

Opening Words

Is it possible that some of God's people go so far into sin that we should stop praying for them? It's a great question, with a surprising answer.

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In our previous messages we have looked at five steps that will take us from childhood praying to mature praying. We also have looked at 1 John 5:16 where John talks about praying for brothers and sisters who are in sin.

John says, "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray, and God will give him life." This is the way most situations resolve. In my ministry I have had to be part of church discipline situations only a handful of times. When people respond the right way, it is time for rejoicing knowing that you have rescued people from their foolish choices and placed them on the right path. But often, people just leave, when you start to approach the situation – even if you approach it with love. They don't want to deal with their sin. Either they are ashamed, or they are stubborn and want to continue in their behavior, and then there's nothing more you can do except to pray. These are the tragic situations when you have done everything you can, you have prayed, you have gone to them, you have pleaded and still they will not turn from their sin and then you have to give them over to God. Let's look at our verse in 1 John 5:16.

¹⁶If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray, and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.

What a frightful verse. What a frightful scenario. There is a sin that does lead to death, John says, and we should not even pray about that. Some people say, "What kind of sin leads to death?" No one knows exactly what John had in mind.

We do know from other passages of Scripture that some Christians were struck down dead in the first century.

Listen to this story from Acts 5.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹ Then Peter *said* to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*.” ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

I have heard people say, “I wish we could have the power of the first-century church.” Great thought! I have said the same myself on many occasions. It is something we should desire, but we must realize the sword cuts both ways. God’s power is not just to perform miracles in the world but to produce holiness in the church. First-century power includes the fear of God and the consequences of lying to God. Here’s another passage, I Corinthians 11:28-30.

²⁸ That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

Do you see what Paul said? In the church of Corinth, many people were sick, unnecessarily, because they were taking the Lord’s Supper in an unrighteous way. Some people even died prematurely from the discipline of the Lord. God is the God of life and death. Life is a gift. It is not to be squandered as we please. Sin is bad for us and it dishonors Him. If we live only by His grace, then He also has the right to take life away, especially if our life dishonors Him.

One of the great needs of the church is the fear of God. After Ananias and Sapphira died in front of the apostles, here is what happened in the church; great fear seized the church and all who heard about these events. The deaths seemed like such a negative thing but look at how Luke, the writer of Acts describes the church a few months later in Acts 9:31.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

This is healthy. If churches have only the love of God, they slide into mushy, sentimental, feel-good, cotton candy communities that never grow deep. If churches have only the fear of God, they slide into legalistic, rigid, hypocritical communities that put people into bondage. God wants His people filled with love and righteousness.

Some of you may be fearful. That could be a good thing. I pray for the fear of God in your life as I pray for it also in my life, to be sobered up, and not to play around the edges of sin but to stay as far from it as I can.

Unfortunately, some of God’s people play with sin too much and they get sucked into it, go too far, never repent, and God disciplines them with the ultimate discipline – premature death. I believe this is what John is referring to in this passage when he says there are some sins that people

commit and that we should not pray for them. I wish I had discernment to know when to pray and when not to pray. I think we should always pray when we feel led to pray but evidently there are some situations where God says, “Enough praying! No more! I must step in and deal with this person.” This is what happened in ancient Israel when God told the prophet Jeremiah three times not to pray for the people. Listen to Jeremiah 7:16 – “As for you, do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me; for I do not hear you.” This did not mean they were not the people of God, but God was telling Jeremiah, “I am not going to hear your prayer or their prayers to save them from the consequences of their sin. I am not going to save them from the Babylonians. I am going to let the Babylonians destroy the city and the temple and carry them off to slavery.” It was a death, of sorts, for Israel and Jerusalem and the temple. I believe John had similar thoughts in mind when he said there are some situations where prayer is no longer effective.

This is something to think about, isn't it! Well, thankfully, John also doesn't end the passage this way. He ends with a word of comfort. Look at it with me one more time.

¹⁶If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. ¹⁸We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

Yes, we are all sinners. All wrongdoing is sin, and when we sin that doesn't mean that God is going to zap us down at that moment. John wrote earlier in the letter that there is One who stands for us – Jesus Christ Himself, the Righteous One. He is the One who is our Courtroom Attorney, our defense attorney, our advocate. He is the One who comes to our side and puts His arm around us in order to pick us up and lead us back to the path.

He does something else for us. He protects us from the evil one. Look at verse 18. “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin,” i.e., he doesn't continue to indulge in a sinful lifestyle as if nothing is wrong with it. When you come to Christ you just can't continue living that way anymore. It bothers you. You know that's not who you really are and so you seek forgiveness and help in the journey.

Then, John gives a word of comfort, the One who was born of God (Jesus) keeps him safe from the evil one. Jesus puts one arm around us to pick us up and he uses the other arm to push back the evil one who would destroy us. That's a great Savior. That's a great God who is holy and yet at the same time gracious to us.

Friends, this should cause us to pray for ourselves and for one another. We have looked at five steps to grow from childhood praying to mature praying. We have looked at situations where we see our brothers and sisters in sin, and we pray for them and seek to restore them. We have looked at some situations that are beyond prayer and God says, “Leave them to me.”

Word of God, Speak – Churches in Danger! – 1 John
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But in it all, the reason we can have confidence in praying is that God is for us. God keeps us. God wards off the attacks of the evil one. Greater is the one in us than the one in the world. May God fill you with his Spirit and guide you into mature praying for your life, your family, and for the Church.