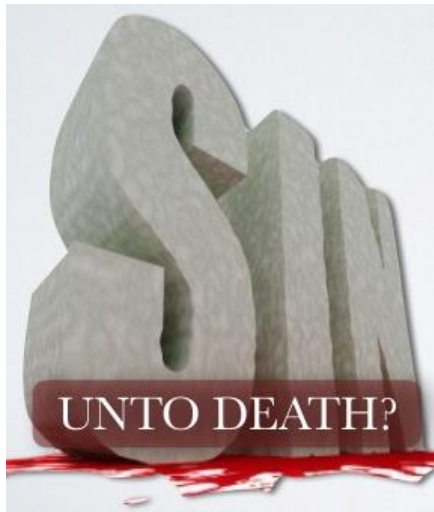


## The Sin Unto Death (1 John 5:16-17)

Pastor Kelly Sensenig

On one occasion Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, the agnostic lecturer of the last century, was announced to give an address on Hell. He declared he would prove conclusively that hell was a wild dream of some scheming theologians who invented it to terrify credulous people. As he was launching into his subject, a half-drunken man arose in the audience and exclaimed, "Make it strong, Bob. There's a lot of us poor fellows depending on you. If you are wrong, we are all lost. So be sure you prove it clear and plain." No amount of reasoning can nullify God's sure Word that there is a hell for unrepentant and unbelieving sinners. No amount of reasoning can nullify God's sure Word that there is a hell for unrepentant and unbelieving sinners. Jesus spoke as plainly of a Hell for the unsaved as He did of a Heaven for those who are saved.



The Bible says that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) which is the eternal reminder that the payment for sinning against God is spiritual death – separation from God in hell for all eternity. The opposite is true for those who receive the free gift of eternal life for Romans 6:23 goes on to say, “but the gift of God is eternal through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

All sin, which stems back to our sin in Adam, brings God’s spiritual death and judgment upon every unbelieving sinner. So, as we study about “the sin unto death” (1 John 5:16) we need to remember that this is a particular sin that leads to the same type of death mentioned in Romans 6:23 which is spiritual death. Some have interpreted the sin unto death to mean physical death and the ultimate discipline of God’s saints for continuing in gross sins against God. However, I believe it can be proven that the context of John refers to the sin unto death as referencing the sin of apostasy and the assurance of God’s impending judgment and doom upon the unrepentant sinner like Robert G. Ingersoll.

1 John 5:16-17

“If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.”

In a sermon, Charles Spurgeon once remarked:

“Beginners in the way of grace, it is a great and solemn truth that every child of God will hold on until the end, but it is an equally solemn truth that many who profess to be the Lord’s are self-deceivers, and will turn out apostates after all.”

Abandoning God and the truth is a very serious matter. When an unsaved person repeatedly rejects and abandons the truth of the Gospel, the claims of Jesus Christ, and the clear revelation of the Bible, they will eventually reach a place where they commit what the Bible calls “a sin unto death.” With a hardened heart and a conscience seared like a hot iron, they totally and forever abandon God and the truth of salvation through Jesus Christ. As a result of repeatedly rejecting the clear light of revelation they were given (Rom. 1:19; 2:12), God abandons them by giving them over to their own choices, which results in people committing this “sin unto death” that John mentions. Remember that God does not give up on people, people give up on God.

What is the meaning of “a sin not unto death” and “a sin unto death” in the epistle of First John? This puzzling passage and verses have caused an interpretive dilemma that needs to be sorted through so we might arrive at the right meaning of this text.

One writer said,

“Frankly, I think passages such as this will only be satisfactorily resolved when we are in the presence of our Lord one day future!”

Kenneth Wuest, the Greek scholar, said this about 1 John 5:16:

“The present writer confesses his utter inability to understand this verse except 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. 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.”

Let me give you a summary of these verses. John is teaching to pray for those who are reachable and redeemable but not to expect answers to our prayers for those who are unreachable and unredeemable due to apostasy and God confirming them in their choice. The context points strongly to spiritual and eternal life (1 John 5:12). If the life that God gives is spiritual and eternal life, then the sin unto death (apostasy) must correspond; it must mean the opposite, that is, spiritual and eternal death of those who profess Christianity but who are not possessors of salvation in Jesus Christ. John calls them “antichrists” (1 John 2:22; 2 John 7).

Let’s try and untie the knot of this passage. We begin with something very easy to understand.

