

Praying for Sinning Christians

By Don Green

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Truth Community Church
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road
Cincinnati, OH 45255

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

The text that we have here today is of particular significance, a unique significance for us to determine how we respond to the text that's in front of us today collectively is going to have a defining impact on what kind of church this is going to be over the course of time. It's that important how we view ourselves as Christians, how we view our position before God, how we use our position before God is going to have a defining impact on the way that we relate to one another in the body of Christ and the kind of spiritual environment we set for those who are coming along beside us and coming along after us. 1 John 5. I'm going to read in verses 13 through 17 and I'll explain and expand on what I mean as we go along here with those opening comments but I want you to have a particular sense of urgency, a fresh sense of urgency as you hear the word of God today because the things that I'm about to say to you over the next 50 minutes or so are going to be a little bit different than the way that you're used to thinking about the topic at hand and it's just so vital and so crucial that we view ourselves in the presence of God in the right way and that we use our privileges before God in the way that he intends us to do.

1 John 5, in verse 13 we'll start even though we preached that verse a couple of weeks ago. Watch the flow of thought here, chapter 5, verse 13,

13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 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.

Now verse 16,

16 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. 17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

Now, what are these five verses saying to us? It's building to a crescendo really and in some ways this is really the concluding passage of 1 John. We'll finish the text in verses 18 to 21 next week but it's building to a crescendo that instructs us about life in the body of Christ and the way that we view one another and how we respond to one another in the body of Christ and this is so urgent and important, I can't begin to impress the importance of it on your minds enough. Watch the train of thought here, in verse 13, John has said, "Everything that I have written up to this point was so that you would know that you have eternal life." He has written everything from chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 5, verse 12, to impart to us who are Christians a confident assurance that we truly belong to the Lord Jesus Christ; that our sins truly have been washed away by his blood; that judgment holds no fear for us; and therefore we can move forward with confidence even though we are walking as Christians in the midst of a world that hates us. That's what everything was designed to accomplish and what he had written up until that point and I won't take the time to reestablish that in your minds from things that we've looked at in the past.

So up to this point he said, "I've written these things so that you may know that you have eternal life." Now, here's the question that we addressed last week: now that you have that assurance, we're assuming that, yes, you're a true Christian, yes, you see the marks, you know why you have confidence that you're a Christian, and now the question is, well, what comes next? And what we said last time was that too many people think that the idea of assurance is to let you therefore set aside your concern for spiritual life as though, "Well, I'm going to go to heaven and therefore now I'm free to live anyway I want because I've settled the issue of salvation." I know you've been instructed that way many times in the past but the whole thrust of what John says in verses 14 and 15 is exactly the opposite. You see, God brings us, God gives us assurance not so that we can move on to something else, not so that we can move on to something somehow more important, he gives us assurance so that we can confidently and seriously devote ourselves to the pursuit of his will during the years he gives us here on earth. That is so vitally important for you to grasp and understand.

Look at verse 14 with me. We said last time that verse 13 and verse 14 is joined by the conjunction "and"; you have this assurance and now what do you do with it in verse 14 now that you have this confidence before him, what do you do with it? And what we said last time was: we seek his will. Assurance doesn't make us careless Christians, beloved. It doesn't mean that we can be indifferent to spiritual life. Assurance is the foundation upon which we seriously seek to carry out the will of God in the circumstances that he has appointed for us in our individual lives and we devote ourselves to that wholeheartedly and we can do that with confidence and without fear because we have assurance that our salvation is real. So assurance is designed to fuel serious devotion to Christ, not indifference to spiritual matters. We see that in verse 14, he says, "This is our confidence if we ask anything according to His will." What motivates us in prayer is a seeking of the will of God, not the pursuit of our own selfish pleasures. "Not what we want, Lord Jesus, but thy will be done." Just as our Lord prayed in Gethsemane, we pray just like he did. "Lord, this life isn't about seeking what I want, this is about seeking what you want and I'm confident that I can seek that in a fruitful way because I belong to you and when I pray that way you hear me," verse 14.

Now, verse 15. Watch this, we're building up to something really serious and important about life in the body of Christ here. I can't tell you how important this is. Okay, so verse 13, we have assurance; verse 14, we use assurance to be serious seekers of the will of God. That means part of that is that God has given us the privilege of prayer. Watch this, verse 15, "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." So we are true Christians. We've been united to our Lord Jesus Christ. Our sins are forgiven. We stand in this great noble position before God as children of his family. We call to him as our heavenly Father and he says, "Whatever you ask according to my will, I will grant to you." Wow. This is really cool. This is really awesome. You have a voice in the throne room of God. You have a voice in the presence of God that he says he will honor and respond to and answer your requests in a favorable way. Tremendous.

