

Having identified the assurance of salvation (v13) as his primary purpose in writing, the apostle John then descends to the closely related subject of confidence in prayer (vv14-15), which then leads him to the subject of intercessory prayer (vv16-17)—in other words—possessing the assurance that I am right with God provides a confidence in prayer before God—and having confidence before God in prayer what ought we to pray for—v16, “if anyone sees his brother sinning a sin...”—thus John brings us back to what’s been a repeated emphasis throughout this letter—brotherly love—the need to be concerned not merely without ourselves but with the good of our brethren...

Martyn Lloyd-Jones—“We are concerned, obviously, about our own condition; we must be sure that we are right with God. But our concern does not stop at that—we must be concerned about the whole family. We must have this view of ourselves as Christian people, God’s people—as members of the Church, in which we see ourselves as God’s household, God’s family. We must have a great and jealous concern about that family; our desire should be that everybody in it should be enjoying the full benefits of this great salvation and are marching together to Zion with God. So we should be very concerned that we ourselves do not fall, and we should be equally concerned that our brother or sister should not fall...”

- I. A Distinction
- II. An Intercession—v16
- III. A Clarification—v17

I. A Distinction

1. The distinction I here refer to is that of “sinning sin which does not lead to death...” in contrast to “sin leading to death...”
2. Generally stated there are two options—[1] the apostasy view—this view understands that by “sin unto death” John was referring to the sin of apostasy [and or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit]...
3. This is without doubt the majority view—such persons understand John to refer to spiritual life and spiritual death...
4. Those who have committed the unpardonable sin have sinned in such a way whereas forgiveness is no longer possible...
5. Their sin is unto death—that is, it will inevitably lead to eternal death—“for it is impossible for those who were once enlightened...if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance...”
6. Thus those who are committing sins not unto death are either erring brethren or hypocrites who are restored or truly converted...
7. The largest problem with this view is that how would we know whether or not a person has “sinned unto death” and should no longer be prayed for...
8. When John tells us we are to pray for a brother “sinning sin not unto death” and that we are not to pray for those whose sin is unto death, the implication is that we can clearly discern between these two...
9. Notice [2] the discipline view—this view understands the “sin unto death” as physical death and the result of the chastisement of God...
10. Thus by life—“He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death...”—is meant a restoration of physical life...
11. Thus according to this view, sins which do not lead to death can be recognized because the person who commits them is still alive...
12. Conversely—sins which do lead to death can be recognized because the person who persists in such a pattern dies...
13. F.F. Bruce—“It may be, then, that by ‘sin unto death’ John means an act or course of sin which has resulted in the death of the sinning brother. If so, his words ‘I do not say that one is to pray for that’ amount to a disapproval of praying for the dead...”
14. John MacArthur—“The contrast to the phrase ‘there is sin leading to death’ with ‘there is sin not leading to death’ signifies that John distinguishes between sins that may lead to physical death and those that do

- not. That is not to identify a certain kind of mortal or non-mortal sin, but to say not all sins are so judged by God...”
15. Thus according to this view, when the apostle forbids us to pray for those whose sins have led to death, he is condemning all prayers for the dead...
 16. V16—“there is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that...”—that is, what purpose would there be to pray for those who have died...
 17. Thus I suggest that John is referring to the possibility of a true Christian [a brother], to persist in sin so as to endure the chastisement of God under the form of physical sickness and even death...
 18. Now whether or not this is the proper interpretation of our passage is debated, but what can not be debated is that the Scriptures elsewhere teach what I am suggesting John is teaching...
 19. 1Cor.11:27-32—“therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world...”
 20. Notice two things [a] their sin, v29—“for he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself...”
 21. Notice [b] their chastisement, v30—“for this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [that is are dead]...”
 22. That weakness and death were the result of God’s chastisements is clear from v32—“but when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world...”
 23. In other words—the Lord chastises us that we would not return back into the world—and at times [according to this text] this includes physical weakness, sickness, and even death...
 24. James 5:13-16—“is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much...”
 25. Notice two things within this passage—[a] the intercession of the elders, vv14-15—“is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven...”
 26. Notice that James understood that it was possible that sickness was the result of God’s loving and paternal discipline—“and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven...”
 27. The elders are to “pray over him”—that is they are to intercede on his behalf—they are to plead that God would be merciful towards them...
 28. I suggest the phrase “and the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up...”—is akin to the phrase in our text—“he will ask, and He will give him life...”
 29. Notice [b] the intercession of the saints, v16—“confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed...”
 30. Having spoken of the responsibilities of elders to intercede for the brethren, James now addresses the responsibility of members to prayer for one another...
 31. Notice the phrase—“that you may be healed...”—which refers to physical healing, which again implies that it’s possible sickness may be the result of particular sins...
 32. Thus I conclude that it is my present judgment that the sin unto death refers to a pattern of sin committed by a true Christian that the Lord chastises with physical death...
 33. John Wesley—“I have myself, during the course of many years, seen numerous instances of this. I have known many sinners (chiefly notorious backsliders from high degrees of holiness and such as had given great occasion to the enemies of religion to blaspheme) whom God has cut short in the midst of their journey; yea, before they had lived out half their days: These, I apprehend, had sinned "a sin unto death;"

in consequence of which they were cut off, sometimes more swiftly, sometimes more slowly, by an unexpected stroke [stroke of fatherly chastisement].”