➤ **Why should we pray?**

1 John 5:14-15

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us (*implying that God accepts our prayers and will honor them which align with His will*): And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

John begins by encouraging God’s saints to pray. We have the privilege of going to God in prayer and getting answers to our prayers. A believer’s prayer that is in harmony with God’s divine will and the Scriptures will always be answered. Since we know that God hears and honors requests in accord with His will, we know that we will be granted the requests offered to Him in prayer. This is the reason we pray (Luke 11:9; James 4:3).

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 a similar way, there is much that we do not understand about prayer in this life. But we should not let that keep us from using it in accordance with what we do

know and understand about the ministry of prayer. We do know that if we are children of God, we can 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).

The encouragement on answered prayer sets the background for the next verses in John's epistle (1 John 5:18-19) which have been understood in various ways. Here is the bottom line. Either we view these verses in the context of apostasy and spiritual death or as pertaining to true Christianity and physical death via God's chastisement. In my opinion, it seems best to place what John says about prayer and the sin unto death in the greater context of apostasy and spiritual death versus spiritual life as he repeatedly mentions in his epistle (1 John 2:25; 3:15; 5:11-13, 20). John also speaks about spiritual new life (rebirth) versus nonbirth and remaining in the realm of spiritual death (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 14, 18). To be consistent with John's thinking throughout his epistle, we should interpret the "sin unto death" and the "sin not unto death" as references to spiritual life and death.

#### ➤ **When should we pray?**

George Muller prayed confidently for the salvation of specific individuals. Many were saved under his ministry. But how can we know that God might save certain people and not save others? When should we pray for the salvation of the lost? John gives us this answer.

Allow me to give you a summary of 1 John 5:16:

**"If any man see his brother** *(a professing but not a genuine brother as in 1 John 2:9-11; 1 John 3:10-15; 4:20-21)* **sin a sin which is not unto death** *(a sin which can be forgiven, unlike the apostate's sin, since the apostate is past feeling and destined for wrath, judgment, and spiritual separation from God),* **he shall ask, and he (God) shall give him (the petitioner) life for them** *(pray with the expectation, confidence, and hope, as in 1 John 5:15, that God will grant forgiveness and eternal life for those who have not apostatized to the point where God has turned them over to their sinful degradation – Rom. 1:26, 28)* **that sin not unto death"** *(restating that there is plenty of hope and confidence for the salvation of an individual that sins, as in 1 John 5:11-13, if they have not committed the sin of full-blown and final apostasy, a sin which guarantees a person's spiritual death, damnation, and separation from God forever).*

2 Peter 2:1-3 is one example of a person's confirmed judgment:

**"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying (full-blown apostasy - a total denial and abandonment of Christ and His saving work) the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction (the assurance of their future judgment from God's perspective). And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not"** (the confidence that these apostates will be eternally judged for their utter abandonment of Christ and truth).

I notice several things when beginning my exegesis of 1 John 5:16-17. First, it's interesting that this "sin not unto death" and the "sin unto death" (1 John 5:16-17) was obviously something that could be observed by the brethren. They understood that certain types of sins which do not involve apostasy would not fall under the category of "a sin unto death" (1 John 5:17) which references the various sins associated with apostasy that are Christological (dealing with Christ's person and work – 1 John 2:22-23; 4:2-3; 2 John 7) and soteriological (dealing with salvation and the new birth – 1 John 4:7; 5:1, 11-13) in nature, along with the fruit of rebellion that stems from doctrinal departure (1 John 2:29; 3:6-10, 15; 5:18).

Second, I can observe that the kind of death and life John is taking about is spiritual in nature – not physical. The immediate context demands this interpretation.

1 John 5:12-13

"He that hath the Son hath life (spiritual life); *and* he that hath not the Son of God hath not life (spiritual death). These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

Roy Lanier wrote:

"The 'sin unto death' refers to spiritual death. Since Christ is the source of eternal life in this context and this life is given in answer to the prayers for one sinning a sin not unto death, it follows this death must be eternal death. This "death' is the opposite of whatever the 'life' in the passage is."

Third, I can also observe that we should not necessarily view “brother” in the normal sense of referencing a genuine Christian since John has repeatedly spoken about those who identify themselves as a “brother” but who are not truly saved (1 John 2:9-11; 1 John 3:10-15; 4:20-21). John is using the word “brother” (1 John 5:16) loosely and is referencing only a professing believer. This brother is part of the “if we say” crowd (1 John 1:8, 10) which tried to promote their alleged Christianity without walking in the light of God’s holiness and confession. The real distinction in 1 John 5:16–17 is the same distinction we have observed all along in the epistle of 1 John. It is between the saved and unsaved, those who possess spiritual life (rebirth) and those who do not.

