

LIFE FOR A SINNING BROTHER
(SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2019)

Scripture: Psalm 32; 1 John 5:16-21

INTRODUCTION

There are challenges in interpreting passages in Scripture, **but man's greatest problem is not what to him appears to be unclear but what is perfectly clear and which he does not want to hear.**

How do we interpret Scripture?

- Grammatical-historical method
- Rule of faith: Scripture interprets Scripture; compare Scripture with Scripture
- Alistair Begg: Main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things.
- We must interpret Scripture with humility but confident that it is God's Word.

Beware of the Absalom interpreters of Scripture.

Story of Absalom.

1 John 5:16-17 – Challenging passage

Not all interpreters agree on all the details.

Attempt to focus on what is clear and how this applies to us as a church.

- 1) Review of Sin in 1 John
- 2) Focus on verses 16-17
- 3) Are there are other passages in Scripture that are similar?

1) REVIEW OF SIN IN 1 JOHN

In Scripture:

Verb *to sin*: 43x, 10x in 1 John (almost 25%)

Noun *sin*: 174x, 17x in 1 John

Book of Romans speaks of sin most often but in terms of mentions per word, 1 John is number one in the NT.

What does John say about sin in 1 John?

- 1) Honesty and seeking forgiveness
- 2) Three main areas for failure: belief, conduct, and love
- 3) God's work of regeneration or fathering brings about a real change for the believer

1 John 1:8-2:2 and 2:12

1 John 3:4-9

When we looked at 1 John 3:4-9, I mentioned the following:

There is a **grammatical** solution that some take.

Some understand that John is saying that a believer no longer habitually sins. This understanding is based on the present tense verbs used in verse 4 and verse 6.

Some propose a **theological** explanation of various forms: deliberate sin vs. involuntary sin, **or the difference that we see in 5:16-17**, or that John is speaking about what is possible rather than what is actual.¹

Another approach is to explain this in terms of the **situation** that John was dealing with, the danger of the false teachers and those who were following them.

The Christian does not sin in the way that John especially warns against in this section, joining league with the antichrists and with the devil.

¹ Smalley, 161.

Robert Yarbrough writes:

John may be assuming a definition of “sins” that extends primarily to the transgressions that threaten his readers and have already led some to desert the faith (cf. 2:19), as John sees it. This is, in other words, a contextual solution to the problem. Some run aground at points of doctrine (2:22), others at points of ethics (2:4), and still others at points of love for God (stressed later in the epistle) or for other people (2:9–11).²

Clearly John cannot be speaking of absolute sinlessness.

Never should we treat sin lightly. We seek forgiveness and repentance.

There should be a difference for the believer. God’s work of sovereign grace does not leave us unchanged.

Love for others is not shown just in terms of material needs but ultimately the spiritual well-being of others.

2) FOCUS ON VERSES 16-17

Challenging verses.

Observe. Do our best to interpret. Look to apply in accordance with what Scripture is saying.

Verses 14-15: Confidence in prayer

Verses 16-17: An important application of that

Observe – questions that we have

Brother – believer or a broader sense of the word that could mean someone who claims to be a Christian but is not?

Sin not to death vs. sin to death

Life – regeneration or application of salvation?

² Yarbrough, 183.

Interpret

I think it makes more sense to understand brother here speaks of a believer and that life in this context is not regeneration but **living in God's truth** rather than in rebellion.

Not all commentators understand the passage this way.

John Calvin wrote:

“Surely it is an iron hardness not to feel pity when we see souls, redeemed by Christ's blood, going to ruin”

So, what is the sin not to death and the sin to death?

Three times John speaks of sin or sinning not to death.

Now we know that all sin warrants death.

Rom. 6:23 For the **wages of sin** *is* death, but the gift **of** God *is* eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But here John distinguishes sin leading to death vs. sin not leading to death.

Some understand death here to mean physical death.

A case can be made for this.

Can you think of examples in the NT where physical death was the result for specific sin?

Acts 5 – Ananias and Sapphira

1 Cor. 11:30 –

1 Cor. 11:30 For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

John MacArthur states that John is not speaking of a particular sin but **whatever sin is the final one in the tolerance of God**.

It is more an attitude of hardness and refusal to repent he suggests.³

Certainly, we must with reverence accept and realize that God can bring sickness and death even to his children who persist in rebellion.

Not sure that physical death is the best understanding here, because you would only know a sin leading to death after it already was judged that way by God.

Another background that might be helpful here is the OT distinction between **deliberate sins vs. inadvertent sins**.

We also keep in mind the context in which John is writing.

There were false teachers who claimed to have the truth but showed that they were in league with the devil.

It is possible in this context John is speaking of someone who is being influenced by this false teaching but has not rejected the truth.

This is a believer in serious danger, but he has not turned away entirely from God's truth. He is in sin, but not unto death.

