

# 1 John 5:16 Commentary

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## FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND HIS CHILDREN

Click chart to enlarge

Charts from [Jensen's Survey of the NT](#) - used by permission  
Another Overview Chart - [1 John](#) - Charles Swindoll

BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP		BEHAVIOR OF FELLOWSHIP	
Conditions of Fellowship	Cautions of Fellowship	Fellowship Characteristics	Fellowship Consequences
Meaning of Fellowship 1 Jn 1:1-2:27		Manifestations of Fellowship 1 Jn 2:28-5:21	
Abiding in God's Light		Abiding in God's Love	
Written in Ephesus			
circa 90 AD			
From Talk Thru the Bible			

## STUDY GUIDE

### 1 JOHN 5

What is this? On the photograph of the Observation Worksheet for this chapter you will find handwritten 5W/H questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?) on each verse to help you either personally study or lead a discussion on this chapter. The questions are generally very simple and are stated in such a way as to stimulate you to observe the text to discern the answer. As a reminder, given the truth that your ultimate Teacher is the Holy Spirit, begin your time with God with prayer such as Psalm 119:12+ [+](#)

"Blessed are You, O LORD; Teach me Your statutes." (you can vary it with similar prayers - Ps 119:18, 26, 33, 64, 66, 68, 108, 124, 135, 171, etc) The questions are generally highlighted in yellow and the answers in green. Some questions have no answers and are left to your observations and the illuminating/teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. Some qualifying thoughts - (1) Use "As is" - these are handwritten and will include mistakes I made, etc. (2) They may not be the best question for a given verse and my guess is that on some verses you will think of a far superior 5W/H question and/or many other questions.

Dr Howard Hendricks once gave an assignment to his seminary students to list as many observations as they could from Acts 1:8. He said "So far they've come up with more than 600 different ones! Imagine what fun you could have with 600 observations on this passage. Would you like to see Scripture with eyes like that?" (P. 63 [Living by the Book](#) - borrow) With practice you can! And needless to say, you will likely make many more observations and related questions than I recorded on the pages below and in fact I pray that the Spirit would indeed lead you to discover a veritable treasure chest of observations and questions! In Jesus' Name. Amen

Why am I doing this? **Mortimer Adler** among others helped me develop a questioning mindset as I read, seeking to read actively rather than passively. Over the years I have discovered that as I have practiced reading with a 5W/H questioning mindset, it has yielded more accurate interpretation and the good fruit of meditation. In other words, consciously interacting with the inspired Holy Word of God and the illuminating Holy Spirit has honed my ability to meditate on the Scripture, and my prayer is that this tool will have the same impact in your spiritual life. The benefits of meditation are literally priceless in regard to their value in this life and in the life to come (cf discipline yourself for godliness in 1Ti 4:8+.) For some of the benefits - see Joshua 1:8+ and Psalm 1:2-3+. It will take diligence and mental effort to develop an "inductive" ([especially an "observational"](#)), interrogative mindset as you read God's Word, but it bears repeating that the benefits in this life and the rewards in the next will make it more than worth the effort you invest! Dear Christian reader let me encourage you to strongly consider learning the skills of [inductive Bible study](#) and spending the rest of your life practicing them on the Scriptures and living them out in your daily walk with Christ.

Although Mortimer Adler's advice is from a secular perspective, his words are worth pondering...

*Strictly, all reading is active. What we call passive is simply less active. Reading is better or worse according as it is more or less active. And one reader is better than another in proportion as he is capable of a greater range of activity in reading.* (Adler's classic book [How to Read a Book is free online](#))

[John Piper](#) adds that "Insight or understanding is the product of intensive, headache-producing meditation on two or three verses and how they fit together. This kind of reflection and rumination is provoked by asking questions of the text. And you cannot do it if you hurry. Therefore, we must resist the deceptive urge to carve notches in our bibliographic gun. Take two hours to ask ten questions of Galatians 2:20+ and you will gain one hundred times the insight you would have attained by reading thirty pages of the New Testament or any other book. Slow down. Query. Ponder. Chew.... (John Dewey rightly said) "People only truly think when they are confronted with a problem. Without some kind of dilemma to stimulate thought, behavior becomes habitual rather than thoughtful."

*"Asking questions is the key to understanding."*

--Jonathan Edwards

That said, below are the [5W/H questions](#) for each verse in this chapter (click page to enlarge). This is not neatly typed but is handwritten and was used for leading a class discussion on this chapter, so you are welcome to use it in this "as is" condition...

