

John may understand prayer not primarily as communicating in order to acquire petitions or to somehow force God's hand but as communing with God... The loftiest attainment of errant mortals petitioning before the heavenly throne is not to gain God's compliance but to be fully assured of his listening ear—whatever external results our prayers do or do not precipitate from God's side. The highest divine response to the petitioner is not to put human prayer in the driver's seat of destiny but to assure the one who prays that all requests are duly considered and acted on so as to maximize the coming of God's kingdom and the fulfillment of his will....<sup>1</sup>

This is therefore an additional aspect of our confidence as we pray: we know that we are always accepted into the Father's presence because of the work Yeshua has accomplished on our behalf.

*...we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.* – It is important to note that John uses the present tense here, not the future tense. He writes “we have the requests” not “we will have the requests.” Since when we ask, always with “Your will be done” being the foundational premise of our prayers, we know that God is both attentive to our requests and that He will accomplish His sovereign and powerful will in respect to our requests. We have this assurance as the fruit of our faith, that God will grant our petition in accordance with His will and in His time. As Yeshua taught:

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. (Mk 11:24)

**16–17 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.**

Having encouraged believers in Yeshua with the freedom they have to pray and know that their requests are both heard and answered, John goes on to encourage prayer, not only for one's own needs and petitions, but also for the needs of others within the believing community. Here, once again, we are reminded that the viewpoint of the Scriptures is that eternal salvation through faith in the person and work of Yeshua

---

<sup>1</sup> Yarbrough, *1John*, p. 301.

is not only something that accrues to an individual, but joins the believing individual to a wider community. In short, salvation from a biblical standpoint always envisions a community of believers, knit together through the work of the Spirit and thereby recognizing the vital part community plays in the sanctification of God's people.

However, while it is clear that John is admonishing his readers to take seriously the duty of praying for one another, it is well known that these two verses in the final pericope of John's first epistle have been the subject of a veritable plethora of comments, commentary, and scholarly writings, all attempting to explain what John means when he writes of "a sin not *leading* to death" (ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον) and contrasts this with "a sin *leading* to death" (ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον).

The deciding factors revolve primarily around two factors. One is the use of the word "brother" in the opening line of v. 16, "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin not *leading* to death...." The other is to determine whether the word "death" means "physical death" or "spiritual, i.e., eternal death."

Regarding the use of "brother" in the opening line of v. 16, we may note several things. First, we recognize that the word "brother" is clearly used of a fellow community member, since John writes of "his brother" (τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ), making it clear that the person in view is someone recognized within the community of faith. Second, John uses the word "brother" 14 other times in this epistle,<sup>1</sup> and the context of each of these makes it clear that John is using the term to denote a believer in Yeshua. With this in mind, it is important to note that John does not refer to the person who has committed a "sin *leading* to death" with the term "brother." There may be, therefore, a subtle but important distinction to be discerned, that John is differentiating between a person who is marked as a believer in Yeshua as over against a person who is openly and clearly not a believer.

In regard to the word "death" as used in these verses, some have taken it to denote that which is opposite of "eternal life," which has been a major theme in the context immediately preceding our current verses (cf. 3:15; 5:11, 13). Thus, the "sin *leading* to death" is understood in this scenario as "the unpardonable sin." On the other hand, some take "death" in these verses to refer to physical death, i.e., that the sin in this context is that which either results in capital punishment at the hands of local authorities or the hand of God divinely taking the life of the one who has sinned in this way.

While there are a number of combinations of these various factors

---

1 Cf. 2:9-11; 3:10, 12-17; 4:20-21.

that have resulted in divergent interpretations of our text, there are three that are most predominant in the history of interpretation of this pericope.

The first is that John, in writing of a “sin *leading* to death,” has in mind specific transgressions that result in capital punishment. That is, there are sins which can be overcome through making proper compensation to those who sustained damages from the sin and through open and genuine repentance which is manifested by a change in the course of life of the one who sinned. In contrast, this view would consider some sins as “unpardonable” from the standpoint of human government and authority. Some of the early Church Fathers took this view, e.g., Clement of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> and Origen,<sup>2</sup> that some sins could be pardoned while others could not be. Tertullian also took this view and even listed the unpardonable sins as including murder, adultery, blasphemy, and idolatry.<sup>3</sup> This view developed into the distinction of “mortal” vs. “venial” sins in the later Roman Catholic Church.

But the larger context of our Epistle speaks against this interpretation. For John does not appear to be designating a single or specific sin, but of sin in general, that which characterizes the unbeliever and which is not the characteristic of the life of the true believer (cf. 3:4–9).

