

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, October 9, 2024 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



THAT YOU MAY KNOW – A STUDY OF 1,2 & 3 JOHN *Confidence and Carefulness in Prayer* 1 John 5:14-17

“¹⁴Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. ¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.” -1 John 5:14-17 (NKJV)

BACKGROUND AND SETTING FOR 1ST, 2ND, & 3RD JOHN:

- (1) **AUTHOR = The Apostle John** – Tradition holds that John was sentenced to death in a boiling vat of oil, yet he emerged unharmed from the experience. Again tradition tells us that John lived into old age perhaps dying sometime after AD 98... He is thought to have died in Ephesus – But in fact the mystery and unknowns concerning John’s death and what happened to him are not known and are varied...
- (2) **DATE = A.D. 90-95** - As with most books in the Bible, we cannot know for certain when and from where these epistles were penned. As to a date, it is commonly believed to have been written close to the end of the 1st century, with a fairly wide possible time frame... somewhere between 90-95 A.D.
- (3) **PLACE OF WRITING = Ephesus** – It is believed by most Biblical scholars that John wrote these letters from Ephesus, the place believed to be where he died. It is usually accepted that John wrote them late in his life.
- (4) **RECIPIENTS = Different audiences** - The Epistles of John were written to various audiences. They were all written after John was an old man living in Ephesus.

(5) **PURPOSE = Multiple purposes** - In terms of a positive stated purpose, John actually gives us reasons why he wrote these epistles:

3 Stated Positive Purposes for These Letters:

1. **That your (our) joy may be made complete** = 1 John 1:4, *“⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”* How may a Christian's joy be full if they lack assurance of faith, or if they are unsure that they are even a Christian and assured of salvation? Why do you think that is?
2. **That you may not sin** = 1 John 2:1-2, *“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”* What affect does sin in the life of a Christian have on his or her assurance? Why? What is John telling us here that might help?
3. **That you may know that you have eternal life** = 1 John 5:13, *“¹³ These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”* Why do you think this (assurance) might have been a stated purpose of John's writing? Why so important?

“¹⁴ Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. 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.” -1 John 5:14-17 (NKJV)

Last week I cited **Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, who viewed 1 John 5:6-8 **as the three most difficult verses in 1 John, and perhaps in the entire Bible.**

- I find our current text (vv.14-17) *far* more difficult to understand than those verses!
- In verses 14 & 15, I struggle to understand how the promise really applies, because frankly, it does not line up with my experience. We'll talk more about that in a moment.
- In verse 16, I struggle to understand the exact meaning of the “sin unto death,” and thus I'm not sure how to apply this to my prayer life. I want to touch on these briefly if we could just to try to get our heads around what John is talking about. There are two complexities in Scripture concerning sin that are particularly troubling...

2 Troubling Biblical Complexities About Sin:

(1) **The sin unto death = willful, continuous, unrepentant sin** - 1 John 5:16 is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to interpret. *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. Of all the interpretations out there, none seem to answer all the questions concerning this verse. The best interpretation may be found by comparing this verse to what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–10 (see also 1 Corinthians 11:30). The **“sin unto death” is willful, continuous, unrepentant sin.** God has called His children to holiness (1 Peter 1:16), and God corrects them when they sin. We are not “punished” for our sin in the sense of losing salvation or being eternally separated from God, yet we are disciplined. “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son” (Hebrews 12:6). First John 5:16 says there comes a point when God can no longer allow a believer to continue in unrepentant sin. When that point is reached, God may decide to take the life of the stubbornly sinful believer. The “death” is physical death. God at times purifies His church by removing those who deliberately disobey Him. The apostle John makes a distinction between the “sin that leads to death” and the “sin that does not lead to death.” Not all sin in the church is dealt with the same way because not all sin rises to the level of the “sin that leads to death.” In Acts 5:1–10 and 1 Corinthians 11:28–32, God dealt with intentional, calculated sin in the church by taking the physical life of the sinner. This is perhaps also what Paul meant by “the destruction of the flesh” in 1 Corinthians 5:5. John says that we should pray for Christians who are sinning, and that God will hear our prayers. However, there may come a time when God decides to cut short a believer’s life due to unrepentant sin. Prayers for such an unheeding person will not be effective. God is good and just, and He will eventually make us “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27). To further that end, God chastens His children. May the Lord preserve us from the hard-heartedness that would cause us to commit the “sin unto death.”

