

Reading: 1 John 5:13-21

Theme: Reality Check!

Last week in v14-15 we looked at the **3rd certainty believers have – God answers prayer** and we saw the privilege of prayer and the confidence we can have in going to our heavenly Father in prayer, as we are able to bring the biggest and smallest of matters to Him. This evening we begin the **4th certainty – Christians Do Not Habitually Practice Sin (v16-19)**. As much as I would like to jump to these verses deal with their comforting matters, I find there is a rather high and very prickly fence in the way - v16-17! These verses have caused not only commentators and multitudes of preachers many problems, but also troubled, bothered, concerned and caused worry to many, many believers through the ages. Until I started preparing these verses in detail, I thought I understood them!

John wrote so believers could know they have eternal life (v13). Then he goes and puts v16 - words that have caused many sensitive believers to question if they have done what is called “*the unpardonable sin*” or “*the unforgivable sin*”, if they, even as a believer, has sinned in such a way as to forfeit their salvation, to be lost and in a sense doubly damned. We will be looking at things that will challenge us, cause us to think. I present these matters to you not as the final definitive authority, but as my current, careful considered and prayerful understanding in the light of God’s word. Let’s note 3 things:

1. The Context.

Let’s stand back a bit, one step back. John has been writing of confidence in God answering prayer. What a real encouragement and privilege to go to God in prayer - what a friend we have in Jesus! Personally, we can go to God cast all our care on Him, can pray and know He hears and answers prayer for the needs in our lives. Now take a 2nd step back and see that John has written of our fellowship with God **and** with our brothers and sisters. Note it, remember it,

work it out in our love and relationships, as our attention has been drawn to this wonderful privilege of prayer for others - the immediate context.

Prayer is not exclusively for our needs, our desires and our concerns alone. Prayer is to be inclusive of the family - not merely our physical family, but the church family, other believers. The Lord's prayer does not begin with "*My Father*", but "*Our Father*". Prayer is to be inclusive and mindful of our brothers and sisters in the local family, their wellbeing i.e. this church and also brothers and sisters in other churches and in other parts of the world.

Our relationship with God is not only to be worked out on the vertical, but also on the horizontal - as we see in Luke 10:27 "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*"; and, '*Love your neighbour as yourself.*'" We are to pray for one another, for God's blessing and dealing with each one of us. The theory is fine, but do pray for one another? We have the privilege to pray regularly systematically for all who regularly come along to the church, but do we? We can use the members list to pray for one another. It means we need to get to know people and what we can pray for concerning them. We need to be ready to seriously take up the prayer ministry for one another and they for us.

It is in the context of the fellowship of prayer that John writes of praying for a "brother" who we see sin - literally it says "*sinning sin*". What do we do about such? Go and gossip it? No. Report it to the church officers? Not necessarily. Do we go to our heavenly Father in prayer? YES! We are not to condemn, slander, accuse and definitely not gossip, but we are to pray - pray we will not be "sinning sin" either, but that we will be given grace to stand and pray that our fellow believer will not be ensnared in such "sinning sin", that they will not bring public disgrace to God's honour, cause and

Name, that their Christian life and witness will not be shipwrecked that they will be restored and if the church officers have to discipline, correct such a one, that patience, wisdom, love, gentleness and biblical firmness will be given them.

Having said that, realise it is the easier part, but now we see:

2. The Central Issue.

What is “*a sin that does not lead to death*” and “*a sin that leads to death*”? This is what you probably want clear and concise answer to - so do I! This is the central the big issue and it is set in the context of prayer, in the wider context of John wanting and writing in order that believers would know they have eternal life, would work it out in love to their brothers and sisters, especially in praying for them. It is right we remind ourselves not only of those matters, but also of other biblical principles and basic truths and so we need to take a few steps back again.