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**1 John 5:16 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:**

**Greek** - Ean tis ide (3SAAS) ton adelphon autou hamartanonta (PAP) hamartian me pros thanaton aitesei (3SFAI) kai dosei (3SFAI) auto zoen tois hamartanousin (PAP) me pros thanaton estin (3SPAI) hamartia pros thanaton ou peri ekeines lego (1SPAI) hina erotese (3SAAS):

**Amplified** - If anyone sees his brother [believer] committing a sin that does not [lead to] death (the extinguishing of life), he will pray and [God] will give him life [yes, He will grant life to all those whose sin is not one leading to death]. There is a sin [that leads] to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

KJV 1 John 5:16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

BGT 1 John 5:16 ν τις δ τ ν δελφ ν α το μαρτ νοντα μαρτ αν μ πρ ς θ νατον, α τ σει κα δ σει α τ ζω ν, το ς μαρτ νουσιν μ πρ ς θ νατον. σιν μαρτ α πρ ς θ νατον· ο περ κε νης λ γω να ρωτ σ .

NET 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his fellow Christian committing a sin not resulting in death, he should ask, and God will grant life to the person who commits a sin not resulting in death. There is a sin resulting in death. I do not say that he should ask about that.

CSB 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin that does not bring death, he should ask, and God will give life to him-- to those who commit sin that doesn't bring death. There is sin that brings death. I am not saying he should pray about that.

ESV 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life-- to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

NIV 1 John 5:16 If 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.

NLT 1 John 5:16 If you see a Christian brother or sister sinning in a way that does not lead to death, you should pray, and God will give that person life. But there is a sin that leads to death, and I am not saying you should pray for those who commit it.

NRS 1 John 5:16 If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one-- to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that.

NJB 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that is not a deadly sin, he has only to pray, and God will give life to this brother -- provided that it is not a deadly sin. There is sin that leads to death and I am not saying you must pray about that.

NAB 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray.

YLT 1 John 5:16 If any one may see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and He shall give to him life to those sinning not unto death; there is sin to death, not concerning it do I speak that he may beseech;

MIT 1 John 5:16 If anyone observes his brother committing a sin that is not a mortal sin, he will ask (mercy for him) and God will give him life; this pertains to those whose sin is not mortal. There is a mortal sin. In the case of a mortal sin, I say he should not make a request.

GWN 1 John 5:16 If you see another believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, you should pray that God would give that person life. This is true for those who commit sins that don't lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I'm not telling you to pray about that.

BBE 1 John 5:16 If a man sees his brother doing a sin which is not bad enough for death, let him make a prayer to God, and God will give life to him whose sin was not bad enough for death. There is a sin whose punishment is death: I do not say that he may make such a request then.

RSV 1 John 5:16 If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that.

NKJ 1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

ASV 1 John 5:16 If any man see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and God will give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request.

- **he shall ask:** Ge 20:7,17 Ex 32:10-14,31,32 34:9 Nu 12:13 14:11-21 Dt 9:18-20 2Ch 30:18-20 Job 42:7-9 Ps 106:23 Eze 22:30 Am 7:1-3 Jas 5:14,15
- **There:** Nu 15:30 16:26-32 1Sa 2:25 Jer 15:1,2 Mt 12:31,32 Mk 3:28-30 Lu 12:10 2Ti 4:14 Heb 6:4-6 10:26-31 2Pe 2:20-22

- **I do not:** Jer 7:16 11:14 14:11 18:18-21 John 17:9
- [1 John 5 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

## Related Passages:

James 5:15, 20+ "And the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.....15 and "let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins."

Acts 5:1+ But a certain 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 upon all who heard of it.

1 Corinthians 11:27+ Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the 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, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. 30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a **number sleep**. 31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

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.

Jeremiah 11:14 "Therefore **do not pray** for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not listen when they call to Me because of their disaster.

Jeremiah 14:11 So the LORD said to me, "**Do not pray** for the welfare of this people.

## WHAT IS OUR OBLIGATION TO A SINNING BROTHER?

Let's take this difficult passage phrase by phrase but do not expect me to give you a dogmatic interpretation! Note that this passage is clearly in the context of prayer and specifically praying with assurance that God will answer when we ask according to His will.