Now, it's at this very point that we at Truth Community Fellowship diverge greatly from the health and wealth movement that says, "Oh, if we have this privilege, then I am going to ask for the things that I want to make my life good. I want wealth. I want health. I want all of these other things. God, give this to me," as if the Son of God who came to be a servant would bestow that privilege on us so that instead of being a servant we would become selfish and use God as a means to what we want in our earthly life. Isn't that an abominable thought? This is terrible to think that way. It's a terrible way to live to say, "I have this great exalted privilege and now I'm going to use it for myself. Hey, this is good. Whatever I ask, I can have. So, Lord, let me tick off my want list before you and I'm going to patiently tap my fingers until you give it to me." Beloved, do you see that that couldn't possibly be the true spirit of true Christianity? That can't possibly be right. If the Son of God left heaven, came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many, if he was motivated by the well-being of the flock of God which he purchased with his own blood, then it can't possibly be that that incomprehensibly great selfless spirit of Christ was designed to produce incomprehensibly selfish disciples who use God as a means to accomplish what they want in their earthly life. That can't be right. That's not true Christianity.

Now, the question is then: what do we do with this? We have assurance. We have this position before God where whatever we ask he says according to his will he will grant to us, what do we do with that great position? Assurance motivates us to pray because God hears us favorably, how do we pray in light of those themes? Here's the answer, beloved: we pray so that others in the body of Christ would receive the spiritual benefit of our prayers. We pray so that others would receive the spiritual benefit of our prayers. This changes everything. This is the principle that I'm going to expand on and those of you that are visiting, I'm glad you're here. Those of you that are here at Truth Community Fellowship and intend to make this your long-term spiritual home, I'm asking you to embrace what we are about to hear as the guiding principle in your relationships in the body of Christ and the way that you approach prayer because if we do this collectively, corporately and individually together, it's going to change the future of what this church would otherwise be. I can't tell you how important this is. This changes everything and we're going to build today's message around two principles.

But as we do, let's look at verse 16 and 17 which is our primary text for this morning. Remember that verse 16 flows out of what happened in verses 14 and 15. This is our confidence in prayer that if we ask anything according to the will of God he hears us. We know that we have the request which we have asked from him if he hears us in whatever we ask and so the question is: what do we ask for then? Verse 16, here is your answer to that question. Here is where you align your prayer life with the purposes of God for his church. Here is where you align yourself with the purposes of being a body together in a local assembly. Verse 16, "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."

Point 1 here this morning is we're going to see the expectation of effective intercession. That's a long point, isn't it? The expectation of effective intercession. What John's about to show us is how we can expect to pray effectively and know that we have aligned ourselves with the purposes of God when we pray and that as we do that, we're going to see how God responds and somehow uses our prayers to accomplish his purposes in the life of his body, and what we see in light of the fact that we have such a selfless Savior, we see that we pray selflessly for the sake of others in the body and what we pray for them, it's okay to pray for the physical things and all of that, but what we have to set our mind on, where we set our heart on is this, is that we ask God to help other Christians grow in holiness. Let me say that again. This is the focus of prayer, we ask God to help other Christians grow in holiness and you see this in verse 16. Flowing out of this statement of prayer in verses 14 and 15, John is continuing, he's building on his theme here and he says, "If you see your brother committing a sin not leading to death, ask God to help him. Ask God and God will give life to him, to those who commit sin not leading to death." So here's the picture: he's picturing us going to God in prayer and we remember, "Oh, So-and-so is struggling over here. In fact, he's actually in sin in his life right now."

Now, we all understand because we all operate this way ourselves and we've been in churches where we see this happen, you've got to recognize the junction point that we are at here, the fork in the road that we're at mentally and in the future of our church. The temptation, I would dare to say the fairly normal response in our fallen, sinful conditions when we see a brother in sin is to start gossiping about it; to start talking about it to someone else; to start judging them; to start being critical of them and feeling somewhat self-righteous about the fact that we are not in that particular sin ourselves. You know that we are like that. You know that we're like that. When we see that, beloved, I daresay that our first impulse as Christians is not to immediately go to God in prayer for them, it's to stand apart from them and to start to cackle about it. And what John is saying here is that our perspective about it has to be completely different. You see, this passage is very, very practical for our relationships as Christians. It teaches us how to respond when we see Christians sin; when we see each other falling short of the glory of God in our individual Christian lives. How do we respond to that, is the point of this passage.

Now, think about it this way: we understand what to do in the physical realm, we see somebody suffering physically, somebody short of the means that they need or they have needs that they can't meet on their own, well, we use our physical means, we use our resources to relieve that physical suffering within the body of Christ. We help one another out that way and that's good and proper, that's what we should do. What we have to do here, beloved, what we have to do is we have to extend that into the invisible realm. The way that we respond in the physical realm is an illustration of the way that we respond in the invisible realm, in the spiritual realm as we operate in the relationships within the body of Christ. This passage is teaching us how to respond to spiritual need in the body of Christ. Love responds to these physical needs and says, "Oh, let me help you with this. Here, I've got something for you. Here, let me take that burden off your hands." Well, you see beloved, that spirit which we better understand and better operate in the physical realm is the exact same principle of, "I'll use my resources to help you," is the exact same attitude that we take in the spiritual realm. Now, follow me. Please don't lose me here. Please don't lose me here. Here's the way that we're supposed to think about this in the whole context of verses 13 through 17, we say, "I have a privileged position before God. God says that he will answer my requests that are according to his will and therefore I have a spiritual resource." You and I as Christians have a spiritual resource at our hands that, follow me, we can use to benefit the Christians that are around us. Just as if you had an abundance of financial resources and you generously give out of that, so the spirit of generosity in prayer becomes, "Father, how can I help my brothers and sisters in Christ with this great spiritual resource that you have given to me?" And it changes everything.