The second common interpretation is that John has in view open and blatant denial of Yeshua as the Messiah and Savior, and the incarnate Son of God. That is, the “sin *leading* to death” is that of apostasy. Those who take this view often point to Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26f; 12:16–17 as support for their viewpoint.

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. (Heb 6:4–6)

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

---

1 Cf. *Strom.* ii.15, §66.

2 Cf. *Homily in Ex.* x. §3; *Homily in Lev.* iv. §5, 28.

3 Cf. Tertullian, *De pudicitia* 19. On Augustine’s interpretation of this passage, see his *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.22.73. For further comments on the Patristic comments on this text of 1John 5:16–17, see Westcott, *1John*, pp. 211–14.

but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. (Heb 10:26–27)

that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Heb 12:16–17)

The strength of this interpretation is that we know John has, throughout the Epistle, been seeking to strengthen his readers against the false teaching of those who were at one time part of their community but who denied Yeshua, left the community, and were seeking to persuade others to follow their errant teaching and ways.

The third interpretation rests upon the Gospels' account of Yeshua's words relating to blasphemy against the Ruach HaKodesh, in which the miracles and mighty works that He has performed were being said by His opponents as having been done through the power of Satan.

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt 12:31–32)

Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit." (Mk 3:28–30)

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him. (Lk 12:10)

The weakness of this interpretation is that committing the sin of "blaspheming against the Holy Spirit," which Yeshua states will not be forgiven, seems to have been possible only by those who were eyewitnesses of His miracles and who attributed His miracles to have been performed through the power of Satan.<sup>1</sup> Such blatant demonstration of

---

1 See my comments on the passage in Matt 12:31–32 in my *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 5 vols. (TorahResource, 2008), 2.449–55.

unbelief marked such blasphemers as apostates to whom repentance would not be granted. Since, however, John is writing well after Yeshua's ascension into heaven, it seems highly unlikely that he would be referring only to those who may still have been alive and who were among those who claimed Yeshua's miracles to have been performed via the power of the devil.

In seeking to find John's meaning in these verses, we must give full attention both to the immediate context as well as to the specifics of the Greek text as we have it. In terms of the immediate context, it is clear that John is exhorting us to practice intercessory prayer for fellow believers. In v. 15 he emphasizes that our prayers are heard by the Almighty and He will always answer our prayers.

And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1Jn 5:15)

Given this reality, that God hears our prayers and provides us with that which is in accordance with His will, John's point in the following verses is that we should regularly be interceding for fellow believers, particularly those within our own community, for he writes "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin...",<sup>1</sup> which seems clearly to indicate someone with whom others are closely associated, as well as someone who is a "brother." The use of "brother" seems certain to indicate the person for whom one intercedes is viewed as a fellow believer. Of the 15 times the word "brother/brethren" (ἀδελφός/ἀδελφοί) is found in 1John, 14 are clearly referring to believers in Yeshua. The only exception is 3:13 which speaks of Cain who slew his brother.

Thus, when John begins v. 16 with "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin...", it is certain he is referring to someone within the believing community who is viewed and accepted as a believer. Obviously, whether the person is genuinely a child of God through faith in Messiah can only be ultimately ascertained as that person perseveres in the ways of God's grace and bears fruit in concert with his or her confession.

But John's emphasis in these verses is simply this: that when one sees his fellow believer committing a sin, he should be confident that prayerful intercession on behalf of that person will both be received by God and answered by restoring the person if, in fact, that person

---

1 The Greek actually has "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin...", *Εάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν...*

is truly a child of God by faith in Yeshua, and the reason is that “there is sin not leading to death” (literally, “there is sin not to death,” ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον).

The larger question is this: what does John mean by “There is a sin leading to death” (literally “there is a sin to death” (ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον)). As noted above, the idea that by “death” John is referring to capital punishment seems contrary to the context, for it hardly seems likely that John would be exhorting his readers not to intercede in prayer for someone who had committed a capital offense. Rather, when John speaks of “death” in these verses, it seems quite certain that he is referring to eternal death, i.e., the penalty given to those who die as unbelievers: “The wages of sin is death....” (Rom 6:23).

It may well be that John has taken his cue from the Gospel texts and the words of Yeshua regarding those who have blasphemed the Holy Spirit, who consequently will therefore not be forgiven, and has used this as parallel with those who have openly denied Yeshua and continue to persist in their unbelief. For surely failure to accept Yeshua by faith as the only Savior of sinners is likewise to be assured of death eternally.

