such is not mentioned nor implied in the Bible.
    - (2) There would have to be sins that are un-pardoned in this life they may be pardoned after physical death. Again, not mentioned no implied in the Scriptures.
      - (a) Objection: Mt.12:31,32 infers it.
      - (b) Answer:
        - (1) “World” is from the Gr. “aion,” not “kosmos”
        - (2) “Aion” defined: “an age, a period of time,” the RV marg. Always has “age,” Vine, IV, 233.
        - (3) Hence, in Mt.12:31,32, what is under consideration is the Jewish and the Gospel ages – “this world,” the Jewish age; “the world to come,” the Gospel age.
      - (c) Besides, many plain passages refute any idea of a forgiveness-after-death theory, Lk.16:26; 2Cor.5:10; Eccl.12:13,14; Heb.9:27.
    - (3) There would have to be authority from Christ or from his Apostles for the living to pray for the dead, of which there is none.
      - (a) Objection: It was done in 2Mac.12:43-46.
      - (b) Answer”
        - (1) 2Mac. Is an apocryphal book (of or belonging to the Apocrypha, i.e. writings not considered genuine) and has no lace in canon law; i.e., the Sacred Scriptures.
          - (a) The author of 2Mac. Openly admitted he was not inspired, 2Mac.2:24-33; 15:38-40.
        - (2) The context of 2Mac.2 shows the sacrifices and prayers were for dead idolaters, Vv.39-42.

- (3) V.45 says those dead idolaters “had fallen asleep with godliness.”
  - (a) Do Catholics believe idolatry is godliness? If not, they better find another proof text!
- (4) Another essential is that any individual is to be purged or can be purged by fire after death. Again, there is no divine authority for it.
  - (a) Argument: Paul teaches it in 1Cor.3:11-15.
  - (b) Answer:
    - (1) “Every man’s (builder, preacher, teacher) WORK” is to be tried by fire, not the man (builder, preacher, teacher) himself, V.13.
    - (2) “the DAY shall declare it” is singular and refers to judgment, not purgatory – purgatory would require several days.
    - (3) “**Every man’s**” work is to be tried --\
      - (a) Catholics do not believe “every man” goes to purgatory.
      - (b) In fact, they believe no one but Catholics go to purgatory.
      - (c) Catholics do not believe that even all Catholics go to purgatory.
      - (d) They believe those who die guilty of **mortal** sin go directly to hell, not to purgatory.
    - (4) This is no proof text for the purgatory doctrine!
  - b. Since purgatory is not a Bible doctrine and is actually contrary to plain Bible teaching, and therefore a false doctrine, it cannot be what John has under consideration in 1Jno.5:16,17.

**D. HAVING ILLIMINATED ALL THESE FALSE THEORIES ABOUT “SIN UNTO DEATH” IN 1JNO.5:16,17, WE ARE NOW READY TO CONSIDER PLAIN PASSAGES AND FIXED BIBLE PRINCIPLES THAT WILL HELP US TO UNDERSTAND AND TO DETERMINE WHAT “SIN UNTO DEATH” IS, WHO IT IS THAT IS GUILTY AND WHY.**

1. With the exception of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mt.12:31,32; Mk.3:28,29; Lk.12:10) and the “sin unto death” in 1Jno. 5:16,17 all manner of sin can be prayed for and is forgivable.
  - a. This is demonstrated in the book of Acts that shows that the blood of Christ is able to reach and wash away the sins of sinners
    - (1) All the way **down** to vile persecutors and murderers of Jesus Christ, from Saul of Tarsus to the Jews on Pentecost, Ac.22:16; 2:36-38.
    - (2) And **up** to devout Cornelius who was of circumspect life and irreproachable character, Ac.10; Ac.11; Ac.15.
  - b. This is also demonstrated in the book of 1Corinthians, 1Cor.6:9-11.
  - c. It is affirmed by the Apostle John in 1Jno.1:7,9.
    - (1) “All” does not cancel or contradict the exception of Mt.12: 31,32, for this exception is not under consideration by John in the Epistle of 1John.
    - (2) Neither does “all” include “sin unto death” of 1Jno.5:16,17.
2. A repeat and a reminder: the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of Mt.12; Mk.3; Lk.12 is not to be confused with “sin unto death” of 1Jno.5:16,17, because it is:
  - a. Different in **application** – it is “whosoever” (Mt.12) VERSUS “brother” (1Jno.5:16).
  - b. Different in **extent** – Mt.12 is specific; it speaks of one specific sin and that against one specific Being, the Holy Spirit. BUT – 1Jno.5 is not so limited.
  - c. Different in **nature** – it is to “**blaspheme**” in Mt.12; Mk.3, meaning to “slander, use injurious speech toward, rail, revile, speak reproachfully of” a Divine Being, the Holy Spirit.
    - (1) But in 1Jno.5 the sin is to “resist, quench the teaching of Christ through the Spirit, thus to grieve the Spirit,” such as that committed in Ac.7:51,54-60; Mt.23:29-32; Cf. Lk.23:34; Ac.2:36-38.
    - (2) To resist the teaching of the Holy Spirit is not the same as to blaspheme the Holy Spirit.
3. Remember this about answered prayer and forgiveness of sin for the erring child of God: It is always **CONDITIONAL!**
  - a. The conditions are set forth by John in 1Jno.
    - (1) One must walk in the light, 1Jno.1:7.
    - (2) One must confess his sins, 1Jno.1:9.