II. An Intercession—v17

1. Thus according to the explanation I have suggested, we are now ready to examine some of the key phrases within v16...
2. V16—“If anyone sees his brother sinning sin not to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not to death...”
3. Notice several things—[1] the nature of the sin observed—“if anyone sees his brother sinning sin which does not lead to death...”
4. It must be pointed out at the outset, that John is here referring to a person who is identified as our brother in Christ...
5. He is a brother that we see and know—“if anyone sees his brother...”—the implication is that he is someone we are well-acquainted with...
6. Furthermore, the Greek tense of the verb “sinning” is present tense, thus literally the phrase is—“sinning sin...”
7. The point being—this is not a one time sin, but a general pattern—it refers to continual, ongoing sin, or open and obvious sin...
8. Now let me say briefly as an aside, it’s obvious that John is not saying that when we see our brother sinning that we are to only pray for him...
9. No, the Scriptures tell us elsewhere that we may have to confront that brother in meekness and out of love...
10. But here John is emphasizing the fact, that an essential response on our part is that we petition God on his or her behalf...
11. Notice [2] the nature of the life given—“and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death...”—this refers to the life given by God in response to prayer...
12. Notice it is life—“for those who commit sin...”—that is, it is the restoration to life of an erring brother who had apparently fell weak or sick due to his sin...
13. Now here I want to remind you of what we saw back in 1Cor.11:30—“for this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [have died].”
14. Notice there is a progression—weak, sick, and dead—the point being, the chastisement of God varied with reference to degree or severity...
15. Thus regardless whether or not the sinning brother was weak, a little sick, or greatly sick, he needed the same thing—life...
16. Notice [3] the nature of the prayer offered—the text simply says—“he will ask...”—that is, he will plead with God on his behalf...
17. The implication is that we are to pray for the repentance and thus recovery of the erring or sinning brother—we are to plead with God for mercy...
18. Now at this point I want to take a few minutes and briefly examine a couple of OT examples of such intercessory pleading or prayer...
19. Num.12:13—“so Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, Please heal her, O God, I pray...”—notice [a] sin, [b] chastisement, and [c] intercession...
20. Num.21:7—“therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people...”
21. Notice [a] sin pf the people (vv4-5), [b] the chastisements of God (v6), and [c] the intercession of Moses (v7)...

III. A Clarification—v17

1. Having made the distinction between sins that lead to death and sins that don’t, John now provides a necessary clarification...

2. While there is a difference within sins [that is some are more heinous than others], all sin, regardless if it leads to death or not, is unrighteousness...
3. Sin is contrary to that righteousness as revealed in the law, thus John said in 3:4—“sin is lawlessness...”—it is living contrary or in opposition to the law...
4. In contrast, righteous living is right living as defined by the law—it can be defined by an objective standard...
5. No person is left to determine what is and isn't right—God has given us a righteous standard against which all behavior must be judged...
6. That which harmonizes to it is righteous, and that which contradicts it is sin—“all unrighteousness is sin...”
7. John then adds the reminder—“and there is sin not leading to death...”—that is, while all sin is unrighteousness, not all sin is punished with temporal or physical death...
8. Thus in summary, John is clarifying that while all sin is unrighteousness not all sin I punished to the same degree—that is, not all sin brings the stern fatherly chastisements that leads to death...

IV. Observations

A. A warning about sin

1. The very first thing I want to do at this point is make a necessary clarification—I am not saying [for the Scriptures do not teach] that all sickness is the result of our sin and thus God's chastisements...
2. Jn.9:2—“and His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind...”
3. V3—“Jesus answered, Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him...”
4. We saw the same thing back in James 5:15—“and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven...”—the implication is that his sickness may not have been the direct result of his sins...
5. Thus we have to be careful to make dogmatic judgments concerning the reason a brother is undergoing physical pains and sickness...
6. Furthermore, it seems according to this text, that those being chastised physically were committing open and continuous sin...
7. Accordingly, John is not suggesting that we ascribe every cold to the fatherly chastisements of God—that it's the result of some secret sin...
8. Furthermore, the Scriptures themselves describe several very godly people as being afflicted with chronic sicknesses...
9. For example, the apostle Paul exhorted Timothy—“no longer drink only water, but use a little wine for you stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities...”
10. But my brethren, having made this necessary clarification, I hope it's obvious to you that when Christian people sin they are chastised for it...
11. Ps.89:30-32—“if his sons forsake my law and do not walk in my judgments, if they break my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes...”
12. Thus we learn this very important lesson—sin brings chastisement—and in some cases it may even bring very severe chastisement...
13. Notice [1] the chastisements of God are always righteous—by this I mean, He never disciplines us unnecessarily or without cause...
14. And to put it bluntly—if He disciplined us to the degree that we deserved it, not one of us would be alive this morning...
15. But—“there is sin not leading to death...”—that is, the larger share of sins committed by Christians are treated in a very gracious manner...
16. Notice [2] the chastisements of God are always remedial—that is, they have a corrective purpose to them, Ps.119:67—“before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word...”