The very next verse after the “sin unto death” statement says, “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not (does not habitually practice sin); but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not” (1 John 5:18). In other words, John is viewing the “sin unto death” through the lens of a non-believer who is not born again whereas the person who is truly born again will not apostatize and continually practice (habitually) a lifestyle of rebellion and wickedness against God like the apostate who commits “a sin unto death.”

Fourth, since John is speaking about the apostasy of unbelievers, the “sin not unto death” and “sin unto death” (1 John 5:16-17) are referencing prayers that revolve around deliverance from spiritual death - not deliverance from physical death. In other words, if a person has not committed full-blown apostasy and is not confirmed in his unbelief, then we must keep praying for that person for he has not crossed the line and committed the sin of apostasy which leads to spiritual death and separation from God (“he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them” – vs. 16). However, if a person has committed apostasy which is the “sin unto death” (vs. 17), then the efficacy or value of one’s prayer (for spiritual deliverance) is in question because of God confirming this individual in his sin of unbelief and spiritual death. In other words, the person moves outside the realm of salvation and deliverance.

So, the sin which can potentially lead to life (spiritual life or regeneration) is forgivable and can result in a person’s salvation and new birth, but the sin which is not forgivable, due to apostasy and an individual’s confirmed unbelief, leads to death (spiritual separation from God in Hell). In this context of 1 John and apostasy, only an unbeliever can commit what is called “a sin unto death” which results in

God confirming this person to an eternal destiny of separation and judgment away from His presence.

Those who view the “brother” as someone who is truly born again but who might lose his physical life under God’s discipline have a problem. How do we know whether the sinning believer is too far gone to keep praying for his restoration? How can we possibly know when he crosses over from “a sin not unto death” to “a sin unto death?” How can we know when he passes over the line from a sin that is not mortal to a sin that will result in his physical death? The fact of the matter is this, we could never know when to stop praying for a sinning saint until we actually see him dead! This is because we are not omniscient. We are not God and we certainly don’t know the timing of one’s physical death since this is in God’s hand (Ps. 39:4; Isa. 46:10; John 231:22).

In addition, no one could really know when to start or stop praying since true believers do not forever abandon God, apostatize, live in total rebellion against Him (1 John 3:8-10; 5:18; Heb. 3:6, 14), and openly deny and trample underfoot the person and work of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:29, 39). Although God may on rare occasions severely discipline His children and remove them from earth prematurely (1 Cor. 11:30) it is not due to their total apostasy and abandonment of God.

Yes, there is no question that prayer is associated with erring/sinners brethren and can sometimes save them from God’s disciplinary hand of physical death (James 5:16-20). However, John is not dealing with this in his epistle since true believers cannot apostatize in the sense of forever abandoning God, repudiating the Bible and the truth, and keep living without any restraints. Nor is there any specific instruction given when or when not to pray for erring brethren. We must simply keep praying in hope that they will repent and return to their first works (Rev. 2:5).

I used to be inclined to this view which basically says to pray for the spiritual restoration of a believer, so God does not prematurely take the physical life of His own saint and remove them from earth to Heaven. However, it seems better to understand the “sin unto death” as referring to apostasy, when an unsaved person comes to the place where he repudiates Christ, Christianity, and the Gospel, and comes to a point where prayer cannot overturn God’s death sentence upon this individual. This brings us to our next question which seems to further clarify what is in John’s mind.

➤ **When should we stop praying?**

1 John 5:16b- 17 goes on to say:

**“There is a sin unto death** (*apostasy is a sin which leads to death or results in spiritual separation from God’s presence in Hell*): **I do not say that he** (*the petitioner*) **shall pray for it** (*John is talking about praying for the person’s life, new birth, or salvation, as stated in verse 16, which means one should not pray or intercede for that person who will experience this specific sin of spiritual death, one should not possess the hope that God will*