We understand that, you and I, we understand that we are going to fall short of the glory of God in our walk with Christ. We understand. We are realistic based on an informed understanding from the Scriptures that we are going to see as we walk together through life in the body of Christ, we are going to see people stumble from time to time. That doesn't mean that we accept that or promote it or any of that, we just realize that we are surrounded by people who are weak in flesh just like we are, just like you are, just like I am. So rather than viewing them with a critical, harsh spirit, we view them sympathetically. We say, "Oh, they're struggling with the flesh, you know, I do too. Is there anything I could do to help them?" There is, "Dear God, my brother is struggling. My brother is stumbling here. I ask you, dear God, to help him. I pray that you would lift him up out of that sin that he is stumbling in right now. I pray that you would exercise the power of your Spirit upon his life so that he would walk in the holiness that you desire rather than the sinful path that he has chosen here right now." That's how we pray to help them. You see, the whole point of assurance is that we have come to a mature understanding of what salvation looks like. We understand the nature of salvation and that it's supposed to produce obedience in the lives of God's people and we love God's people and we know that obedience is the place of blessing for them. So because we love them, because we care about them, because we're concerned about the glory of God more than we are our personal circumstances, we pray for them with a sympathetic heart and say, "God, I see him committing sin. God, please help him because I know that you answer my prayers that are according to your will and, Father, I know it's your will for your children to walk in obedience to you. Unleash your power on their lives so that they

would walk in a way that better glorifies you than what they're doing right now. Father, I pray this not out of a critical spirit, I pray this not out of a judgmental spirit, I pray because you have invited me to your throne. I love my brothers and sisters in Christ. They are struggling, dear God, I therefore pray for them and I pray that you would do and increase their sanctification all the more."

That's what it's saying in verse 16, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask," he shall ask. It's the natural expected response that we would pray for one another in this way as we walked together in the body of Christ. And what's the outcome of that? In fitting with what he had just said in verse 15, we know we have the requests which we have asked from God, fitting with that, we go and we ask God and what happens? Verse 16, "God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death." God will aid them. God will impart further benefit, further spiritual power to them. God will be motivated, watch this, by your faithful, humble, intercession for other Christians. He will take that and use that and make them better Christians than if you hadn't prayed for them to begin with.

Now, listen, if we have that kind of power in our hands, so to speak, if we have that kind of influence at the throne of God then, beloved, isn't it incumbent upon us to use it that way for those that share in life in the local assembly together? This is how we are to pray for one another. It's okay if you forget to pray for somebody's physical need. You know, that stuff comes and goes. I want to elevate before you this priority in prayer. This priority and this teaching in this passage teaches us to look at one another sympathetically. This teaches us to view one another from the perspective that we share in a life walking in this hostile world environment and we realize that we need one another, we need to support one another in that and because I care for you, I pray for you that God would help you walk more faithfully with him as you go through this life in a hostile world, and it means that you pray that way for me too. This is the way that we pray for one another.

So when we see spiritual struggles around us, this isn't our opportunity to lift ourselves up and, "Huh, I'm not like that." Beloved, this is the time when we see that, that we get down and we humble ourselves and we say, "God, it can't be this way. I love them too much. I want them to know the fullness of your blessing in their lives. I want your name to be glorified through their lives. It's too important and, God, I know that you hear me when I pray and therefore I'm using this privileged position I have before you and asking you to do that for them which I couldn't begin to do. I can't exercise spiritual power over them." I can't even as a pastor, I have no spiritual power over you. I can't increase your sanctification by anything that I do. It takes God to do that. Well, we realize that God has the power to do that. We realize that he has promised to respond to our prayers as we live this way and we realize that these people that we love that are around us will benefit from us and so that motivates us to pray. And we pray with sympathy, we pray with compassion, we pray with an urgency rather than going about with our nose lifted up, as it were, "I'm glad I'm not like that." Right? You get this, right? Someone can nod and say, "Yeah, yeah, I get it." This is what we do.