- (2) **The unpardonable sin = blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (rejection and unbelief)** - Today by continued rejection of the Holy Spirit conviction of our need for Jesus Christ through unbelief. **There is no pardon for a person who dies in his rejection of Christ.** - The unpardonable/unforgivable sin or “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” is mentioned in Mark 3:22–30 and Matthew 12:22–32.

READ: Mark 3:22-30

“²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebub,’ and, By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.’ ²³ So He called them to Himself and said to them in parables: ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. ²⁷ No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house. ²⁸ Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may

utter; ²⁹ but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation”—³⁰ because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

READ: Matthew 12:22–32

²² Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. ²³ And all the multitudes were amazed and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” ²⁴ Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.” ²⁵ But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. ²⁸ But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. ³⁰ He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad. 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. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

Jesus said, *“Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter”* (Mark 3:28), but then He gives one exception, *“Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin”* (verse 29). According to Jesus, the unpardonable or unforgivable sin is unique. It is the one iniquity that will never be forgiven (“never” is the meaning of “either in this age or in the age to come” in Matthew 12:32). The unforgivable sin is blasphemy (“defiant irreverence”) of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Spirit’s work in the world through Christ. In other words, the particular case of blasphemy seen in Matthew 12 and Mark 3 is unique. The guilty party, a group of Pharisees, had witnessed irrefutable evidence that Jesus was working miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit, yet they claimed that He was possessed by the prince of demons, Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:30). The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day committed the unpardonable sin by accusing Jesus Christ (in person, on earth) of being demon-possessed. They had no excuse for such an action. They were not speaking out of ignorance or misunderstanding. The Pharisees knew that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to save Israel. They knew the prophecies were being fulfilled. They saw Jesus’ wonderful works, and they heard His clear presentation of truth. Yet they deliberately chose to deny the truth and slander the Holy Spirit. Standing before the Light of the World, bathed in His glory, they defiantly closed their eyes and became willfully blind. Jesus pronounced that sin to be unforgivable. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, specific as it was to the Pharisees’ situation, cannot be duplicated today. Jesus Christ is

not on earth, and no one can personally see Jesus perform a miracle and then attribute that power to Satan instead of the Spirit. **The only unpardonable sin today is that of continued unbelief. There is no pardon for a person who dies in his rejection of Christ.** The Holy Spirit is at work in the world, convicting the unsaved of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). If a person resists that conviction and remains unrepentant, then he is choosing hell over heaven. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6), and the object of faith is Jesus (Acts 16:31). There is no forgiveness for someone who dies without faith in Christ. God has provided for our salvation in His Son (John 3:16). Forgiveness is found exclusively in Jesus (John 14:6). **To reject the only Savior is to be left with no means of salvation; to reject the only pardon is, obviously, unpardonable.** Many people fear they have committed some sin that God cannot or will not forgive, and they feel there is no hope for them, no matter what they do. Satan would like nothing more than to keep people laboring under that misconception. God gives encouragement to the sinner who is convicted of his sin: “Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8). “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20). And the testimony of Paul is proof positive that God can and will save anyone who comes to Him in faith (1 Timothy 1:12–17). If you are suffering under a load of guilt today, rest assured that you have not committed the unpardonable sin. God is waiting with open arms. Jesus’ promise is that “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (Hebrews 7:25). Our Lord will never fail. “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2).

But let's tackle what John says about prayer in this passage. Here it is again in **verses 14-17**, *“¹⁴Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. ¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.”*

This evening we face a difficult task. I'm sure that John wrote these verses to encourage us to pray, and so I want to encourage you to pray more faithfully. God is a prayer-hearing God...

