



Truth

On Tough Texts

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What is the Sin Unto Death?

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.

Our text this month is among a choice number that have generated much debate. It's right up there with Genesis 6:4; 1 Corinthians 13:10, 2 Corinthians 12:7, and others that we've addressed in this humble publication.

Since John makes this statement in such a matter-of-fact way—almost off-the-cuff, as it were, with no explanation—his readers obviously knew exactly what this sin was about, while we are left somewhat perplexed. But is there really that much of an enigma here? We would humbly submit that this statement is not that puzzling after all, that its meaning seems fairly obvious. We would, therefore, offer the following: the *promise*, the *problem*, the *precedents*, and the *prayer*.

The Promise

As with any text, we should not jump into this one without first looking before we leap. One of the most basic and critical principles of interpretation is the *context*.

First, the overall theme of John's First Epistle is stated, in fact, just three verses before our text: "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" (5:13). As noted in a recent TOTT (#56, "We Band of Brothers"), while John's *Gospel* was written that men might *believe* on Christ and have life (Jn. 20:31), his *First Epistle* was written that men might *know* they have that life. The Greek behind "know" is *eidō*, which means "to behold, look upon, contemplate, to see in order to know, to look at or into, examine,"¹ and therefore

speaks "of absolute [knowledge], beyond the peradventure of a doubt knowledge, a positive knowledge."²

First John is therefore about the Christian having assurance of his salvation based upon objective evidence in his life. While it addresses several themes, the overall theme can be expressed several ways, such as, "a recall to the fundamentals of the faith," "back to the basics of Christianity,"³ "the evidences of faith," or perhaps best of all, "the tests of life."⁴

We see that overall theme in three major tests that reoccur many times throughout the letter, all of which flow from the words, "we know." First, is the test of *doctrine*, the test of orthodox belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (3:23; 5:5, 10, 13). Second, there is the test of *duty*, the test of obedience to God's Word and practical righteousness (1:5–6; 3:5, 9; 5:18). Third, there is the test of *devotion*, the test of whether we love other believers (2:9–11; 3:14; 4:7–8, 20–21). These are not arbitrary or unrelated. They are inseparably intertwined, for *faith*, *holiness*, and *love* are all works of the Holy Spirit. (3:24; 4:13). If even one of these is lacking, true salvation is not evident. So, as we will see, understanding this overall theme aids us in understanding our text.

Second, in addition to the overall theme is the immediate context around these verses, which is about having confidence in prayer. Verse 14 declares: "This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us." "Confidence" is *parrēsía*. In Classical Greek it was important in political situations, meaning "the right to say anything, an openness to truth, candor." Taken to extremes, it took on the negative sense of "insolence," being disrespectful. In each of its 31 New Testament occurrences (e.g., Acts 4:31), the basic idea is that the person has the right to speak and to speak it openly. The word is actually a compound, *pas* ("all") and *rēsis* ("the act of speaking"), so the most literal idea is "to

tell all.” In other words, we can come before our Father with total freedom of speech, pour out our hearts, and tell him everything. What a blessed privilege! Verse 15 goes on to add, “And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

While verses 14 and 15 speak of our overall *confidence* in prayer, verses 16 and 17 deal with *content*, specifically, intercessory prayer for other believers, as the word **brother** implicitly implies. It is argued by some that **brother** does not of necessity refer to a true believer, but as we will detail later, this fact is consistent throughout the letter. That leads us to our second emphasis.

The Problem

Based upon the promise of these verses, John makes an extraordinary statement, so much so, in fact, that it seems out of place, even a sudden change of subject. He makes what appears at first glance to be an exception to intercessory prayer. Is he actually saying that while we can pray for believers who are committing a sin that is **not unto death**, we should *not* pray for those who *are* committing **sin unto death**? Before answering that question, what *is* **sin unto death**? Let’s examine the views.

First, some very sound Bible teachers equate this sin with the “unpardonable sin,” which we examined in our last TOTT (#58), viewing this as an act of extreme willful rebellion against God and His working by His Spirit. In our view, however, this does not seem to fit. However loosely one might define the term **brother**, which we will examine in a moment, we can’t imagine John using it here in even the broadest sense of the term.