Now, think about it this way. Let's bring Christ right into the middle of it. Beloved, we're just talking about following after the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's all we're talking about. Think about it this way: before his incarnation Christ was living in heaven as full deity surrounded by the worship of angels in glory with communion with his Father. That was a great place to be and he had this whole wealth of spiritual resource at his disposal. What did he do with that? Beloved, he saw you in your spiritual need, as it were, I'm describing temporally something that is an eternal reality; he saw you in your need and said, "I'm going to set this aside. I'm going to use my position in obedience to my Father, I'm going to use my position to benefit you." He left heaven to benefit you. From a position of perfect impeccable holiness, seeing you in your rebellion and judgment and said, "I have a position here that I can use to help them. I will do that. I will spend 33 years on earth, as it were, marching toward the cross and men will spit on me," as we read earlier in our Scripture reading out of Mark. "I know that men will spit on me. I know that men will scourge me. I know that they will lift me up. I know that they will crucify me but I have such a spiritual resource that I want to use it to benefit those who will one day become my brethren." And he did that and now you have an assurance of salvation if you're in Christ as a result of that. Where he could have rightfully zapped thunderbolts of judgment upon this rebellious creation of his, this rebellious earth, upon us, he stepped down in love. Motivated by the great love of his godly heart, he stepped down in love to redeem you, not sharing in your sin, but taking it upon his shoulders so that you could have eternal life. Well, now here we are on the other side of the cross some time later and we don't have the same exalted position that Christ does but we have a privileged position before the throne of God and the same love for sinful people that motivated Christ now becomes our motivation and prayer in the body of Christ. "Wow, do you know what? He doesn't get it at all. You know, he is so self-centered. He is so abrasive in his relationship with Christ. Father, I pray for him. I pray that you would soften his heart. I pray that you would help him be truthful in his dealings. I pray that you would bring him along, Father, and Father, while you're doing that, do some more work in my own heart, would you?"

Turn over to the book of Galatians 6. You can see this same spirit expressed in Paul's writing in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass," okay, we're talking about sin in the body of Christ, "you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." And so Scripture tells us that we're going to deal with people falling short of the glory of God in the body of Christ and the question is those of us who are walking in the Spirit, how do we respond to that? Well, check yourself right at this very point, check yourself that your spirit would be animated by gentleness and that you would be seeking the restoration of the one around you and that starts, as we read 1 John 5, that starts with our spirit in prayer. "God, without anyone even saying anything to him if possible, just work in his heart so that he'd turn and he would walk with you and he'd step out of that sin and back into this path of sanctification." And God, it says in this passage, God moves the sinning believer to turn from sin as part of, watch this, as part of his faithfulness to us when we pray. God is faithful to us when we pray this way. God will give that request to us and we are happy to pray this way because we want to use prayer to benefit those around us.

Turn over to the Gospel of John 17:13. This is exactly how Jesus prayed for you, beloved, before his crucifixion. He said in verse 13, "now I come to You," he's praying to his Father and he says, "now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves." Father, I want the joy that I have, I want them to know and so I'm going to pray for them now. Verse 14, "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." Do you see what's motivating him? It's exactly what we were talking about just a few minutes ago. He's mindful of the fact that his disciples are in the midst of a hostile world that hates them and so he's concerned, he knows that that's a threat to their spiritual well-being and so he says, "I'm mindful of this and therefore I'm praying to you on their behalf." Verse 15, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world," I'll be specific here, Father, what I'm praying, "I just ask You to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." Sanctify them, Father. Help them grow in righteousness. It's the exact same thing that John is calling us to in 1 John 5.

It's the exact same thing and what I want you to see here, beloved, look at verse 20. Oh, watch this. For the love of Christ, if you have any sympathy toward the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, look at this, verse 20 in John 17. He says, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," not just for these 11 disciples that are left in the upper room, "I don't ask on behalf of these alone but for those also who believe in Me through their word." That's you and me. We have believed through the word of the apostles and so Christ prayed the same way for you and me. So we see out of love, we see out of example for Christ, we see everything that we need to motivate us to make this our priority in prayer. "Father, promote joy in them. Father, keep them from the evil one."

Let's look at one more passage from Jesus. Look at Luke 22. Jesus even shows a proactive dimension to this, it's not purely reactive waiting until after the sin occurs in order to respond this way. This holiness that motivated his prayers for others, he prayed this way for them before they even sinned to begin with. Chapter 22 of Luke, verse 31, "Simon, Simon," talking to Peter, you remember the story, "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." Here's what I'm asking you for based on these Scriptures, here's what I'm asking from you, beloved: view your prayer life as an instrument to help other believers walk better with the Lord. That's why we pray. For the glory of God and because we love each other, we pray this way for one another. You see, I hope that you're starting to see how this changes the dynamic of life in a local body because when you're on your knees, when you're filled with compassion and concern for someone to walk well with the Lord, that attitude drives out the spirit of gossip and criticism and condemnation. You can't have those two things side-by-side. You can't have your own flesh puffed up because you're not in that particular situation that they're in, you're not guilty of that; you can't be puffed up about that and at the same time on your knees before God consciously seeking their spiritual well-being before God.

And here's the thing, beloved, this is what could be really exciting about Truth Community Fellowship: when you gather together a group of Christians who are praying this way and we walk in on Sunday morning and we say, "Oh, do you know what? You know, I know Amanda prays for me this way and I pray for John that way. You know, and I know that Karen prays that way for Tim." Then there is a whole different spiritual dynamic that starts to define, oh listen, that starts to define the way that body life lives out over time. We love each other. Your pastor loves you and you love your pastor and we pray for each other. We are mindful. We accept the fact that we've got weaknesses and things that we are going to mess up on but we're taking a big picture of it and we relate to each other completely differently and we carry each other through the week before the throne of God in prayer, "Father, help them walk with you." God says, "I'll answer that prayer. I'm just waiting for you to ask." That intercession has effective results. This is how we use our assurance. This is how we use our position before God.