“² O You who hear prayer, to You all flesh will come.” – Psalm 65:2

But at the same time, I can't gloss over the tremendous difficulty that our text creates for my prayer life. Listen to **verse 14-15** again, *“¹⁴Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”* Let me ask you, ***“Is that true?” “Really!” Does your experience bear that out. Let don't sissify the text. Let's be honest. What is problem we have this this text?*** Let's be honest and talk about it...

It is simply *not* true to my experience. John, who is echoing here the repeated promises of Jesus (Mark 11:22-24; John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:24), says that if we ask *anything* according to God's will, He will answer *favorably*. "No" is not an acceptable answer. It must be "yes" every time!

Over the years, my "prayer batting average" is pretty low when it comes to this. ***How about your?***

- I have prayed for the salvation of people who have not gotten saved
- I have prayed for the restoration of sinning Christians, who have not repented and been restored
- I have prayed for the reconciliation of many Christian marriages that have broken up
- I prayed intense prayers for healing for church members, friends and even family (my dear mom and dad) and they have died?
- I've pray even for myself... for victory over besetting sins, for God's deliverance from problems that just won't go away, for God to do something that He still hasn't done, and that list can go on and on... and still nothing!
- Some try to get God off the hook by saying, "He gives people free will."
- But if God cannot subdue a sinful person's will, then He can't do anything!
- That means that sinful man, not God, is sovereign!
- And it means that prayer is useless and impotent. If God promises to answer our prayers, then He has the power to answer them!
- **I'm sure that the fault is with me, not with God's promise!**
- I am probably lacking in understanding God's perfect will and lacking in faith. But I could not find any preachers on this text who admit to having the difficulties that I have. So this has not been an easy message to prepare, because if I'm honest, I have to expose my own failures in prayer to you! My prayer has been that perhaps by sharing my struggles, you will be motivated to keep "swinging" in your prayer life. Maybe we'll all improve our batting averages!

Some surprising new statistics from a LifeWay survey reveal what Americans really think about prayer. I found these very interesting...

- 48% of Americans say they pray every day – That is nearly half of Americans pray every day, according to a survey released last week from LifeWay (*Lifeway Survey*)
- 25% of those who pray say that God answers their prayer "all the time" (*Lifeway Survey*)
- 21% say that God answers their prayers "most of the time" (*Lifeway Survey*)
- 37% say that God answers their prayers "some of the time" (*Lifeway Survey*)
- 3% say God answers their prayer "none of the time" (*Lifeway Survey*)
- 14% say that "they don't know" if God answers prayer (*Lifeway Survey*)

- 28% of Americans say God hears our prayers but cannot intervene (*Gallup Poll*)
- 11% of Americans say God does not hear our prayers and do not answer prayer (*Gallup Poll*)

Again, do these verses bear out our experience prayer... verses 14-15, “¹⁴Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him”

Verse 14 is closely connected with verse 13, “¹³ These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.” (Notice the Greek text opens in v.14 with the word, “Now”... or “And” in some translations). Confidence in prayer is founded on the assurance that you have eternal life. If you do not have eternal life, there is no way that you can pray according to the will of God, except to pray that God would save you from your sins. The promise of our text is only for God’s children. The promise is:

(***PRAYER PROMISE: As believers we have confidence that God will answer our prayers, if we pray carefully according to His will.***)

Our text falls into two sections... other words these verses (1 John 5:14-17) can be outline this way:

2 Sections to 1 John 5:14-17:

- (1) **A general principle on prayer (1 John 5:14-15)** - First (1 John 5:14-15), John states the general principle, which has both a promise and a qualification.
- (2) **A specific example of the principle (1 John 5:16-17)** - Then (1 John 5:16-17), he gives a specific example of how we should apply the promise, and again he gives a promise and a qualification. In each section, we have to grapple with a difficult problem.