Second, others view this sin as a particularly heinous one, one that carried the death penalty. Since the Mosaic Law defined several sins as capital offenses (e.g., Lev. 20:1–27; Num. 18; cf. Rom. 1:32), it is argued, then it follows that such sins would still carry this ultimate penalty. It is further insisted that the Law differentiated between sins that were not deliberate and could be forgiven through sacrifice and those that were premeditated and could not. Such a view, however, not only smacks of the Roman Catholic teaching of “mortal” (which the RSV uses in our text) and “venial” sins, not to mention “the seven deadly sins,” but also seriously blurs the lines between Old and New Testament economies. As John R. W. Stott puts it, “There is no New Testament warrant for such an arbitrary classification of sins, and certainly it would be an anachronism to apply it here.”⁵

Third, still another view, a quite popular one, in fact, is that this sin refers to a Christian who apostatizes, that is, a former believer who repudiates Christ. Since Gnosticism was growing at this time,⁶ which John addresses in this letter, some insist that John refers to such apostasy in our text. They further support this with passages such as Hebrews 6:4–6 (TOTT #29) and 10:26–27. The troubling aspect of such an idea, of course, is whether a true Christian can apostatize. A true Christian is a metamorphosis, a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17), a “[partaker] of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). The idea of such a one repudiating Christ is unthinkable and flies in the face of the doctrine of security. A variation, of course, is that

these weren’t believers *proper*, rather only believers *professed*, making it possible for them to ultimately reject Christ. But here again, this demands that we view the term **brother** in a way that simply does not match how John uses this term throughout the letter. Further, passages such as Hebrews 6:4–6 do not say anything about death. All three of these views, therefore, fall short of explaining John’s meaning.

Fourth, this brings us to the view that, in our humble opinion, is the most natural sense of the language of the text. As Dr. David Cooper stated what many view as “The Golden Rule of Interpretation”: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore; take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicated clearly otherwise.”⁷

In our view, therefore, this plain language, indicates, as one commentator succinctly puts it: “Sometimes a Christian may sin so seriously that God judges that sin with swift physical death: ‘a sin that leads to death.’”⁸ We would humbly offer four reasons we accept this view.

1. The term **brother**. It is odd, indeed, that some expositors downplay the significance of this term here. The Greek, of course, is *adelphos*, a compound comprised of *delphus*, “a womb,” and the prefix *a*. Not only is this prefix often used as the “alpha negative,” which makes a word mean the exact opposite, it’s also used in a “collative” manner, signifying unity. The picture in *adelphos*, then, is “one born from the same womb.” Originally, it referred to a physical brother (or sister with the feminine *adelphē*). Later it came to refer to any near relative, such as a nephew or even a brother-in-law. Finally, there are several examples in the Septuagint where *adelphos* is used to refer even to fellow Israelites (e.g., Ex. 2:11; Lev. 19:17), showing a close relationship without any physical heritage. It’s that very practice of using **brother** to refer to fellow Israelites that was carried over into the New Testament. The idea of fellow Christians being brothers, in fact, appears some 30 times in Acts and 130 times in Paul’s Epistles, so this concept obviously carries great importance.

Likewise, the Apostle John uses *adelphos* 17 times in his First Epistle and three additional times in his Third Epistle.⁹ Some insist here that John uses the term in a broad sense to refer to a “neighbor or nominal Christian, a church member who professes to be a ‘brother.’”¹⁰ But that simply is not supported by the data. With only a single exception, in fact, John clearly speaks of a believer. Only in 3:12 does he use it otherwise, in this case in reference to Cain and Abel as siblings.

It is argued that in verses such as 2:9—“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now”—**brother** might also include those who only *profess* to be a believer. But we humbly submit this is a misreading of the text! Note carefully who is actually being called **brother**. The term is clearly used to refer to *the one being hated*, not the one doing the hating; it is the latter whose salvation is in question, not the former. The same is true in verses 10, 11, and 3:15—**brother** refers to the genuine believer, not the one whose behavior makes it questionable. John’s use of *adelphos* in his Third Epistle is also significant in demonstrating this

consistency; all three uses dramatically indicate believers.

We, therefore, submit that the plain and consistent use of **brother** (*adelphos*) in Acts and the Epistles, including John's epistles, to refer to a true believer indicates that John does, in fact, have a Christian in mind here in 1 John 5:16. It simply cannot be demonstrated, in fact, that this term is ever used for an unbeliever in the spiritual sense.