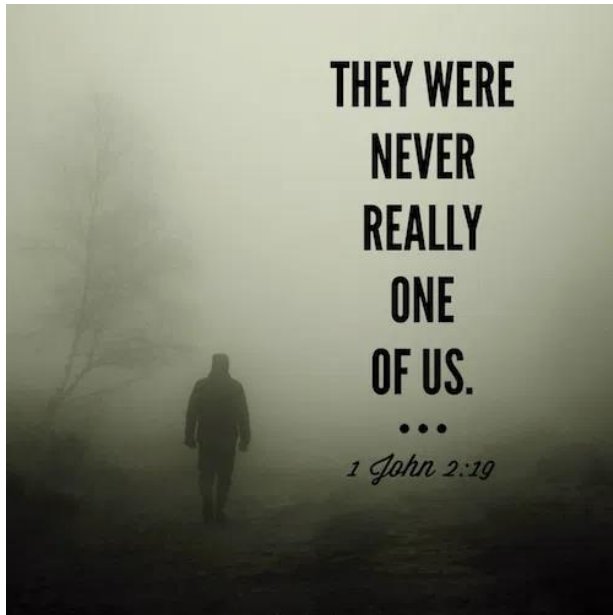


*save and give this individual eternal life, who has apostatized beyond reach and whose sin will lead to spiritual death*). **All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death**” (*to encourage us to pray, we must remember that not every sin consigns a person to eternal death or separation from God, like the sin of apostasy, since most sins can be forgiven and result in a person’s salvation and eternal life*).

Some expositors reason that John is teaching that we should not ask God to bring about the death of a person (1 John 5:17). But this interpretation seems to miss the previous and obvious point of what John has just talked about which was asking for the salvation or deliverance of an individual who has committed the sin unto death. The “it” (praying about the salvation of someone who has committed a sin unto death – 1 John 5:17) does not have reference to praying for the death of the person, but the spiritual life and new birth of the person, as John looks back to his previous statement about praying for deliverance (“ask, and he shall give him life for them” - vs. 16). The emphasis is on praying for life and not asking for the individual’s death. Unlike the first person who was still in a savable position, a Christian should not necessarily request pardon for this second individual who has apostatized (vs. 17), who is under the anathema of God (Gal. 1:8), and whose sin will lead to their ultimate death and doom in Hell (“a sin unto death”).

Let’s break down the meaning of this verse. The sin leading to death is the sin of apostasy which John mentioned earlier.





1 John 2:19

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

Vance Havner once said:

“The temple of truth has never suffered so much from woodpeckers on the outside as from termites within.”

These were the *professors* of salvation but not the *possessors* of it. They who went along for a while professing to be born of God, who hear the word and immediately with joy receive it, yet they have no root in themselves, but only endure for a while and then fall away (Matt 13:20). They are professors of the experience of salvation, but in the end, they prove that they were never born of God. The “sin unto death” apostasy can only be committed by unbelievers (Heb. 10:38-39; 2 Pet. 2:1, 19-21). Once again, Peter reminds us that they are “even denying the Lord that bought them, and being upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:2) which is another way of saying “a sin unto death” (1 John 5:16).

The next verses in 1 John 5:18-20 indicate that apostasy is in view – one who continues in willful and sinful rebellion against God and the claims of Jesus Christ. This is a sin that is often presented as defecting from the church and repudiating the Gospel, after a previous profession of faith in Christ and the Gospel message. Law calls it “the sin of those who by deliberate and avowed action severed themselves from Christ and from the Christian community.”

2 Peter 2:19-22 declares:

“**While they** (*the apostates*) **promise them** (*these newly saved converts*) **liberty** (*a false type of liberty or freedom*), **they themselves** (*the apostate teachers*) **are the servants of corruption** (*slaves to sin*): **for of whom** (or by what or whatever) **a man is overcome** (*a reference to the apostates themselves*), **of the same is he brought**

**in bondage (to sin). For if after they (the apostates themselves – looking back to verse 19 – “they”) have escaped the pollutions of the world (through reformation – not regeneration) through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (a superficial knowledge about Jesus Christ, the Gospel and His delivering power, without embracing its message and receiving the new life and delivering power that Christ wants to give them), they are again entangled therein, and overcome (by their sin, lustful living, and reckless abandonment), the latter end is worse with them than the beginning” (meaning they will receive greater damnation and judgment for rejecting the light of revelation they had).**

The false teachers (apostates) had thrown away their chance for deliverance by utterly rejecting the Gospel message and as a result become entangled and overcome again by the defilements of the world.

In the context of 1 John, the sin leading to death includes a persistent, willful rejection of orthodoxy as it relates to Christ’s incarnation, sinless life, and sacrificial death on the cross. Some who attached themselves with Christianity were guilty of the sin of apostasy. In this case, praying for their salvation or spiritual deliverance from apostasy and Hell (deliverance from their sin unto death) was not recommended, since these people were under the irrevocable judgment of God’s hand. John states: “I do not say that he shall pray for it” (the salvation of the apostates - 1 John 5:16) or pray about it, concerning it, on behalf of it, or on account of it. John is saying that because of this person’s spiritual state of death and apostasy, we should not think that praying for him will make a difference, since he has so flagrantly turned aside from God’s truth and is bound to spiritual deception.