But is John teaching us in these verses that we should not intercede in prayer for those who have, at one time, confessed Yeshua to be their Messiah and Savior, but who consequently have denied Him? The answer is “no” for a couple of reasons. First, as Westcott has shown, the negative in the phrase of v. 16 (as the NASB has it), “I do not say that he should make request for this” (οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ) could just as well be understood to mean “I’m not talking about that sin that leads to death....”<sup>1</sup>

Second, understanding the Greek in this way allows vv. 16–17 to remain consistent with John’s main point in the immediate context, namely, that we should intercede for a brother or sister who is sinning. Thus John is not issuing a prohibition for intercessory prayer in a particular situation but rather enjoins this upon us regardless of the circumstances. This means that even for those who have openly denied Yeshua, there still may be a time when they will repent and return to a walk of genuine faith in Yeshua, and it is this for which we should pray.

Thus, what John is emphasizing is that in the case where someone has sinned by denying Yeshua and who repents of this sin, then this is not a sin unto death. To pray for someone who has denied Yeshua, yet

1 See Westcott, *1John*, p. 192; Randall K. J. Tan, “Should We Pray for Straying Brethren? John’s Confidence in 1 John 5:16–17” *JETS* 45.4 (Dec., 2002), pp. 599–609.

they never repent, this is what identifies the sin as “unto death.” John’s point, therefore, is this: when we pray for someone who is a true believer, even in a time when this person denies Yeshua, we will receive our request for his or her return even as John states in v. 15, because those who belong to Yeshua will never be eternally lost. Consider this in regard to Peter’s denial of Yeshua. Before the denial even took place, Yeshua Himself, fully aware that this would happen, states:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. (Lk 22:31f)

Here we see our Lord interceding for Peter, the outcome of which is Peter’s repentance and return to his walk of faith in Yeshua.

But we do not have the ability to know whether a confessed believer who denies Yeshua will be granted repentance and return or will persist in their denial and unbelief. Should we then refrain from intercession on their behalf because we cannot be certain of their true heart condition? John’s point in our text is “no,” for since we have no way of knowing if the person’s sin in this instance is “unto death” or not, we must intercede in prayer for them. If they return in repentance and faith, then we know that their sin was “not unto death.” But if there is never any return, then we know that the reason we have not received our request is that the sin in which they are engaged is, in fact, the sin unto death.

With this interpretation before us, we could give an expanded paraphrase of vv. 16–17 as follows:

If any one sees his brother, one who has confessed faith in Yeshua, who is currently not walking in ways of righteousness but is sinning in a way that does not lead to eternal death, he should intercede in prayer to God for his brother, and God will bring him back to his faith and righteous living, which will be proof that he was not sinning unto death. Granted, there can be a circumstance where a person confesses faith in Yeshua, then denies Him, and never comes to repentance. This is not to prove that intercessory prayer is powerless, but rather that he was sinning the sin that leads to eternal death. But I’m not talking about that situation, for only God knows the heart, and since not all sin is that which marks a person as an apostate (never to be granted repentance), we must intercede in prayer for a confessed believer who is seen to be sinning. Because while all unrighteousness is sin, there is sin



that does not eventuate in eternal death but when the one sinning is granted repentance, that sin can be overcome and such perseverance in the faith is the mark of every true believer.

**18 We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.**

Having taught on the subject of interceding in prayer for a brother who is seen sinning, John now comes to the final part of his epistle and gives three important summary statements, each beginning with “We know” (Οἶδαμεν, *oidamen*). The first established truth which John emphasizes flows naturally from the previous context, for the confessed believer who is seen sinning will inevitably repent and turn from such sin if he is, in fact, a true child of God. This is because one who is born of God has been born again to a new life, a new way of thinking, and a new way of living. What is more, the one who is born of God has been given the ability to overcome sin and to live in righteousness, gaining victory over the ways of the world. Thus, as John taught us in the previous verses, the brother or sister who is sinning is proven to be a genuine child of God when he or she repents, meaning turns from the sin and lives in victory over sin.

That John opens the verse with “We know” emphasizes that this is a truth that is without dispute, and something that is fundamental in the life of every true believer. And this is primarily because the believer has experienced a death and also a new birth which always issues in new life, and thus a new way of living. The one who is born from above is born of God and is therefore no longer of the world nor controlled by the things of the world.

The opening line of our verse is nearly identical with that of 3:9.

“No one who is born of God practices sin....”

Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ,  
(Anyone who is born of God, sin he does not do....)

“We know that no one who is born of God sins....”

Οἶδαμεν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει  
(We know that anyone who is born of God is not sinning....)

Likewise, our current verse reiterates the truths of 3:6.

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. (1Jn 3:6)