2. The terms **death** and **life** seem to indicate the *physical*. It is argued that since **death** refers to spiritual death and **life** refers to spiritual life in 3:14, it therefore follows that they mean the same in 5:16. We submit, however, that does not follow of necessity. The verb tense of "we have passed (from death unto life)" in 3:14 is the *perfect*, a past action (or process) with results that continue. In other words, John says that we passed from death in the past and that state still continues (cf. Jn. 5:24). The verb tense of "he shall give (him life)" in 5:16, however, is the *future*, action that *will* take place. So, why would John say that spiritual life *shall* come when he said earlier that it already *has* come and continues? It seems possible instead that he is saying that for those who **sin not unto death** God **shall give** more physical life in contrast to those who commit **sin unto [physical] death**.

This explanation makes all the more sense in light of the phrase **unto death**. The preposition **unto** is the Greek *pros*, which in the construction here indicates the idea of "tending (or moving) toward death."¹¹ Only physical death makes sense. As we will see, a believer can commit sin that "moves him toward death."

3. The verb tense of **sin** (in the phrase **if any man see his brother sin**) indicates a continuing practice. This is the *present* tense, indicating continuing action in the present time. Coupled with this are the words **a sin**, which can actually read just **sin** because the article is not mandatory. In other words, the idea is not **a** particular **sin** that is in view, or an isolated act (which we all are guilty of), rather recurring sin, some sin, whatever it might be, that persists.

Now, this seems at first glance to contradict totally what John says previously. In 3:9, for example, the words "commit," "remaineth," and "(cannot) sin" are all in the present tense. Additionally, "cannot" is the negative particle *ou*, indicating complete and absolute negation. We could, therefore expand the verse to read: "Whosoever is born of God doth not [habitually] commit sin; for [God's] seed [continually] remaineth in him: and he [absolutely] cannot [habitually] sin, because he is born of God." So, if that is true, how can 5:16 say that a Christian can persist in sin?

It seems to us, however, that this is John's very point. He is saying in 5:16 that this sin is contradictory for a believer, that such a believer is in practice acting like an unbeliever in a particular sin, which cannot be allowed to continue. While a believer is *not* capable of the *perpetual condition* of sin—that is, a life that is permeated by sin—he *is* capable of the *practical circumstance* of sin, of allowing a particular sin to continue, allowing the flesh to win out over the Spirit (Rom. 7 and 8) in some particular action or attitude.

This also reminds us of the overall theme of this Epistle, as noted earlier: "the evidences of faith" or "the tests of life." The three tests of *doctrine* (orthodoxy), *duty* (obedience and

practical righteousness), and *devotion* (brotherly love) are the rule by which we are measured. If any behavior begins consistently to contradict one of those, a believer is flirting with **sin unto death**. This idea should become clear as we examine a few examples in a moment.

4. Finally, the phrase **if any man see** indicates that this overt **sin** is quite probably effecting the entire body of believers. As 1 Corinthians 5:6–7 declares, and to which we will return later, "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" and must be purged. If a believer persists in some sinful attitude or action that has become obvious to others in the church, that sin must be removed, and God might indeed do so with physical death. That thought leads right to our third point.

The Precedents

The view we presented above is easy to accept—and indeed is hard to deny—when we recognize that there are many biblical illustrations of such sin and penalty.

First, without a doubt, Ananias and Sapphira are a graphic example of **sin unto death**. Their greed, hypocrisy, and lying were done in front of the whole church and God took their lives for it. They had publicly promised to give all the proceeds from their sale to the church but then publicly reneged. There is no indication whatsoever that they were unbelievers or just professing believers; 4:32 implies that they were part of "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul."

The question could arise, "But this situation seems to be one *act* of sin instead of a continuing practice as noted earlier." We submit, however, that just the opposite is true. It seems quite likely that this behavior was, in fact, not isolated at all, that their attitudes were known to Peter and others. A believer is capable of any sin under the right circumstances, which is all the more reason to guard against it. J. N. Darby makes a noteworthy comment here:

This does not seem to me to be some particular sin, but all sin which has such a character that, instead of awakening Christian charity, it awakens Christian indignation. . . . It was a lie, but a lie under such circumstances that it excited horror rather than compassion. We can easily understand this in other cases.¹²