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLE (1 John 5:14-15)

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLE ON PRAYER = If we ask anything according to God’s will, He hears and grants our request

2 Part to This General Principle:

- (1) **The promise: When we pray, God hears us and we have the requests that we ask of Him** - John has already brought up this idea of having confidence in prayer and of a promise of answered prayer, if we are obedient to God. Look back at that he said in 1 John 3:21-22, “²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. ²² And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His

commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” Here, he repeats it for emphasis. Prayer is not optional for God’s children.

- It is absolutely essential, because if you do not pray, you are not living by faith in God.
- If you do not pray, you are trusting in yourself, which is exactly how the world lives.

Note five things about this prayer promise...

5 Things of Note in this Prayer Promise (in 1 John 5:14-15):

1. **We should have confidence when we approach God in prayer** - Our confidence is never in ourselves, but rather in Christ. After reminding us of our sympathetic high priest, the author of Hebrews states in Hebrews 4:16, *“¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* And here are Paul’s words in Ephesians 3:12, (Christ Jesus our Lord) *“¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.”* Our confidence is never in anything else or in ourselves, but only in Jesus Christ, whose blood gives us access to the very throne of God.
2. **We must come into His presence when we pray** - We have confidence before Him. Verse 14 says, *“¹⁴ Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”* Notice the word *“in Him.”* We are to come into His presence with our prayers. Prayer is not just mumbling through a list or repeating some rote formula. Prayer is coming before the living God, humbling ourselves in His presence. If we have not come before God, we haven’t prayed.
3. **We must come confidently into His presence and ask** – John writes, *“¹⁴ Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”* As James 4:2 pointedly reminds us, *“² ... You do not have because you do not ask.”* He adds verse 3, *“³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”* We need to be sure to ask (not assume), but we need to ask with the proper motives, that our requests would further God’s purpose and glory.
4. **If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us** – Again, John writes in v.14, *“¹⁴ Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”* I’ll deal with the condition in a moment, but for now I’m focusing on the promise that *He hears us*. Since God hears *everything* and even knows the unspoken secrets of our hearts, John means that He *hears us favorably* by coming to our aid. I’ve been at church gatherings where many children were playing as the adults sat eating or talking. Suddenly one mother jumped up and ran for her child. Why? Because she heard his cry. None of the other parents heard the cry, or if they did, they knew that it was not their child. But the mother knows the cry of her own child, and she responds to his need. Our heavenly Father knows the cry of His children. He hears our prayers.

5. **If we know that He hears us, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him** – Notice again John’s words in **verse 15** of our passage... John writes, **“¹⁵And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”** The idea of verse 15 is that we know that we *presently* have whatever we have asked in accord with His will. We may not actually see it for many years, but it’s as good as done. Abraham prayed for a son and God promised to give him that son. But it was 25 years before Abraham held Isaac in his arms. There is much in Scripture about waiting on God. So we would be mistaken to think that God is promising that if we pull the prayer lever, all the goodies instantly come out of the chute. Sometimes in His purpose and wisdom, God delays the answers to our prayers for years. Yet, in another sense, He has already granted the requests. Usually, we should continue praying until the request is actually granted (Luke 18:1-8). At other times (I can’t give you a rule for this), you should stop praying and begin thanking God, even though you haven’t yet received what you were praying for.

(2) **The qualification: We must ask according to God’s will** - Many who do not know God pray, but they are not seeking God’s will in prayer. Rather, they are trying to use Him (whoever they conceive Him to be) to get what they want. But biblical prayer is *not* trying to talk God into giving us what *we* want. We have been saying that each week in . praying, as Jesus instructed (Matt. 6:10), **“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”**

Why we must not pray for our will to be done (rather than God’s will be done)?