Matthew Henry clarifies the meaning of this statement:

“Perhaps the apostle’s expression, I do not say, He shall pray for it, may intend no more than, ‘I have no promise for you in that case; no foundation for the prayer of faith.’”

Another older writer, Matthew Poole, also writes:

“I do not give that encouragement to pray for such, with that hope and expectation of success, as for others; though he doth not simply forbid praying for them neither.”

Sam Gordon remarks:

“The unambiguous reference in this verse is to all those who have become apostate in their thinking and theology; John is singling out those who have walked out on the community of God’s people and openly denied the doctrines of salvation. No matter what they may once had professed to believe, they have put themselves beyond the reach of the church’s prayers.”

In other words, when a person has apostatized and is beyond the hope of redemption because of the callousness of his own heart, there is no guarantee that our prayers will be answered regarding this person’s salvation. John does not positively forbid intercession for those whose sin is to death - he “merely abstains from commanding it” (Brooke, 147). This is because when a person crosses the line and has become unredeemable, due to apostasy, our prayers for his salvation will not be answered. So, Paul is not discouraging us from praying for these people but is not giving us assurance or hope when it comes to praying for the salvation of those who appear to be as “spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots” (Jude 12).

We must remember that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). However, this does not mean that God cannot confirm a person in their unrepentant choice, way of life, and hardened heart as He did Pharaoh (Ex. 8:32). Sometimes a situation has reached the point that the time for prayer has passed (Isa. 1:15; 16:12) as Abraham discovered when he pled for Sodom (Gen. 18:23–32). Jesus prayed before He chose Judas (Luke 6:12) and later even washed his feet, but the time came when He had to let him go his own way (John 13:27). Jude likens those who have committed this “sin unto death” (apostasy) as “Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 1:13). In other words, they were confirmed to die the sinner’s death without any hope of salvation. They had a reservation in Hell waiting for them! They had sinned away the day of grace. Apostasy is the sin that leads to death.

Steven Cole speaks of the view of apostasy in 1 John 5:16-17:

“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.”

Faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins will lead to escaping eternal death and damnation. But when a person persists in his refusal to embrace Christ as the sinless, incarnate, and crucified Son of God, it will lead to his eternal death. Adamant resistance to the Holy Spirit’s call of salvation (Acts 7:51) eventually results in the confirmation of a person’s soul to God’s eternal wrath (Matt. 12:31–32). Actually, no sin (here apostasy) is forgivable when one rejects the only way to forgiveness.

Michael Eaton makes this point:

“It is a ‘sin unto death’ only because it refuses to have Jesus, who is the way of forgiveness. It is a sin no Christian has committed or ever can commit. In any case, no-one need feel alarmed. No sin is unforgivable except sinning against the means of forgiveness! John’s point is: they don’t have to feel obliged to rescue the gnostics ...”

William Hendriksen also writes:

“When a man has become hardened, so that he has made up his mind not to pay any attention to the promptings of the Spirit, not even to listen to his pleading and warning voice, he has placed himself on the road that leads to perdition. He has sinned the sin ‘unto death.’”

Those who commit this “sin unto death” (1 John 5:16) have turned their backs on God and God is left with no alternative but to turn His face away from them. They have become abandoned by God and left to themselves. Therefore, John does not encourage us to pray for these types of people with the hope of seeing their lives changed. Again, John does not command us to never pray for these individuals but is opening our understanding to the reality that certain people have utterly abandoned God and their conscience is seared like a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2). According to John, there is no need to target these people in prayer for they have removed themselves outside the orbit of prayer. There may be rare occasions when we

might need to remove an unsaved person from our prayer list who has totally abandoned God and turn them over to God's eternal plan and purpose (Eph. 1:11).

Let's give some examples of those who can be perceived to commit "a sin unto death" as mentioned in 1 John 5:16.

Historically, Arius argued that Jesus was not "of the same essence" as the Father but was rather "of similar essence." Arius described his position in this manner: "The Father existed before the Son. There was a time when the Son did not exist. Therefore, the Son was created by the Father. Therefore, although the Son was the highest of all creatures, he was not of the essence of God." This is apostasy and Arius was the leader of the cults we see today that reject the deity of Christ such as the Jehovah Witnesses who are in one sense the spiritual children of Arius. Arius was very clever and did his best to get the people on his side, even going so far as to compose little songs that taught his theology, which he tried to teach to everyone who would listen.

There is a 2010 study by Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola called "Preachers Who Are Not Believers." Dennett and LaScola's work chronicles five different preachers who over time were presented with and accepted heretical teachings about Christianity and now have completely fallen away from the faith. These pastors are either pantheists or secret atheists. One of the most disturbing truths highlighted in the study is that these preachers maintain their position as pastors of Christian churches with their congregations being unaware of their leader's true spiritual state. They are apostates who have rejected the orthodox teachings of the Bible.