All people sin - men and women, boys and girls, believers and unbelievers sin. Those who are not believers sin as a natural part of the outworking of their sinful nature, they do so habitually, but they are still in the guilt, power and grip of this sin and sins, also its condemnation and are helpless to escape it. Believers have been forgiven the guilt and condemnation of their sin, have new natures in Christ and yet they continue to do sin. There is no such thing sinless perfection here on earth, believers fall into sin too, but they do not habitually practice sin. It is not their routine, unthinking, habitual and constant way of life. Their sins’ guilt and condemnation is removed through faith in the Lord Jesus. Although they sin, they remain justified. Yes, they need to confess, repent and forsake sin to maintain their relationship with God and His people. Believers do “acts” of sin and do not habitually go on in sin.

The wages of sin is death - physical death will occur to us all, whether believers or not - unless the Lord Jesus returns, but if a person has not received eternal life by trusting the Lord Jesus, there is also an eternal spiritual death - hell. The question debated is “*Does John mean physical death or eternal death here?*” In both OT and NT some incurred the punishment of physical death as a result of their sin e.g. Aaron’s sons - Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 11:1-3) or Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 9:1-10). Most commentators argue it refers to eternal spiritual death – eternally serious!

Believers have eternal life and have it for ever - this begins at the moment of their new birth, their justification by faith alone through God’s grace. Believers cannot be “unjustified” or “un-regenerated” – once we are alive in Christ, we are alive forever and we cannot lose our salvation. I say that and want to emphasise it because v16 has caused sensitive, concerned, troubled believers much worry - that they have sinned the unpardonable sin unto spiritual death, have lost their salvation, cannot regain it and are damned.

John has written to these believers to allow them to test those who were troubling them, also to use some of the same tests to see the evidences of spiritual life in themselves and so be encouraged. Remember there were those false teachers about, who would claim great things and experiences, but were not living correctly, not obeying God’s revealed word, who hated Christians, who were anti-Christ and taught wrong things about who He is and what He had done. Sadly, such ones were in the church and had even made professions of faith, had claimed a conversion experience, claimed great experiences of God and were at one time called “*brothers and sisters*” in the church. These ones had heard of Jesus, claimed to be of Him, but had now turned their backs on Him and the way of salvation they once professed, but claimed they knew, different revelations and experiences, claimed their ways were right and they kept on continually in this and kept to it.

Here I feel is the key to understanding v16. It is not an act of sin, having a besetting sin, nor habitually doing sin in a cold, backslidden state, but a persistent and stubborn sinning against the truth – Bible truth, that denied the exclusive sufficiency of the work and person of the Lord Jesus, deliberately rejected the revelation and the working of the Holy Spirit in their own life.

Wayne Grudem in His systematic theology writes – “Berkhof in his systematic theology wisely defines this sin in the following way: *“This sin consists in the conscious, malicious, and wilful rejection and slander, against evidence and conviction, of the testimony of the Holy Spirit respecting the grace of God in Christ, attributing it out of hatred and enmity to the Prince of Darkness....in committing that sin man wilfully, maliciously, and intentionally attributes what is clearly recognized as the work of God to the influence and operation of Satan.”* He explains that the sin itself consists *“not in doubting the truth, nor in a sinful denial of it but in a contradiction of it that goes contrary to the conviction of the mind, to the illumination of the conscience, and even to the verdict of the heart.”*

The fact that the unpardonable sin involves such extreme hardness of heart and lack of repentance, indicates that those who fear they have committed it, yet still sorrow for sin in their heart and desire to seek after God, certainly do not fall in the category of those who are guilty of it. Berkhof wisely and helpfully adds that *“we may be reasonably sure that those who fear that they have committed it and worry about this, and desire the prayers of others for them, **have not committed it.**”*

Basically, it means that it is a person who has heard, been affected by, or even accepted the teachings, truths and ideas of Jesus God’s word, they may even have been emotionally and intellectually moved, they may have owned an acceptance of these truths and

teachings, but they have never ever truly been born of God and are still dead spiritually and have no life. Yet in addition to that, in their arrogant pride they go on to claim, even experience things through false delusive spirits (*4:1ff - test the spirits*) and now by their ongoing habitual life of sinning, they deny the gospel truths, give evidence of this and they even actively oppose the gospel and the Saviour it proclaims.