1. **You don’t know better than God does** - It would be the height of stupidity to pray for your will to be done as opposed to God’s will. For one thing, it would mean that you know better than God what is best for your life. But He knows everything and He has assured us that He loves us far more than the best earthly father loves his children. So it only makes sense to submit to and pray for His will for your life and for others.
2. **You can’t ask God to lay aside His sovereignty** - Also, to pray for your will against God’s will would be asking God to abdicate His sovereignty over the universe and submit to you as the sovereign! Again, this would be the epitome of stupidity!

But, the difficulty is, *how do we determine what God’s will is* so that we pray in line with it? Again, as we have discovered in our series on prayer we have been in on Sunday morning, God’s will can be found in the Word of God. Know the Word of God and you will discover the will of God. And we are to pray in accordance with the will of God. We’ve look at some of these things recently in the sermon series we have been in. Let me give you a hit at what God’s will is Biblically speaking... there is a depth to it that you must pray to know deeper, fuller, richer, but here is a start.

7 Things that are God’s Will for your Life: (as a Christian/believer)

1. **God’s will is that you be conformed to the image of His Son... *in other words, that you look like Jesus* - **Romans 12:1-2, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the****

mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

2. **God’s will is that you be set-apart for His purposes... *in other words that your life is used to live for Him and not for yourself* – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3, “¹Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; ²for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification...” Sanctification means to be set-apart... we are to be set part for His purpose.**
3. **God’s will is that you/your life glorify Him** – The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” 1 Corinthians 10:31, “³¹ Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Whatever else God’s will is, it is to glorify Him!
4. **God’s will is that we be thankful in everything** - The Bible also says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for *this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*”
5. **God’s will is that you do good ... *in other words that you live your life in such a way that it draws other to Christ*** - In 1 Peter 2:15, Peter writes, “¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—”
6. **God’s will is that believers will abide forever** - In 1 John 2:17, “*And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*”
7. **God’s will is that people be saved** - 2 Peter 3:9, “⁹The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

We must persevere in prayer even when we do not understand God’s will or His ways. That’s the general principle, that if we ask anything according to God’s will, He hears and grants our requests. Then John gives a specific example:

THE SPECIFIC EXAMPLE (1 John 5:16-17)

THE SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF THE PRINCIPLE = We should pray for God to give life to those who are in sin

“¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.” -1 John 5:16-17

Again, John gives a promise and then a qualification.

2 Part to The Specific Example of the Principle:

(1) **The promise:** If we pray for a person who is not committing a sin unto death, God will give life to him – John says in verse 16, “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.*”

- John does *not* say, “If anyone sees his brother sinning, go tell the pastor so he can deal with it.”
- Nor does he say, “If anyone sees his brother sinning, call up all of your friends and tell them about it so that they can pray.” That is a thin spiritual cover for gossip.
- Nor does he say, “If anyone sees his brother sinning, he should shake his head in disgust and ask, ‘How could he do such a thing?’” That is called “judging your brother.”

Rather, he says that if you see a brother in sin, pray for God to give life to hi. While we all are responsible for our own sins, only God can truly deliver us from sin, because only God can impart life. So we’re dependent on God to deliver, but at the same time the sinning brother is responsible to turn from his sin and take the necessary steps not to fall into it again.

Also, before we speak to a brother about his sin, we need to speak to God about the brother. Prayer is essential in the restoration process! But, John’s words set up an interpretive dilemma.

- If this person is a *brother*, then why does he need *life*? Don’t believers already have new life from God?
- This had led interpreters into two camps...

2 Camps:

Camp #1 = Professing Christians - Some say that John is using the word “brother” loosely, to refer to a *professing* Christian, who is not truly saved. They interpret *life* to mean conversion, moving from spiritual death to spiritual life (see 1 John 3:14, “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.*”).

Camp #2 = True/Genuine Christian - But others say that *brother* means a true Christian, and thus they interpret *life* to mean either restoration to fellowship with God or preservation of *physical* life.