Those who categorically and dogmatically reject the clear teachings of the Bible regarding the person and work of Christ, His death and resurrection, and who mock Christianity and Christ may very well be candidates for the sin unto death. There comes a time when the Church can sense a person's utter abandonment to God's truth as found in Jesus Christ. People who attack the deity of Christ, reject the resurrection of Christ, and mock the Virgin Birth and Second Coming of Christ are candidates for the sin unto death.

Bill Nye, a leading atheist and evolutionist in today's world of delusion was asked if he feared God. His answer: "Not nearly as much as I am scared of the Japanese

Giant Hornet, which is bigger than your thumb, can fly at 25mph and has the added advantage of actually existing.”

This answer shows how atheists put God out of their minds, so they don't have to face Him in judgment. Howbeit, someday they will experience God's judgment (Heb. 9:27). Many (not all) atheists are candidates who are setting themselves up for the sin unto death.

There seems to be a connection between deliberate rebellion in the Old Testament, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels, and apostasy in the book of Hebrews and John's epistles. The connection is that these sins lie outside the normal provision for forgiveness. For this reason, John says, "I do not say that he shall pray for it" (1 John 5:16), which means John does not advise that we pray and petition God about the person's forgiveness and salvation, as in the previous case where the person could still be saved ("he shall ask, and he shall give him life" - vs. 16). The apostate individual cannot be saved since "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance" (Heb. 6:6). Apparently, when an apostate has crossed the line because of his own hardness of heart, and is headed toward Hell, there is no point in praying for his salvation. We must leave the situation in God's hands alone.

Jeremiah 7:16 gives us another example of this:

"Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee."

Again, the text says, "I do not say that he shall pray for it" (the salvation of the apostate). Sometimes we sense we should no longer pray for a person's spiritual deliverance or salvation who has seemingly been given a death sentence by God without any ray of hope of salvation. There are rare times we can sense that a person is beyond hope because of the hardness and callousness of his heart toward the Gospel and claims of Jesus Christ. God is willing (2 Pet. 3:9) but they are not willing (John 5:40).

Marshall reminds us:

"The early church took much more seriously than we do the possibility that a person may sin beyond hope of redemption."

“There is a time, we know not when,  
There is a place, we know not where,  
That seals the destiny of men  
For glory or despair.”

Only God can ultimately know the exact time when He abandons people to the sinful course of their lives, but believers can also possess a God-given sense that a person has also reached the point of no return. This is why John reminded his readers that there was “a sin unto death.” They were to know about this type of sin (apostasy), identify it when necessary, possessing the knowledge that it might be too late to pray for some apostates who have passed the line of no return. But once again, John is not absolutely forbidding prayer for one engaged in the sin of apostasy.

The language of the phrase indicates simply that he cannot guarantee that prayer offered for any apostate will have the same effect typical of believing prayer which is promised in 1 John 5:15-16. Sometimes it is too late to pray! God revealed to Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed with fire. Abraham had implored God six times and begged him to spare the cities. On the sixth time it was too late to pray! Although God is merciful, He is also just. He doesn't enjoy destroying the wicked (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11). As with Sodom, He patiently waits for people to repent (2 Peter 3:9), but His patience with rebellious man will not last forever. When man persists in rebellion his foolish heart becomes darkened (Rom. 1:21) resulting in the confirmation of God's judgment upon his unbelief and apostasy.

John in this passage seems to parallel what Jesus said regarding casting pearls before swine.



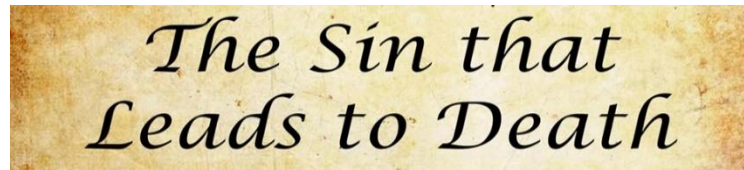
Jesus taught in Matthew 7:6:

“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.”