The ESVSB defines sin that leads to death as:

(1) unrepented of and (2) of the kind or nature that John has warned about throughout the letter: resolute rejection of the true doctrine about Christ, chronic disobedience to God's commandments, persistent lack of love for fellow believers – all indications of a lack of saving faith – which will not be forgiven.

And finally, Robert Yarbrough gives this definition for sin unto death.

To "sin unto death" is to have a heart unchanged by God's love in Christ and so to **persist in convictions and acts and commitments like those John and his readers know to exist among** ostensibly Christian people of their acquaintance, some of whom have now left those whom John addresses.⁴

³ MacArthur Study Bible, s.v. 1 John 5:16-17

⁴ Yarbrough, 311.

Before we move to some applications, let us consider two other things.

(1) I do not say that he should pray about that.

- John not dictating.

- We do pray for the one who is in sin but not unto death. What about the one who persists in rebellion?

- We cannot see all that is going on.

- In the end, we must make sure our final loyalties are with God and His truth and not the transgressor.

(2) Verse 17

There is encouragement that is given in verse 16 that someone in sin or rebellion can be restored.

We don't take sin lightly.

Yes, John distinguishes sin unto death and sin not unto death, but not to minimize the seriousness of sin but to exalt the grace of God.

It is possible that John had in mind gnostically inclined members of his community who were indifferent to godly living.⁵

Application

Some questions and uncertainties, but there are still important applications that we can make.

When you see a brother in sin, what is your first response?

Is it a response of judgment and how superior you think you are?

Or do you just turn a blind eye and say, it is not my responsibility?

⁵ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC 51; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 301.

Both of these responses are wrong, judgmental or not caring.

The first response should be one of concern and intercession.

The grammar is not one of direct command, but we can say one of expectation.

Your first response should be that of prayer.

Yarbrough writes:

The one who sees sin is to make request or petition, not point fingers, turn a blind eye, initiate gossip, or bask in a feeling of superiority.⁶

We go back to verses 14-15, focused on prayer. These verses are not to encourage a self-centeredness.

Significant that what follows is dealing with a very difficult situation.

There is some question about the grammar, but it is best understood that the one who gives life is God.

The Greek syntax is difficult, but certainly we can understand that God is the one who brings about the restoration and repentance and yet there is an important place that the concerned believer plays.

John here just speaks of prayer, but I think there is also a place for appropriate action.

This connects with our third point.

This is a difficult passage, but does it stand alone?

3) ARE THERE ARE OTHER PASSAGES IN SCRIPTURE THAT ARE SIMILAR?

The answer is yes. What John is saying does not stand alone.

⁶ Yarbrough, 306.

What John is saying here fits very well broadly into what we see at the end of about 15 other letters.⁷

Of this rather extensive listing, let me share three passages that are quite similar.

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.

Wonderful unity and diversity of Scripture.

Pray. As appropriate don't stop with prayer. **Maybe prayer in some cases is all you can do.**

Paul here in Gal. 6 joins together prayer and humble and careful action.

And then listen to James 5:19-20

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 then note also how similar is Jude 22-23.

Jude 22 And on some have compassion, making a distinction; **23** but others save with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.

Verse 22 in some versions reads:

And have mercy on those who doubt.

The point is that over and over in Scripture we are to be filled with loving concern for others.

Loving concern – prayer and appropriate action.

Being part of the body of Christ is not a club membership.

It is an awesome privilege.

⁷ Robert Yarbrough supplied the following: Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 16:14, 16, 22; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 6:1, 9–10; Eph. 6:18, 23; Phil. 4:2, 9; Col. 4:2, 12; 1 Thess. 5:12–18; 2 Thess. 3:6–15; Titus 3:10; Heb. 13:1, 9, 18; James 5:19–20; 1 Pet. 5:5, 12; 2 Pet. 3:14, 17; Jude 20–23.

And I use the word awesome in the sense of the original meaning of the word.

Who is sufficient for this?

No one in their own righteousness or strength.

Listen to the comments of Calvin:

It is then right to determine sometimes, whether the fallen is without hope, or whether there is still a place for a remedy. This, indeed, is what I allow, and what is evident beyond dispute from this passage; but as this very seldom happens, and as God sets before us the infinite riches of his grace, and bids us to be merciful according to his own example, we ought not rashly to conclude that any one has brought on himself the judgment of eternal death; on the contrary, love should dispose us to hope well. But if the impiety of some appear to us not otherwise than hopeless, as though the Lord pointed it out by the finger, we ought not to contend with the just judgment of God, or seek to be more merciful than he is.

What God sees vs. what man sees.

Luke 22:31 And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. **32** But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to *Me*, strengthen your brethren."

The Lord is gracious. Intercede with loving concern for a brother in sin with the hope that God can bring restoration.

Prayer

Hymn 479

BENEDICTION: 1 PETER 5:8-11

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever.
Amen.