To probe further, we need to consider the qualification:

(2) **The qualification:** The promise does not apply to a person committing a sin unto death – Notice verses 16-17 again, “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.*” John makes it clear in **verse 17** that while all unrighteousness is sin, some sins lead to death, whereas other sins are not unto death. John does not forbid praying for someone committing a sin leading to death, but he does not extend the promise that God will grant life to such persons. The difficult question is, *what is a sin unto death?* Apparently, John’s readers knew what he meant (since he doesn’t explain it), but we do not.

There are four main views, but I’ll warn you in advance, no view resolves all the problems (see John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], pp. 191 and James Boice, *The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], pp. 172-175)

4 Main Views of the Sin Unto Death: (*Note that none of the views fully answer all the questions raised by “a sin unto death”*)

1. **View 1 = The “sin unto death” is some terrible sin that God will not forgive** – **Tertullian** taught that some sins, such as murder, idolatry, fraud, denial of Christ, blasphemy, adultery, and fornication could not be committed by true Christians, and that God would not forgive these sins (cited by B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 211). **The Roman Catholic Church** divides sins into venial sins, which can be forgiven, and mortal sins that result in spiritual death. But the Bible makes no such distinctions, and if Tertullian’s list were applied to those in the Bible, David, Solomon, Peter, and Paul would all be in hell! We can reject this view.
2. **View 2 = The “sin unto death” is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit** - We’ve already looked at this one briefly in our introduction. Jesus warned the Pharisees about this sin (Matt. 12:31-32) and said that it could never be forgiven. Jesus was referring to the continued, willful rejection of Him and attributing His works to Satan. This is known as “the unpardonable sin” and is Biblical different from the “sin unto death” in 1 John 5. **John Stott** argues that this “unpardonable sin” or “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is such hardened, willful rejection of known truth that constitutes the sin unto death. He also argues that both groups of sinners here are unbelievers, because God will give *life* to those not committing the sin unto death. This implies that they were spiritually dead. So for those whose sin is not unto death (those not blaspheming against the Holy Spirit), believers may pray and God will save the sinner (give him life). For those blaspheming the Spirit, there is no promise of life in response to our prayers. They have hardened themselves beyond the possibility of salvation. There are several problems with this view. You have to understand *brother* to refer to unbelievers. And, the promise seems to *guarantee* salvation for everyone that you pray for who has not yet committed the unpardonable sin, which doesn’t fit reality. Also, God has saved some pretty hardened unbelievers, such as the apostle Paul, who was a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1:13). Of course, John doesn’t forbid prayer for such, but only limits the promise to the other group.

3. **View 3 = The “sin unto death” refers to apostasy from the faith** - Some say that true believers can lose their salvation. But, this goes against the truth that God keeps all whom He saves, which 1 John 5:18 goes on to affirm (also, John 10:28-29 and many other texts). But the Bible does describe those who make a *profession* of faith and look like believers for a while. But then they turn from the faith, showing that they were not truly born of God (Mark 4:3-20; Acts 8:9-24; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 2 Pet. 2:1, 20-22). The context of 1 John, with the false teachers who had been a part of the fellowship, but who had denied the faith, lends support to this view. Again, John is not saying that we should not pray for such apostates, but he is not extending the promise of God’s giving life to these people. This view has the same problem as the second view, that it guarantees *life* to all that we pray for, as long as they have not gone into total apostasy. And, in some cases, *life* would refer to restoration of fellowship to sinning believers, not to salvation.
4. **View 4 = The “sin unto death” is physical death inflicted on believers who persist in some sin** - In 1 Corinthians 11:30, Paul mentions some who had died because they were partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (see also, Acts 5:1-11). In this view, John is saying that in the ministry of prayer, some Christians have gone too far. God will not turn back His judgment of physical death, and so it is useless to pray for them. This view takes *brother* in the normal sense, but it has to understand *life* and *death* as physical life and death, not spiritual. The problem with it is, how do you know whether the sinning believer is too far gone to pray for his restoration before you see him die? So it is a somewhat useless command. I used to be inclined to this view, but I probably now lean to the third view. Whatever view you take, it is still a difficult promise to apply, because John says that if the person has not sinned unto death, God *will* give life to him. I have not seen the guaranteed results that John promises. I’ve seen many professing Christians go on in their sin without dying physically or being restored to the faith or getting saved, in spite of my prayers. So I have to confess that there is much that I do not understand about prayer. But even if we cannot understand these difficult verses, we should pray for God to bring sinners to repentance and salvation and leave the results to Him. He alone has the power to deliver from sin.