Second, the incident of church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5 is another example. The scene there was a case of incest going on within the church, a truly disgusting and unthinkable situation. There is again no indication that this was an unbeliever or simply a professing believer. On the contrary, this was a believer who was put out of the church, "deliver[ed] . . . unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5). "Delivered" is *paradidōmi*, a compound of *didōmi*, to give of one's own accord and with good will, and *para*, alongside or over to, yielding the full meaning, "to deliver over to the power of someone." It was used in Classical Greek as a legal term for delivering a prisoner to the court. Likewise, the basic New Testament meaning is to deliver someone over to judgment and death. It's used in Matthew 4:12 of John the Baptist when he was "cast into prison" with the ultimate end of death. Thank-

fully, that man repented and was restored to fellowship about a year or year-and-a-half later (2 Cor. 2:5–8), but what would have happened if he had not? The language could not be clearer: this man was on his way to death. We don't know how that would have happened, but had he not repented, death "before his time" was assured. While difficult and heartbreaking, church discipline is absolutely mandatory for the purity of the Body of Christ. (Look for a study on "Principles of Church Discipline" in a future TOTT.)

Third, we find another example of **sin unto death** within the troubled Corinthian church. Paul tells us that some believers were abusing the Lord's Table (11:17–32) in both *action* and *attitude*. Overt action included drunken revelry, by partaking of it "unworthily" (*anaxios*). In Classical Greek, the root *axios* originally meant "tipping the scales, counterbalancing, of different weight," and finally came to mean "worthy." The negative form *anaxios*, then, means *unworthy*, not suitable. So in the present context, such unworthy, out-of-balance attitudes would include a plethora of things: indifference, unthinking ritualism, unconfessed sin, bitterness against another believer (cf. Matt. 5:23–24), or any other attitudes that undermine the whole purpose of this ordinance. Such abuse, therefore, had resulted in judgment through illness and even *death* ("sleep" was a common euphemism for death; cf. 15:18; Matt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 2 Pet. 3:4).

Fourth and finally, we find this sin rooted even in Old Testament history. Adam Clarke, for example, observes: "The disobedient prophet, 1 Kings 13:1–32, is . . . a case in point: many others occur in the history of the Church, and of every religious community."¹³ Others point out incidents such as Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10), Korah (Num. 16:23–35), Achan (Josh. 7), and Joab (2 Sam. 3:22–39). Even David was well aware that he could have died for his sin (2 Sam. 12:13–14); on the other hand, perhaps worse was the fact that *others died* because of his sin.

So, we submit once again, the most natural sense of the language in our text, as well as Scriptural precedents, demonstrates that the **sin unto death** is the physical death of a believer for serious unrepentant sin.

The Prayer

Finally, what does John mean by **I do not say that he shall pray for** those overtaken by **sin unto death**? One expositor insightfully writes: "Why, then, doesn't John say that one should pray for them? The answer is because such prayer is useless. It is not that it is absolutely wrong to pray. While John clearly does not intend Christians to pray for the forgiveness of such people, he words himself carefully so as not to forbid it."¹⁴

The only question that remains, then, is: *How do we know*? It seems that the only answer is: *We don't*. We are not judges. Rather we pray for everyone, no matter what. We might see sin that concerns (or even) frightens us deeply, so we pray. Whether or not it does any good, we still intercede. When we pray according to God's will, He hears, and does according to His sovereignty, holiness, and justice.

Dear Christian Friend, this verse stands as a solemn, serious, and stern warning to every believer. God cannot allow

sin to remain, so He will at times remove it for the purity of the Body. Let each of us, therefore, examine ourselves. A. T. Pierson encourages us:

It has been my habit for years to spend the last half hour before I go to sleep in looking over the day, asking God to let me see where wood, hay, and stubble have found incorporation in my life building. I would ask him to judge me then and there, and to burn up the wood, hay, and stubble that nothing may stand but gold, silver, and precious stones. What a blessed thing for us to discern ourselves in daily judgment, deciding, with regard to God, to leave nothing for the last great trial that will not stand the fire.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* AMG Publishers, (1992), entry #1492.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies* (electronic edition), comment on 1 John 5:13.

³ Both from *The MacArthur Study Bible*.

⁴ Both of the following use *Tests of Life* as the title of their exposition: Robert Law (T. Clark, 1909; reprinted by Baker, 1968) and Theodore Epp in his short exposition (Back to the Bible, 1957).

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 188.

⁶ Influenced by Plato and others, Gnosticism was a dualistic philosophy, maintaining that while spirit was good, all matter was inherently evil. The result of such teaching was that while Christ was "some form of Deity," He could not have been truly human for such "matter" would have made Him evil. Coming to full bloom in the second century, it also boasted of a deeper, superior, mystical knowledge that was higher than Scripture and that only the properly initiated followers could acquire. Gnosticism is alive and well in our day, taking many forms in various cults and flavors of mysticism.