John is saying something similar. He is teaching that the ongoing attempt to minister to those who are past feeling, whether by witnessing to them, teaching them the Word, or praying for them, seems to be without much purpose. This is because God cannot grant forgiveness to those who have apostatized (the hogs and dogs – 2 Pet. 2:22) and whose attitude toward Christ and the Gospel has been forever desensitized. If someone has no appetite for repentance, Christ’s sacrifice cannot avail for them (Heb. 10:26-31). Truly, this last state is worse than the first (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Sam Gordon again remarks:

“The inference is *‘the sin that leads to death’* is the sin that ultimately excludes the sinner from the life of God. It can be no



other than a blatant denial of that saving truth. The sin that leads to death does so because, by its intrinsic nature, it rejects the only means by which sin may be forgiven. It says a doggedly defiant ‘no’ to the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God. It spurns God’s offer of love and mercy in the gospel of Christ. It walks away from an opportunity to be reconciled to God.”

David Jackman correctly observes:

“It is not the magnitude of the sin that prevents its pardon, as though there existed this one sin for which Christ’s sacrifice was insufficient. Rather, it is the attitude and disposition of the sinner that excludes the possibility of forgiveness.”

Within the context of 1 John, and when gathering together all the Biblical evidence, John seems to suggest that the sin unto death is the sin of apostasy or total abandonment of God and the truth.

Edmond Hiebert explains the sin unto death in this manner:

“In view of what John has said about the false teachers (2:18–23; 4:1–3; 5:10), it is clear that he has in view the persistent attitude of those who separate from the true Church and pervert or reject the apostolic message of redemption in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. In thus persistently rejecting the divine provision for forgiveness, they commit themselves to a spiritual disposition and course of conduct which can only be described as “sin unto death.” Characterized by full and



deliberate unbelief in the incarnate Redeemer, they are fatally guilty of sinning against the remedy.”

Lenski, the old Lutheran expositor, also comments in this way:

“Sin unto death,’ is that sinning which involves the closing of the door to the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son (1:7). It is the sin which itself denies the Son of God (2:22) and all the sinning that goes with this denial. John has added the main features. One is making God a liar (1:8, 10), claiming that one has no sin; another is stated in 1:6, lyingly claiming fellowship with God while repudiating his Word.”

In the midst of all the gloom and doom of apostasy and the sin unto death, John reiterates that “All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death” (1 John 5:17). He does this to remind his Christian readers that for all sinners and sins, other than the sin and state of confirmed apostasy against Christ and His way of salvation, there is the glorious prospect of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life! For most people, there is “a sin not unto death” since the majority of people are not “past feeling” and “past hope” when it comes to salvation. They are all spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-2) but still in a savable position, not being overridden with apostasy and given up to their vile affections and damnable heresies.

Allow me at this point to interact with a popular view of this passage. As mentioned previously, these verses are sometimes understood in the framework of Christians persisting in some specific sin and for this reason God prematurely removing them from earth to Heaven (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 5:5; 11:30), or giving them a dishonorable discharge, sending them on to glory ahead of time. But this interpretation seems unlikely.

The Moody Bible Commentary gives this inciteful summary:

“Verse 16 is often explained as referring to a real Christian persisting in some serious sin that results in his premature, physical death. While possible, this view is unlikely for the following reasons. First, this letter presents the genuine believer as incapable of persistent sin (3:6, 9–10; 5:18). Second, in response to the intercessor’s prayer God will give the persistent sinner life (Gk. *zoe* meaning the new, spiritual life divinely imparted to the unbeliever at conversion). If the brother is a Christian, he already has this life; it cannot be given to him again. And third, the death in view is best interpreted by its opposite, namely life; if this life is eternal life, then the death must in like manner be eternal death, not physical death.”

The difficulty with the view of physical death and life is that it does not fit with John's use of life/death terminology within the greater and immediate context of the epistle (1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:14-15; 5:11-12). Also, the distinction between a sin unto death and a sin not unto death is one which John's readers were expected to recognize. Once again, if he were referring to the timing of a Christian's physical death due to sin, his readers, along with each one of us today, would have no way to recognize this impending death until after the fact. Nowhere in God's Word do we find references that believers can know when God is going to remove unbelievers from earth and take them to Heaven.

John does not seem to be thinking of a sin that leads to physical death in this context and these verses (1 John 5:12-18) but the sin of apostasy and abandoning God and the truth that ultimately leads to spiritual death and separation from God in Hell. The sin that ends in ultimate spiritual death includes the act of deliberately denying that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that He came to earth as the Godman to die on a cross for us, that He rose from the dead, and a confirmed choice to reject Christ as one's personal Savior.

One study Bible summarizes in this way:

"In the context of this letter directed against Gnostic teaching, which denied the incarnation and threw off all moral restraints, it is probable that the 'sin that leads to death' refers to the Gnostics' adamant and persistent denial of the truth and to their shameless immorality. This kind of unrepentant sin leads to spiritual death."