17. But someone might here object—how did putting those Corinthian Christians to death have a remedial or corrective result...
18. And my answer is simple—at times [and I believe they are rare], the situation is such that the Lord uses death itself as the means to correct a child...
19. But even in such cases death is remedial and corrective, in that it corrects or perfects the soul from all remaining sin...
20. Notice [3] the chastisements of God are always loving, Heb.12:6—“for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives...”
21. Oh my brethren, does not this thought provide a great encouragement—our Father loves us too much to allow us to persist in open rebellion...
22. And He is committed to do all that it takes to endure that this doesn't happen, and that includes if necessary removing us from this world...

B. A loving obligation

1. With all of the uncertainty that surrounds this passage we must be careful not to overlook its foremost purpose—to exhort us to pray for our erring and sinning brethren...
2. Now as you know the Scriptures teach us to pray for all of our brethren regardless if they are opening sinning or not...
3. Eph.6:18—“praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...”
4. One man said—“Many, we fear, are selfish in their prayers. They only say, Lord, give me this, or give me that. They never think to pray for anyone else beyond themselves and their own families. They are like the old man who prayed this way; Lord bless me and my wife, my son John and hi wife; we four and no more. We should pray for our families, but we should not stop there. We should pray for everyone in our assemblies by name everyday...”
5. But here the apostle narrows our petitions not for the brethren in general, but for the erring and sinning brother in particular...
6. Such a person possesses an urgent need for such prayers—thus let me briefly suggest three reasons or motives to pray...
7. Notice [1] because of who he is—notice again the text—“if anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death...”
8. Throughout this letter John has repeatedly stressed the need for brotherly love, thus he here provides a very practical and necessary way to express this love...
9. What a blessed community is the church of Christ—a spiritual family wherein we look out for the interest and wellbeing of one another...
10. How contrary is this to the world—how contrary is this to many families—and sad to say, how contrary is this to many churches...
11. And brethren, I'm not blind to the fact that our church could has a lot of room for growth in this area—that is of bearing each other's burdens before the throne of grace...
12. My friends let me ask you a personal question—when was the last time you fervently and aggressively prayed for another member of this church...
13. But then in particular, how often do you pray for those who are in a time of unusual testing, trials, or temptations...
14. Yet if were thinking rightly, and understood the close connection that we share as brethren, there must exists a mutual concern for one another...
15. Martyn Lloyd-Jones—“Christian people are not merely a collection of individuals who may hold certain views in common and come together for certain purposes. Not at all! According to the NT we are to realize we are brothers and sisters; we belong to the same Father; we are partakers of the same divine nature; we have this intimate relationship of blood, as it were, than which nothing can be deeper or stronger. So we must look at one another as brothers and sisters; this is a family relationship. And that, of course, leads in turn to this: we must be concerned about one another; we should be exercising a watchful care and interest in one another; we should have a real concern about one another...”

16. Notice [2] because of what he is doing—that is he is sinning—“if anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death...”
17. Here we are reminded of a very sobering and humbling reality—Christian people sin, and at times they sin very heinous sins...
18. Thus John understood that one of the many safeguards provided by Christ for His beloved people is the context of a local church...
19. Churches filled with people who will not allow their brothers and sisters to continue in any open and known pattern of sin...
20. Thus a professing Christian who fails to pray the brethren, possess little love for others and little hatred for sin...
21. Accordingly, people who refuse to align themselves with the local church are in fact professing to be beyond the possibility of ever becoming an erring or sinning brother...
22. Conversely, a Christian person is one who knows his own potential to sin, and thus welcomes the accountability of the local church...
23. He or she knows all too well how prone they are to wander, and thus they covet the intercessory prayers of their beloved brethren...
24. Notice [3] because of what he may receive—“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 to death...”
25. The point being—the text tells us we are to ask—and He [God] will give life to the brother sinning sin not to death...
26. But I want you to notice that the text literally says that God will give life to the asking brother for the sinning or erring brother...
27. The point being, John is saying the same thing James said in Jas.5:16—“the hardworking prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much...”

C. A beautiful picture

1. Here I simply want to underscore that the privilege of intercessory prayer, enables us to resemble our beloved High Priest...
2. For brethren, is it not true that the hope we have of not sinning sin that leads us to spiritual and eternal death—is that our elder brother is praying on our behalf...
3. 1Jn.2:1—“if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous...”—that is He sees His brethren, sinning sins worthy of death...
4. And He stands before His Father and intercedes on our behalf—and thus we are secured life because of His continuous intercession...
5. Oh my brethren bless God for our greater than Moses—for that One who—“always lives to make intercession for us...”