Now, there's an exception to this that John goes into and this brings us to our second point. We've seen the expectation of effective intercession; we expect this to produce visible results because God has promised to answer our prayers and we love one another and we pray that way but there is an exception. Point 2: the exception to effective intercession. The expectation and the exception to effective intercession. The results of our intercession are not always what we would expect based on what John has said up until this point and we have to be mindful of this. He gives a little qualification that doesn't change what we do in prayer, it changes our expectation in a particular way.

Look at the end of verse 16, "There is," he says, "God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death." God will generate greater holiness. He will produce a repentant response in the action that he takes in response to our prayers, alright? But John is making clear that he's not making an unqualified statement about this with what he says at the end of verse 16, "There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this." Whoa, that sounds kind of mysterious, doesn't it? And you immediately say, "Well, what's that sin and have I committed it? Has anyone I know committed it? And what do you mean I shouldn't make request for it?" That's a difficult little passage here. It's an obscure passage and commentators differ widely over its meaning. What is this sin that leads to death? We've had a broad avenue paved for us, "Pray for believers who are sinning so that God will restore them and promote greater holiness in their lives," okay? That's the bigger context. We're going down a big freeway where all of our cars are meant to be driving on so here, understand there's just a little exit ramp, there's a little exit ramp. This isn't meant to take all of our attention on the issue, it's just saying there's an exception here.

There's an exit ramp that you need to be aware of and let me just quickly go through what some possible views of what this sin unto death might be, alright? I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it. Some people say that it refers to the Old Testament classification of sins that required the death penalty: rebellious kid, you could stone him kind of thing. Some people think that that's what John is talking about here. I don't think that's right. I don't think that's the answer because nothing here in the context is talking about the Old Testament, it's talking about the body of Christ. I don't think anything in the context

supports that view. Others think that John is referring to a sin that leads to eternal death like the blasphemy of the Spirit that you've read in Mark 3 or perhaps in Matthew. You know, Jesus said there is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and you're guilty of an eternal sin. Other people think that it refers to the false teachers who abandon the faith. Look at 1 John 2:22, turn back just a page. We're ticking off these possibilities real quickly here. Chapter 2, verse 22, "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son." Well, some people say, "Well, that's obviously such a serious sin that there is death and condemnation in that, maybe that's what John is talking about in the sin that leads to death." Maybe it's the Old Testament, maybe it's blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, maybe it's this severe false teacher category that we deal with.

Now look, those views aren't unreasonable but I think they're mistaken. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and false teaching are deadly sins but that's not what John is talking about in this context. He says, watch this, look at the start of verse 16 again, he says, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death." That refers to a Christian. He's referring to a Christian who is somehow sinning and so if that's true, stay with me here, if that's true, the sin unto death can't be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because Jesus says that has no forgiveness. It can't be false teachers who abandon the faith, they weren't Christians to begin with, 1 John 2:19. So what does John mean when he says there is a sin that leads to death and I don't say that he should make request for this? Well, here's what I want to show to you is what I think is the preferred view and it's sobering. John is referring to the physical death of a sinning believer. He's referring to a believer who has sinned to such a point that God disciplines him by taking away his physical life.

Let's look at the big picture here. God takes holiness seriously, right? God is a holy God and he takes holiness seriously, a whole lot more seriously than we do. God takes holiness seriously. Look over at Hebrews 12. I'm going to kind of build an argument here for you, argument in the sense of presenting something persuasive, not a disagreement. God takes holiness seriously. Hebrews 12:4, the writer says, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin," you see, here it is again, we are pursuing holiness. Verse 5, "and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him,'" look at this, verse 6 those of you that are going through struggles right now, just know that God takes you through struggles to promote your holiness. Verse 6, "'For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." Stay with me here, beloved, verse 9, "Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For," verse 10, "they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them." It's a sympathetic nod to fathers who do their best in raising their kids. They did it for short time in that 18-20 year period that they had us, "but He," God, "disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." You see, to become a Christian is a

pretty serious thing. We enter into a relationship with a holy God who designs our holiness and we in our imperfect condition need to be disciplined and scourged so that we would grow in holiness ourselves. That's the purpose of God in your life is for you to grow in holiness. This is why we go through trials of different kinds, it's because God is teaching us to love this world and to love sin less and to grow more in our affection for holiness and our conscious pursuit of it.

Holiness, here's the only point of that for now: God takes holiness seriously and he disciplines his people in order to promote holiness. Okay, are you with me? You're with me, right? Somebody can nod, it's all right. It's okay to respond to the preacher during the preaching of God's word. That won't get you in trouble anywhere. God takes holiness seriously and he promotes it in the believers. Now, keeping in mind that we said in 1 John there is a sin that leads to death, "Whoa, whoa, God disciplines his people but do you mean to say that sometimes that discipline would take the form of physically taking their life away? Come on, you're kidding, right?" I'm not kidding. God disciplines his people even unto death. We have scriptural examples of this and you need to see them.