**If anyone sees** (aorist tense, subjunctive - mood of possibility) **his brother** ([adelphos](#)) - **If** is third class conditional signifying potential action. The verb **sees** indicates this "**anyone**" has visual evidence, not hearsay, not gossip, not suspicion. In other words, the guilty sinner is seen committing the sin. So far, so good. The phrase **his brother** ([adelphos](#)) is not so easy. Some favor this is a believing brother. Others say while it may be a believer, it may refer to one who professes faith in Christ. This latter interpretation might then explain why he needs to be given **life**. That is, this professor needs spiritual life or the new birth. But as discussed below **life** could have a different sense.

**John Stott** ([See his commentary](#)) writes that the term **brother** could apply "to the false teachers. In John's view they were not apostates; they were counterfeits. They were not true '**brothers**' who had received eternal life and subsequently forfeited it. They were '**antichrists**'. Denying the Son, they did not possess the Father (1Jn 2:22-23; 2 John 1:9). They were children of the devil, not children of God (1Jn 3:10). True, they had once been members of the visible congregation and had then no doubt passed as '**brothers**'. But they went out, and by their withdrawal it was made evident that they '**did not really belong to us**' (1Jn 2:19). Since they rejected the Son, they forfeited life (1Jn 5:12). Their sin did indeed lead to death.

**Committing a sin** ([hamartano](#) - present tense + hamartia) **not leading to death** ([thanatos](#)) - Committing a sin in the present tense supports that this is not an isolated incident but a persistent practice. The interpretation however is not easy, because ultimately all sin leads to **death** in the sense that it is a break in fellowship with God (see Jas 1:14-15+ = "when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death"). Obviously in this scenario, **death** would not refer to eternal death, and a prayer for this person (assuming he is a true believer) would result in restoration of fellowship if the sinner confesses and repents (cf walk in the light 1Jn 1:7+).

**He shall ask** ([aiteo](#) - future tense) - This person interceding is a believer who is called to love his **brother** (let's assume he is a true believer) by interceding for him. It is interesting John does not say first go to the sinning **brother**, but go to God in intercessory prayer. Also John does not give a command to pray for the sinner. Clearly if we love our brother, we will be motivated to pray for one

who is persistently sinning.

**And God will for him give life** ([zoe](#)) - Again, assuming this is a sinning believer, **give life** would refer to restoration of fellowship with the brother and with God (1Jn 1:7+, 1Jn 1:9+). Note however that there is no guarantee that even though this prayer is in God's will (and did not involve a sin unto death), the sinning brother may not cease committing his sin. His will is still involved in this process.

**Alfred Plummer** addresses this aspect of praying for a sinning brother - "Man's will has been endowed by God with such royal freedom, that not even His will coerces it. Still less, therefore, can a brother's prayer coerce it. If a human will has deliberately and obstinately resisted God, and persists in doing so, we are debarred from our usual certitude (ED: THAT IS THAT GOD WILL GRANT OUR REQUEST). Against a rebel will even the prayer of faith in accordance with God's will (for of course God desires the submission of the rebel) may be offered in vain."

**To those who commit sin** ([hamartano](#) - present tense) **not leading to death** - The sinning brother is not committing the sin described in the next clause, the [sin leading to death](#). Since John does not specify what the sin leading to death is, presumably his readers understood what this phrase referred to. Commentators have offered several interpretations (See [Sin Unto Death](#) below)

**John MacArthur** - At first glance, verse 16 appears to introduce an abrupt change of subject. But upon further consideration, the connection of verses 16 and 17 to verses 14 and 15 becomes clear. By giving one important exception, John illustrates in a contrasting manner the extent of God's promise to answer prayer. When a believer sees a **brother** (a real or professing believer) committing a sin not leading to death, the apostle writes, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. On the other hand, **there is a sin leading to death**, and the apostle did not advise Christians to **make request for this** sin. ([Click for more discussion](#))

*Sin is "the dare of God's justice, the rape of His mercy,  
the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power and the contempt of His love."*  
-- John Bunyan

**John Stott** - Having written generally of answered prayer (1Jn 5:14–15), John now gives a specific illustration and a limitation (1Jn 5:16–17). It is not now a case of petition, but of intercession. The assurance of eternal life which the Christian should enjoy (1Jn 5:13) ought not to lead him into a preoccupation with himself to the neglect of others. On the contrary, he will recognize his duty in love to care for his brother or sister in need, whether the need which he 'sees' be material (as in 1Jn 3:17–18) or, as here, spiritual: if anyone sees his brother commit a sin. He cannot say 'Am I my brother's keeper?' and do nothing. (Borrow [The Letters of John page 188](#))