- (3) One must in faith keep God's commandments and do those things that are pleasing in God's sight, 1Jno.3:22.
    - (4) One must in faith ask or pray in accordance to God's will, 1Jno.5:14,15.
  - b. This conditionality is attested by other N.T. writers.
    - (1) By Peter in Ac.8:22.
    - (2) By James in Jas.1:5,6; 5:16.
    - (3) By Jesus in Mt.6:12,14,15.
  - c. Obviously, those who refuse to comply with the conditions and continue in sin will not and cannot be forgiven.
    - (1) Otherwise, conditions are meaningless.
    - (2) Cf. 1Jno.1:6.
- 4. Now back to the erring or sinning brother for whom we are not advised to pray with any confidence of being heard or having our prayer answered, V.16c: the one guilty of "sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it."
  - a. Is there such a brother? Obviously so!
  - b. But who is that brother and what is the sin he is committing?
- 5. What is the only conclusion which harmonizes with the context both immediate and remote?
  - a. Due to what the N.T. says, even in 1Jno. about sin, repentance, confession of it, and forgiveness of any and all sin repented of and confessed, seeking forgiveness, "sin unto death" would have to be referring to **sin, any sin, all sin that a brother will not repent of and confess!**
    - (1) The N.T. teaches, including 1Jno., that the Lord will hear the believer's prayer and forgive the erring brother of the guilt of any and every sin, of whatever nature, that the erring brother confesses, 1Jno.1:9; 3:22; 5:14,15.
    - (2) There is, however, according to 1Jno.5:16c, sin of which the Lord will not forgive a brother; it is "sin unto death."
    - (3) Therefore, the sin of which the Lord will not forgive an erring brother, spoken of in 1Jno.5:16,17, must be **sin, any sin, all sin that brother will not repent of and confess!**
  - b. Therefore, "sin unto death" here is a disposition of heart, a perverseness of attitude and an unwillingness of mind to acknowledge one's sin and from it turn away.
    - (1) Such a disposition effectively closes the door of heaven in one's face.

- (2) And such a disposition does exist. See Jer.7:16; 11:14; 14:11,12; Eph.4:18-20; 1Tim.4:1,2; Heb.6:4-6; 10:26-31.
- e. But it seems to me that perhaps John specifically has in mind the lying, deceiving, antichrists of 1Jno.1:6; 2:18-23; 4:1-5; 2Jno.7, who, no doubt, furnish us a specific example of one sinning “sin unto death.”

### III. CONCLUSION

1. The conclusion reached in this study is in harmony with:
  - a. The facts set forth in 1Jno.
  - b. Bible principles plainly stated in other passages.
2. This passage shows the fearful consequence of a hard heart, impenitence, and the deceitfulness of sin! Cf. Rom.2:5; Lk.13:3; Heb.3:12,13,17-19.
3. All of sin. Hence, we should make sure:
  - a. We are as David was, “A man after God own heart,” always willing to repent.
  - b. We are not lie king Saul was, stubborn, bow our neck, unwilling to repent!
4. Our admonition is:

“O do not let the word depart  
And close thine eyes against the light;  
Poor sinner harden not thine heart,  
B saved, O tonight!”
5. Must we say of you:

“Almost persuaded, harvest is past!  
Almost persuaded, doom comes at last!  
Almost cannot avail, almost is but to fail!  
Sad, sad, that bitter wail ---  
Almost --- but lost!”

(Credit to Tommy McClure, but slightly revised)