CONCLUSION

In 1921, Thomas Edison, with many inventions to his credit, said, “We don’t know the millionth part of one percent about anything. We don’t know what water is. We don’t know what light is. We don’t know what gravitation is. We don’t know what electricity is. We don’t know what heat is. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use” (cited by Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Nonsense About Prayer* [Moody Press], p. 122).

In the same way, there is much that we do not understand about prayer and we will never

understand in this life. But, we should not let that keep us from using it in accordance with what we do know. We do know that if we are children of God, we have confidence before God that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and will grant our requests. So, let us pray at all times and not lose heart (Luke 18:1)!

5 Ways We Can Learn to Pray Confidently:

- (1) **Approach God with reverence and humility** - If any sin in our lives has distanced us from God, we may lack the confidence to pray. John 9:31 reveals, *“³¹ Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him.”* We should be reverent and humble when approaching our awesome God, confessing our sins and accepting God’s help and forgiveness so we’ll be able to come into his holy presence with a clear mind and an open heart. We can confess directly to God, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). We can also confess to our brothers and sisters in Christ, *“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”* (James 5:16). Once we’ve dealt with any sins we need to confess, we can be confident in approaching God with our prayers. *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God”* 1 John 3:21 assures us.
- (2) **Let go of formulas** - We don’t need to worry about following any formulas when we pray. God will still accept our prayers if we don’t use formal language when we speak or if we don’t sit still with our eyes closed. God will still listen and respond if our thoughts are unorganized or our emotions are raw. God will meet us where we are when we simply pray naturally, and his Spirit will help us express what we’re truly longing to pray. As Romans 8:26 assures us, *“... the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”* We don’t need formulaic methods of praying; all we need is a genuine desire to communicate with God.
- (3) **Try out creative ways of praying** - We can feel free to try praying in new ways that shake up our prayer routines. The creative possibilities for expressing our prayers are unlimited, and include writing out your prayers, expressing your prayers through drawing or art, singing your prayers to God (that’s what the Psalms are), prayer Scripture, and more. We can pray silently anytime and anywhere, such as while driving, walking, or cooking. Prayer walking is a common practice today for many. What’s most important is that we pray in ways that truly get us excited about communicating with God. We have an opportunity to enjoy a wondrous encounter with God every time we pray. Getting excited about what awe-inspiring experiences we may have with God can motivate us to pray. Each time we’re encouraged by God’s wonder during prayer, we can grow more confident about communicating with God.
- (4) **Listen as well as talk** - Prayer should be a two-sided conversation between us and God. So, after we talk to God, we need to listen to what God may have to say to us. God promises in Jeremiah 33:3 says, *“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and*

incomprehensible things you do not know.” By quieting our minds and focusing on hearing from God, we can discern messages that the Holy Spirit sends into our minds during prayer. It can be helpful to keep a prayer journal for recording whatever we sense God saying to us after we pray. The more we pay attention to God’s answers to our prayers, the more confidence we can build, because we can see that God is really responding.

- (5) **Expect big answers from our great God** - We can also develop more confidence as we pray by expanding our prayers. Rather than only praying small prayers (for situations that don’t require much help from God to change) pray big prayers (asking God to intervene in situations and do what only he can do). We can remove limitations from our prayers, keeping in mind that God *“... is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us”* (Ephesians 3:20). Invite God to do something greater than what we can do ourselves, in each situation we present to God in prayer. Dare to ask for big answers from our big God! As Jesus encourages us in *Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”*