➤ **Why are some prayers not answered?**

1 John 5:18-19

**"We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not** (*does not practice sin habitually and continually like the apostate*); **but he that is begotten of God** (*truly born again possessing God's divine nature and life*) **keepeth himself** (*through the begotten One - God's power*), **and that wicked one** (*Satan*) **toucheth him not** (*cannot fully grasp and hold on to the believer since he has been freed from Satan's dominion and power as in 1 John 2:13*). **And we** (*Christians*) **know that we are of God** (*we are His true children*), **and the whole world** (*of unbelievers like the apostates who abandon God and Christianity*) **lieth in wickedness."**

John is teaching that those who are born again Christians do not sin like the apostates (1 John 5:16) who are bound to corruption and sin in such a way that they have abandoned God and His truth forever (2 Pet. 2:1). Praying for those who remain in a state of being “past feeling” (Eph. 4:19) and have drifted into the realm of full-blown, Christ-rejecting apostasy will not bring about the result of their salvation. This is because there is a time when apostates cross the line of no return. This is why John concluded earlier: “I do not say that he shall pray for it” (1 John 5:17) which refers again to praying about a person’s deliverance or salvation from their “sin unto death.” In this case, praying for their deliverance would not be in accordance with God’s will.

1 John 5:15

“And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

Roy Lanier correctly states:

“Therefore, the Christian, having no assurance his prayers for eternal life for this person will be heard, will refrain from such requests. They are not according to the expressed will of God.”

In short, there comes a time when we might sense that an unsaved person is beyond God’s saving grace because of the hardness of his heart toward the things of God. God confirms unsaved people in their choices (Rom. 1:24, 26) and sometimes those choices are very apparent to God’s people. As a result, we might come to the place where we don’t specifically pray for their salvation but pray in a general way, placing them in God’s hands and committing them to God’s greater purposes (Eph. 1:11).

Of course, as previously mentioned, we cannot possibly know the exact time when the unsaved individual has crossed the line of God’s patience for God has forewarned that “My spirit will not always strive with man” (Gen. 6:3). There comes a time when God abandons a person to their hopeless condition and darkened state, and when this becomes apparent to the discerning believer, he can stop praying for that person’s salvation. A Christian will sense that a person has committed “a sin unto death.” From our Christian perspective and through the mysterious impartation of God’s wisdom, we sometimes stop praying for an

atheistic, God-defying, hell-bent sinner who has repeatedly repudiated God, Jesus Christ, salvation, and the truth of the Bible and Christianity.

There comes a time when we shut down discourse and prayer. We can sense a person has totally abandoned God and His way of salvation forever. Sadly, they will be lost forever! To continually batter them with truth and prayer becomes nothing more than an opportunity for them to strike back with mockery, blasphemy, and more attacks on Christ and Christianity. Furthermore, it adds to their greater damnation or judgment (Luke 10:13-15).

Jesus said in Luke 9:5:

“And whosoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them.”

There comes a time when we must shake off the dust and let people go in their confirmed pathway of lostness and callousness, understanding that God confirms people in their choices and then consigns them to judgment.



Matthew 23:33

“Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”

When people repeatedly repudiate the claims of Jesus Christ and turn them into mockery and contempt, disgracing God and the way of truth, we sometimes must stop praying and declaring the truth to them and leave unsaved and unregenerate people in God’s hands who have sinned away the day of grace.

John W. Peterson captures the seriousness and sense of what John is teaching.

“Someday you’ll hear God’s Final Call to you  
To take his offer of salvation true-  
This could be it my friend if you but knew-  
God’s Final Call, God’s Final Call.  
How can you live another day in sin,  
Thinking some day with Christ you will begin?  
O will you hear above the world’s loud din-  
God’s Final Call, God’s Final Call.

If you reject God's final call of grace,  
You'll have no chance your footsteps to retrace.  
All hope will then be gone and doom you'll face.  
O hear his call! God's final call."

Friend, if this is your final call and you reject it, then you are doomed to Hell. Will you respond to the promptings of God upon your heart today and put your faith in the saving grace of God's Son? Now is the day of salvation!

Jesus said in In John 3:19:

"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

In John 5:40, Jesus concluded:

"And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."

The point of application is clear. When you persist in your stubbornness and unbelief, you cannot be saved and have the hope of eternal life in Heaven. There is a warning extended to you today. Don't refuse God's call of salvation upon your heart. In simple faith, believe in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, to provide you with the forgiveness of all your sins and give you eternal life. If you want to avoid "the sin unto death" then express faith in Christ to be your Savior, so you might receive the free gift of eternal life.

Romans 6:23

"For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."