Look over at the book of Acts 5. People in the body of Christ operating in the sphere of the church dying for their sin. Acts 5, and this should promote in each one of us a healthy sense of the fear of God as we consider this topic. Some of us have just been far too flippant in our approach to the Christian life, haven't we? Chapter 5, verse 1, they are in a meeting of the early church, "a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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." You know what happens here. You know this story. Verse 3, "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? 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.' And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it." He died for his sin. That was the discipline that God brought upon him in the early life of the church. The same thing happened to his wife later in the passage. We won't take time to go there.

Turn over to 1 Corinthians 5. Again, sin in the life of the body. So, 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul dealing with the Corinthian church and the sin, a gross sin that was in their midst. "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles." You're sinning worse than what your surrounding culture does, "that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead," you see, their response was all wrong about it; they didn't take sin seriously; they didn't mourn over it before God; they weren't praying about this and dealing with it. They just became arrogant and tolerated it. Paul said, "You should have mourned so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst." Verse 3, "I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus," the Lord Jesus who is God, the God who desires holiness among his people,

right? We just looked at that in Hebrews 12. Paul says, verse 5, "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." There is this sin and it leads to physical death. He needs to die for his sin, Paul says. "I have given him over to Satan because this sin is polluting the body of Christ in a completely unacceptable way." Paul says the time for praying here is over. It's time to purge this sin out of the church.

Let's look at one more in 1 Corinthians 11. All I'm wanting you to see is that there is this principle of God dealing with people by removing their life, their physical life, because he won't tolerate their sin anymore. 1 Corinthians 11:28, speaking in the context of communion. We read this almost every time we celebrate communion, don't we? "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly." Verse 30, "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." It's a metaphor for death. Many have died as a result of this, Paul says. "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world."

Listen, beloved, let's kind of pull all of this together. This passage in 1 John 5 is difficult. What does the sin unto death mean? When you come to a difficult passage, you use Scripture to interpret Scripture in order to make sense of it. Well, taken together, these passages from Acts and Corinthians and Hebrews, please follow me, they're not describing one specific sin that calls forth the lightning bolt of God because the sins were different: in one it was lying; in one it was physical immorality; in another, it was having a high-handed arrogance toward the table of the Lord. And there was death that flowed as a consequence in all of those situations and so taken together, these passages are not describing one specific sin that leads to death and if you commit that sin, man, it's over and you're gone. It's just a question of when you're going to get toasted. No, that's not the idea at all. Follow me here: what John is describing, what the Scriptures describe is that the sin that leads to death in the context of the body of Christ is not a particular kind of sin but, watch this and this makes sense, it makes a whole lot more sense, but a defiant believer who deliberately insults the holiness of God. You've come to a point, now let's step back and kind of take a breath and bring this back into the whole point, the whole context of 1 John 5 that we're talking about here. We're saying that as an assembly, as a body together, we pray for one another even when we see each other drifting into sin. We say, "God, help them. I pray that you would help them." And they keep going and you keep praying, "God, help them. God, help them. This isn't getting any better." You keep praying. What does John say about praying for this kind of defiant believer?

Go back to 1 John 5. Remembering that the context is that God answers our prayers and that we pray for sinning believers and that there is a guaranteed result to that. What John is doing here in verse 16 is he's saying there is a qualification to what I'm saying here. He said, watch this, there may be times where you're praying for someone and in God's judgment that person has become so defiant in his sin that even though you're praying and normally you expect God to answer and bring about repentance in that person's life, John says, "I want you to know that there may be times where the outcome is not what

you expect." There may be times where that person dies as a result of his sin. What he's doing here is he's telling you, "Don't be surprised," oh listen, it's really a pretty simple point, he's simply saying, "Don't be surprised if your intercession doesn't always turn out like you would hope." You know what this is like. You've got people you've been praying for for years and they just don't seem to turn. Well, you keep praying for them but you start to realize that not everybody is going to get the same result.

So here's the overall point. We're almost done here. As believers and I know this has been a tough message to listen to, God hears our intercession favorably. We're kind of summing things up here. God hears our intercession favorably but he reserves his sovereign prerogative of discipline as we pray to him about sinning believers. He may bring death to someone in sin that you had been praying for. That's sobering but it also guards you from despair. When someone dies that you've been praying for without visible repentance, you shouldn't think that God has failed you and failed to keep up the promise that he made in verse 15. You shouldn't think that way. You would prefer to see that believer repent, right? God in really extreme cases might prefer death for that person in order to vindicate his holiness and say people who gather together in the body of Christ and persist in defiant sin will not be tolerated. This is a sovereign act of God. We have nothing to do with this. We step back and say, "God, you deal with your people as you see fit. You guard and vindicate your holiness as you see fit. When that happens, I'm just going to fall silent because I'm now in a realm that is so holy and great and vast that I don't have the ability to judge that and evaluate it." This is something that God does, not something that we do.