To be in such a position is a sin unto, towards death - the word 'leads' is inserted in some versions – '*leads towards death*' - and here it is not speaking of physical death exclusively - for all die, but shows it will lead to eternal death as opposed to eternal life - which is the context here. We do not have a classification of sins done in the body as venial or mortal as some do – some can be forgiven, but some cannot and require cleansing after death.

The Lord Jesus warned of "*blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 12:31-32) - where His work and person is mocked. This is expressed practically by ignoring, rejecting, especially slandering the gospel and the Saviour it declares. It is not so much unpardonable, but will remain unpardoned and they remain guilty of this and all other sin as they reject the Saviour that the Holy Spirit gives testimony to.

This is a serious situation to be in. It is not necessarily the same as backsliding into sin, seeming to lose one's faith or be ensnared by a sin for a shorter or longer time. It is a more definite, deliberate sinning against the light, despising, belittling the things of God, even blaspheming against God - the triune God and seeking to justify oneself through other means. Now we see:

3. The Conclusions.

Sadly, a real Christian can tragically fall into sin and seemingly practise sin, we are to pray for them, that God would not leave them

alone, nor grant them peace in their backslidden condition. Someone who has professed to be a Christian may fall into sin and may give evidence by their habitual lifestyle of sin, that they were never truly born again; such ones are to be prayed for. Regrettably there are other professing believers who go so grossly against the things of God, deny the Saviour, add or detract, mock and live habitually as open sinners and blaspheme the things of God and these ones, says John, do not necessarily have to be prayed for. Note John does not say “*do not ever pray for them*” - it is not forbidden to pray for them, but it is not commanded either! John says “*I am not saying that he should pray about that.*” Yet as hard and as impossible it seems to us that they could be saved, we are dealing with the God of bounteous grace and He could even save such a one.

Yes, such evidences in a person’s life may indicate that the Lord may have hardened their heart and given them over to a reprobate mind and maybe we could be praying against God’s will (v14) and so we do not have liberty to pray, beg, beseech (*so the force of the word is in v16b*) for them. This is not a definite command and therefore there are no definite rules on this - as we can be biased, prejudiced and all too easy write-off a person’s fall as fatal. The great reformer John Calvin wrote of this and said in closing “*as God commends to us the infinite riches of His grace and bids us follow His example in being merciful, the judgement of eternal death must not be rashly levelled against anyone. On the contrary, love should dispose us to hope well.*” In other words - keep on praying for relatives, family members, those at work, those “believers” who once professed faith and now seem so far away from Him and the things of God.

At this point a note of warning needs to be sounded, as some may be moved by the gospel, like the morals, like the ideas and ideals of the Bible, even be moved by what they have heard and yet they resist the work of God in their lives. Perhaps someone here or listening may have heard the gospel many times and been stirred, challenged

by it and yet still have not believed. Such ones are to realise the seriousness of their indifference, their apathy, their neglect, their rejection of the gospel. The Lord may leave such a one and never again speak to their heart; He may give them, you even, over to a reprobate heart and mind and you turn actively against the gospel, the Saviour and your sin will lead to spiritual and eternal death, when you could so easily have had freely the eternal life of Jesus.

For those of us who profess to be believers, we are to use the signs, tests of life presented to us by John in this letter and truthfully, honestly apply them to our lives. We are to ask, and be willing, for the Lord to examine us, so that we are not deceived ones, trusting in an experience, a feeling, a high we had or a “decision” we once made, but we may never have been truly born-again of God and we be deluded.

The verses we have looked at, v16-17 are not easy verses, but they are there as a reality check. If we are truly born of God, then thank God our sin is dealt with for ever, heaven is our home and that is guaranteed by the person and work of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.