

A Sin Unto Death

by Staff

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"There is sin leading to death." —I John 5:16

One day not long ago, a fellow church member and I were talking over tea about some mutual friends—old friends, good friends, but friends who are no longer with us—no longer in God's church.

The family we were talking about did not leave the Worldwide Church of God in the 1990s, as many of us did, due to doctrinal issues. Nor did they leave, as many others did around that time, because it seemed more convenient to attend the local church on the corner. They left a few years prior to all that activity, and they left for offense issues. Various members of their extended family, who had been in the church for a long time, had been severely offended by a local minister. Sadly, as so often seems to have happened, the whole extended family has since slipped right back "into the world."

Did this family do wrong by leaving God's church and His way of life? Did they sin? There is little doubt that they did. However, in our conversation, my friend and I agreed that, because of the circumstances, it would seem wrong for us to totally give up on such people. As these friends had not been disfellowshipped, our families have maintained a kind of loose, arm's-length relationship. We do not see each other on any regular basis, yet we would not hesitate to sit down and enjoy a coffee or a meal together. Many of us have had similar experiences with friends or family members who have, to our knowledge and understanding, left God's truth and His way of life.

So what about it? *Should* we give up on such people? Or should we pray that God would, according to His will, heal any offenses, restore their faith to them, and bring them back to us? Or rather, back to *Him*! Is it acceptable to pray such prayers for the restoring of friends who have left us? Or is it futile—even wrong—for us to do so?

These questions introduce another "difficult scripture" and will be answered as we discuss it further.

Wages of Sin

The apostle John records our difficult scripture in I 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 quotation is from the King James translation, as this is the most commonly known rendition of the verse. Here is the New King James version, which, alas, clarifies the meaning of this truly difficult scripture only a little:

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. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

There are at least two applications for these verses: the first for people who, for one reason or another, have left the church of God, His truth, and His way of life, and a second for those who are still actively in the church. The most common misinterpretation of this verse is the claim that it proves there are some sins a person can commit and not incur the penalty of eternal death. Can this be true?

In short, no! It cannot be true. We know very well that the wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23). To this, there can be no exceptions! God does not categorize sins this way. Instead, the Bible distinguishes sins differently.

Willful Sins

Through the author of the book of Hebrews, God shows us that "willful" sin brings the second death—eternal death:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27)

Please hold onto the word, "willfully." We will come back to it presently.

Consider the frightening expression "a certain fearful expectation of judgment and fiery indignation," a phrase that makes one wonder about the mindset of those who have left God's church. Surely, they must remember at least some of what was preached to them during their years in the church! Do they ever stop to consider what they have left behind—what they have thrown away? Do they ever see, read, or hear a news item that may be a fulfillment of prophecy, and get a shiver down their spines when they remember what the church taught them about the ultimate penalties for failing to watch, pray, and endure to the end?

It can only be hoped that many do. Let us pray that our errant loved ones will act—sooner rather than later—upon such thoughts and feelings.

Unrepented Sins

Of course, any sin can be forgiven if it is sincerely repented of, and if it is "confessed," not to a human priest or minister, but to our merciful God: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

Conversely, any sin can also lead to eternal death if it is *not* confessed and repented of, and if it is allowed to continue repeatedly in a person's life.

What about our family members and friends who are no longer with us? Can they still repent? I personally believe that many, if not most, still could. However, it is God's opinion—not mine—on this point that matters! Have these people sinned willfully? Further, if they have not sinned willfully, is it likely that they will repent? Even with the discernment God has given us through His Holy Spirit, we often cannot answer such questions. Only God, who knows all hearts, can answer some questions.

A "sin not unto death," then, is one that is confessed, repented of, and does not involve a willful violation of God's law.

Sins Unto Death

On the other hand, a person has "sinned unto death" if he has willfully turned from God's way. It is gradually becoming clear that this whole matter revolves around this word, "willfully" from Hebrews 10:26. The Greek word is *hekousios*, and it means "voluntarily" or "willingly." The English adverb stems from the adjective, "willful" which, according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, means:

- » obstinately and often perversely self-willed;
- » done deliberately;
- » intentional;
- » unruly.

An extensive and profitable Bible study could be conducted just on these four alternate renderings of the word, "willful." The first three meanings generally speak for themselves, but the fourth and last one seems to show willfulness in its true shade. Those who are unruly are continuously unwilling to obey the rules—in this case, God's rules! They unceasingly refuse to accept God's government and His laws.

Sin unto death may not necessarily include all those who have apparently left the church, nor even all those who have been disfellowshipped, but only those who have willfully rejected God's way to the extent that it is no longer possible for them to be brought to repentance. However, this is certainly not suggesting that it is acceptable for a person to take God's loving mercy for granted, to think that he can leave God's church to "enjoy a little sin" for a while, then simply jump back in at a convenient, later date. Such devices or actions carry with them some obvious and very real dangers, and bring to mind another well known but somewhat fearsome biblical passage:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

This should be an arresting, solemn, and even terrifying warning for any who might consider leaving God's church. Obviously, it is often very difficult for any fellow human being to determine who has and who has not "crossed the line." In fact, it is probably because of the extreme difficulty of discerning when this is the case that the apostle of love writes in our difficult scripture, "I do not say he shall pray for it" rather than the sterner alternative command, "He shall not pray about it."

John's open-ended statement allows for a Christian's natural desire to hope the person has not gone too far—to hope that he will repent—and he does not prohibit intercessory prayer, even in such a case. We should rather err on the side of praying for our errant brethren than not praying. John implies that our prayer *may* be futile, but he does not say that it is a sin to pray even for a seemingly hopeless case, as long as we do not know for sure that it is totally hopeless.

Within the Church

Finally, let us bring this subject around to include those who are still in God's church.

If any of us sees or hears of a fellow church member who is normally striving to obey God "sin a sin which is not unto death"—often out of ignorance or weakness—we ought to ask God to help the member recognize his error and repent of it. When we do so, God will hear and answer our prayers and may, according to His will, "give him life": "And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (I John 5:15).

This is the kind of concern we must have for all of our spiritual brothers and sisters, and it is one way that we can "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Through our deeper study into a relatively complex scripture, God reveals two simple conclusions: Should we pray for a fellow member if we see or hear of him sinning? Yes, we should. And should we pray for friends and loved ones who have left God's truth? Again, yes, we should, for "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).