As we contemplate this, two things that I would say: remember that the bigger context of this whole passage is confidence, it's assurance, it's love operating in the body of Christ before the throne of God. That's the big context. It's God promising to honor your prayers. This is just an exception but John qualifies it so that we might understand the big picture. I've seen this happen. I can't say and you can never, we can never in this position say definitively that such-and-such a situation was an operation of this principle but we can kind of see it. Sometimes it's an act of God's mercy. I remember a couple of three years ago, didn't know this man personally but I knew the pastor who was dealing with him. The guy was converted, obviously converted out of a life of drug and alcohol abuse. He was just a slave to sin. Time went on and he grew, it was cool, but as often happens with people like that, the weakness of that man toward that sin and the sin sucked him back into it. He struggled and wrestled against it, trying to live for Christ while he's dealing with the addiction. I don't use that word very often but you know what I mean by it. There is walking that way for a long time, people praying for him, suddenly dies. Car accident or an overdose, something, I don't know what was. Well, how can we understand that? People say, "Well, you know, maybe he wasn't a Christian." I don't think so. I don't think so. This was a man dealing, struggling with sin so much that God just removed him from physical life and really an act of mercy in that way to deliver him from the horrible struggle that just weighed on his mind and his conscience day by day. God says, "I'm not going to leave you in sin. By mercy, I'm just going to bring you to heaven."

There was another story that I know. I have to be careful with the details lest, it wasn't anyone around here so maybe that doesn't matter. A sweet, sweet Christian girl by all outward appearances that our family got to know. Went along in life. Looked like everything was going great. Started to drift. Drifted more and more. Men and drugs and that kind of stuff. Traveled away. Get the message one night, bam, killed in a car accident. How do we understand that? Well, maybe she wasn't a Christian at all. Kind of hard to explain most of her life by that theory. When you see these things in light of Scripture you say, "Wow, she had really gotten defiant in her sin." God intervened. God didn't allow that professing Christian to continue to sully the holiness of his name any longer. Will I see her in heaven? I hope so. Can't say for sure.

What I want you to see is that you see this in Scripture, you see it in examples in life of people claiming to know Christ dealing with sin and then suddenly, wow, an unexpected death occurs. I think that's what John is showing us here. There is a sin that leads to death. There is a persistent defiant struggle. They just won't listen. They just won't repent. Be prepared for the fact that as you're praying for somebody like that, God may take them. John tells us these things for the sake of our confidence, to preserve our confidence so that we wouldn't be shaken when we see something dramatic like that happen. He says, "There's a sin that leads to death. I don't say that you should make request for this." And see, what happens here, John isn't telling us about the sin that leads to death as a tool for us to use to evaluate how far someone has gone into sin and then we can sit back and say, "I think he's crossed the line. I'm not praying for him anymore." That's not the point at all. We keep praying. We keep praying. What John tells us is he's protecting your confidence by explaining the limits of the effectiveness of your intercession. Sometimes it won't work because God is going to prefer to take that person out of physical life rather than to let that situation persist. He's protecting your confidence so that you wouldn't think that your prayers had somehow failed. There's a lot wrapped up in this. This promotes our fear of God. This should make you and me fearful of sinning in our own lives. "Lord, don't let me take the first step down that path because I can't," once you get down the path of sin and you lose control over the direction of it. "Lord, just let me stay back from sin. Let me live in holiness. Let me pray for the brethren around us so that they would know your blessing, not your discipline."

Now, when you get to verse 17 and I'm going to wrap up here, John says, "All unrighteousness is sin and there is a sin not leading to death." John had just said in verse 16 there is sin and there is a sin that leads to death. While there is this sin unto death and you know by personal experience because you're all still here, you're all still living and breathing, you realize that your sin has not led to death even as a Christian, right? Otherwise, I'd be preaching to a bunch of dead people and that wouldn't be too cool. We know that there's a sin not unto death because we have sinned as Christians and we're still here living. Now verse 17 is John's final corrective on it and he's telling you not to think lightly of sin at all. He says, "All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death." All unrighteousness is sin. What he's saying is this: he says while there is a sin unto death that's more extreme, that defiance is more extreme, he says, "Beloved, don't you get careless about other sin in your life. It's all unrighteous. It's all sin. You repent

from all of it. You don't tolerate any area of sin in your life." And this final assertion, there's a sin not unto death, comes back to the encouragement to pray.

Beloved, and we've come full circle now, all sin is serious but it's not beyond the reach of the faithful prayers of God's people. We need, here's the point in what John is wrapping up here, we need to intercede for the saints. You see, there is sin that doesn't lead to death. There is a quality of sin that doesn't lead to death and evidently all of us are in that category right now anyway. And because there is a sin that doesn't lead to death, as long as we've got breath and the person we see has breath, we pray for them because we love them, because we love the holiness of God, because we want them to grow in grace because this is the way life in the body should take place. You see, when you read this passage in 1 John, your concern should not be a lot of curiosity about the exception, about the sin that leads to death. Our response to this passage should be, "Do you know what? We need to cultivate faithful intercession for one another so that you and I would grow in holiness and that our prayers somehow in a way that we don't fully understand, my prayers for you and your prayers for me would become instruments by which God promotes greater holiness and joy in the life of our assembly." That's the point.