⁷ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated* (Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.

⁸ John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (electronic edition), note on 1 John 5:16.

⁹ 1 John 2:7; 9, 10, 11; 2:10, 11; 3:10, 12, 13, 14 (twice), 15, 16, 17; 4:20, 21; 5:16; 3 John 3, 5, 10.

¹⁰ Stott, p. 190.

¹¹ While there are three "cases" (functions) for nouns in English, there are five in Greek. Two of those are the *nominative*, which indicates the subject of a sentence, and the *accusative*, which is used for a direct object, as is the word **death** in the phrase **sin unto death**. The rule is that when the preposition *pros* is used with the accusative (which it usually is), it marks the object toward or to which something moves or is directed.

¹² John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Old and New Testaments*, note on 1 John 5:16.

¹³ Adam Clarke's *Commentary on the Bible*, note on 1 John 5:16.

¹⁴ Walter Kaiser, Peter Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (InterVarsity), "1 John 5:16-17. A Sin That Leads to Death?"

¹⁵ Cited in *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal*, Volume LXXX, No. 35 (Printed by Wm. H. Pile's Sons, 1907), p. 278.

Book Review: *The Truth War*

By: John MacArthur

Upon reading several reviews and opinions of John MacArthur's, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in the Age of Deception*, I became even more troubled than I already was: "WAY over the top in many places," "not factual," has "many out-of-context quotes," and so on. This grieves me deeply because it demonstrates that many in the church today have either buried their heads in the sand or are, more likely, so deceived that they cannot see what is happening.

Christianity is, indeed, in serious trouble. It is drowning in a sea of uncertainty as Truth continues to vanish before our eyes. That is what this book is about. It is a fight for Truth and a stripping away of the layers of pretense that are used to hide what various false teachers are really teaching.

An excellent introduction, "Why Truth Is Worth Fighting For," outlines Truth's eternal value, meaning, how it's inextricably bound to God, and how it is under assault in today's church. The following eight chapters further develop those themes: "Can Truth Survive in a Postmodern Society?"; "Spiritual Triumph: Duty, Danger, and Guaranteed Triumph"; "Constrained into Conflict: Why We Must Fight for the Faith"; "Creeping Apostasy: How False Teachers Sneak In"; "Heresy's Subtlety: Why We Must Remain Vigilant"; "The Evil of False Teaching: How Error Turns Grace into Licentiousness"; "The Assault on Divine Authority: Christ's Lordship Denied"; and "How to Survive in an Age of Apostasy: Learning from the Lessons of History." An additional benefit is the Appendix, "Why Discernment is Out of Fashion," an updated chapter from his 1994 book, *Reckless Faith*.

A major emphasis of this book is the seemingly enigmatic and steadily growing Emergent Church Movement. A mantra we keep hearing is, "The Emerging Church is hard to define." *No, it is not!* Yes, its chief leaders—Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, and Brian Maclaren—all say different things. Yes, it postu-

lates "reform" and "reexamination," couching it all in nebulous and ever-changing rhetoric. And, oh, yes, there's the ever present "talk about Jesus." *But its central, foundational credo is the rejection of certainty.* It dismisses the possibility of a sure and settled knowledge of Truth. In fact, to say that we can know anything for sure is actually arrogant to Emergent leaders. Sadly, many people are so confused that they conclude, "Oh, well, emergent leaders are saying some good things," which clearly implies that if we look carefully enough in a garbage dump we'll find a sandwich. The charge that MacArthur misquotes these leaders is ludicrous. The truth of the matter is that the things they're saying are so horrific that some don't want to believe they're actually saying them. We need to wake up: *Emergence is NOT biblical Christianity.* It is an ever-evolving theology of paradox and uncertainty.

While John MacArthur certainly does not need me, of course, to defend him, I do so anyway. He is one of the few in an ever diminishing number today who is standing for the absolutes of the Word of God without compromise or concern about who it might offend. If anything, in fact, he does not go far *enough* in this book. Like most movements past and present, Emergence directly (and proudly) attacks the historical doctrines of the faith as set forth in the Reformation; it even proclaims its own "New Reformation" and "95 Theses," as well as another popular opinion, namely, that Christianity should return to Rome. I would call your attention to a further exposé: "The Emergent Church's Retreat into Pre-Reformation Darkness," which you can read online at: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=269>.

So, if you care about Truth, here's a book you should read. I believe it is among the most important books of our time.

Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.