And as I say those words and as I'm basically finished now, I'm kind of stunned. I'm stunned to think that you and I have this spiritual resource at our disposal for one another. You will walk in a more worthy way if I pray for you more faithfully. I'll walk with Christ in a more worthy way if you pray for me faithfully. This is God's promise. He says we know we have the requests which we have asked from him. If you see a brother committing sin not leading to death, ask and God will give him life. There is an implication there that if we don't ask, this dynamic doesn't fully happen. It's kind of convicting, isn't it, when you think through this and you realize the motivations that play into it that Christ was like this and my brothers and sisters and then all of a sudden you step back and realize and I'm speaking autobiographically here, okay, you step back and realize, "Man, my prayer life is selfish. It's focused on earthly things," when God has laid out so clearly in his word it can be so much more, be about so much more. Our prayer lives, my prayer life, this is what you say to yourself and it's what I'm saying to me right now, my prayer life isn't about me, it's about you. It's about you growing in holiness because we love each other and because God promises to answer our prayers.

So, beloved, if you see a Christian in sin, you know situations even in the walls of this room, don't get discouraged. Don't get proud, don't get boastful. Just pray for them. Use your position with our heavenly Father to benefit them and then trust God to renew them for his glory, for their good, and you kind of get to sit back and say, "God, that's sweet to see that happening in their lives. This is what I've been praying for. God, that's sweet. This is another indication that I truly belong to you. This is another expression of your faithfulness and it's just kind of between you and me. That's cool."

Let's pray together.

Father, we are all men and women of flesh. We all sin and fall short of your glory. Lord, each one of us in different ways manifest the remnants of sin in our lives in different

ways. Some of us are proud. Some of us are boastful. Some of us are really hard to get along with. Some of us struggle privately with sin. In all of these things, Father, we take this opportunity collectively to seek you and to humble ourselves before you. Father, we pray with a spirit of gentleness knowing that we are all men of flesh, that we all have sinned, and we look around the room, as it were, so to speak, and realize that, you know, I see my brothers and sisters and I know that they struggle. Sometimes they disobey you. Father, in light of what you have said in 1 John, you say ask anything according to your will and you hear us, Father, we know it's your will for us to walk in obedience to you, to walk humbly before our God, to love mercy, and so we ask, Lord, that you would somehow increase the greater operation of your Spirit in our individual and corporate lives together so that greater holiness would be the mark of our lives; Father, that each individual here under the sound of this voice would know a conscious greater experience of holiness in their lives than what they have known before now. Father, we use our position, we see what you have granted to us and because we love each other, this is how we pray for each other here today. Make us mindful of this going forward.

Father, we know what it's like to be amongst Christians with critical spirits and harsh and demanding and all of that and we know just what an awful way that is and what an awful environment that is to try to flourish as a Christian. I ask you, Father, for the future of Truth Community Fellowship for everyone who had become a part of the life of this body, that you would keep that spirit far from us; that we would be people who love holiness and love each other and therefore pray for each other to grow in holiness, not from pride. Sin is no longer a provocation to gossip on our behalf, Father. We see sin and it what makes us want to pray for the person sinning so that they would walk in a more worthy way before you. Make this church, make this fellowship for years and years and years and decades to come, Father, a place where your word is always proclaimed, it's always front and center, and that the impact of that word on the lives of those who come is a humble holiness that expresses itself in love for one another and a deep reverence for you and your word. I ask you for that, Father. Why would you raise up this church if you weren't going to do something like that? God, why not for your glory make this a unique place where your glory is shown forth in the pulpit and in the lives of the people? We don't want to simply have a place where theology reigns, we want our theology to be good and right, Father, but we want it to have an impact on lives and we want you to take that and extend it further and to bring other people into your kingdom who do not yet know Christ.

Father, we are humbled by this passage, humbled that you would give us privilege before your throne, that you would give us salvation and then not only salvation but that we could be assured of it and flowing out of that assurance is a position before you and a prayer and then to be able to use that and know that others are going to walk more worthily before you if we are faithful to pray for them in this way. Well, Father, we see that in your word and that's what we want for this body, every one of us, not just me. Father, that's what we want. That's why we are drawn together here. And yet if you leave us to our own devices, if you leave us to our own flesh to be the instruments by which this would happen, Father, we'll most certainly fail. And so, Father, by the grace of your Spirit, give life to us, enable us, empower us. Make yourself known through this place. As

the world around us gets increasingly dark, as some of our young people struggle to walk with you without much support around them in their families and situations, Father, do something by your Spirit, do something by the power of Christ, do something to the glory of Christ that implements and works out what this whole book of 1 John has been about that we might live victoriously, godly, graciously in the midst of a hostile world. Having ordered our prayer before you according to your word, Father, we eagerly await the fulfillment of what we have asked in Jesus' name. Amen.

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