**Steven Cole** - John does not say, "If anyone sees his **brother** sinning, go tell the pastor so he can deal with it." Nor does he say, "If anyone sees his **brother** sinning, call up all of your friends and tell them about it so that they can pray." That is a thin spiritual cover for gossip. Nor does he say, "If anyone sees his **brother** sinning, he should shake his head in disgust and ask, 'How could he do such a thing?'" That is called "judging your brother." Rather, he says that if you see a **brother** in sin, pray for God to give life to him. While we all are responsible for our own sins, only God can truly deliver us from sin, because only God can impart life. So we're dependent on God to deliver, but at the same time the sinning **brother** is responsible to turn from his sin and take the necessary steps not to fall into it again. Also, before we speak to a **brother** about his sin, we need to speak to God about the **brother**. Prayer is essential in the restoration process! But, John's words set up an interpretive dilemma. If this person is a **brother**, then why does he need **life**? Don't believers already have new **life** from God? This had led interpreters into two camps. Some say that John is using the word "**brother**" loosely, to refer to a professing Christian, who is not truly saved. They interpret life to mean conversion, moving from spiritual death to spiritual life (see 1Jn 3:14). But others say that brother means a true Christian, and thus they interpret life to mean either restoration to fellowship with God or preservation of physical life. ([1 John 5:14-17 Confidence and Carefulness in Prayer](#))

## A SIN LEADING TO DEATH

**There is a sin** (hamartia) **leading to death** ([thanatos](#)); **I do not say that he should make request**([erotao](#)) **for this** - The natural question is which sin is this? James writes that "when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth (births) death." (James 1:15+). So there is a sense in which all sin deals a death blow! However clearly that is not John's intended meaning here because he distinguishes between sin that does not lead to death and sin which leads to death. [Click here](#) for one of several discussions on the **sin leading to death**. Notice that John does not strictly command we should still not pray for the one that commits a sin leading to death, he certainly does not encourage such prayer. He however alludes to the fact that it will

not be efficacious praying. Interestingly in the OT God specifically instructed His prophet Jeremiah not to pray for Judah (Jer 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). I will not attempt to unravel the various interpretations but will leave that for your viewing pleasure in the [articles below](#).

**Kenneth Wuest** (one of my favorite NT commentators who is seldom stumped) - The present writer confesses his utter inability to understand this verse except that the sin unto death is the denial of the incarnation, and that it is committed by an unsaved person who professes to be a Christian. The rest of the verse is an enigma to him, and he will not attempt to offer even a suggestion as to its possible interpretation.

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#### **[JACK ARNOLD'S EXAMPLE OF SINNED UNTO DEATH](#) -**

I had a good friend that was from a Christian home and was probably saved sometime in college. He was an active witness, led some people to Christ and went off to seminary. In seminary, he began to drift from the Lord. He left school and went out in the secular world to become a lawyer. He became quite immoral, living with a woman, drinking, and involving himself in all kinds of immorality. Yet through all this he still called himself a Christian and even witnessed once in a while. He married an unsaved girl and became a successful lawyer. He had everything, including his own airplane. He loved to do stunt flying and one day he did a loop and the plane crashed to the ground. A young man of 29 years of age was dead. An accident? I think not. I'm convinced that this was the discipline of God upon this rebellious young man. This man was a bigger hindrance to God than a help on this earth, so God took him home.

I had a preacher friend who had a man in his congregation that owned a liquor store and he was a professing Christian. The man was under great conviction about being in the alcohol business as a Christian but just did not want to get out because he was doing very well financially. He knew he was wrong. The first judgment of God was that his store caught on fire but he still didn't learn and just built the business back up again. The next judgment of God came just two days after the doctors had pronounced this man physically fit. He died very suddenly of a heart attack. Just an accident? I hardly think so. This was the discipline of God.

**COMMENT** - I recall a similar story of a pastor in East Texas who was beginning to have an illicit affair and was taken out in a head on crash before the affair became public. Admittedly, this is a second hand story from another pastor's daughter who lived in East Texas, so you need to take it "with a grain of salt."

### **SIN UNTO DEATH**

Clearly this commentary will not provide a definitive answer to this question which has bothered commentators for almost 2000 years! What follows is a summary of the three general categories that have been proposed as the **sin leading to death** (and much of this is based on John Stott's excellent comments). Following this discussion are several other article you will want to read. If you arrive at a dogmatic answer please email me so I can put it in the commentary.

**(1) A Specific Sin** - One recalls certain sins in the OT for which the perpetrator was sentenced to death (Lev 20:1-27, Nu 18:22) Stott adds that "in the Old Testament generally a distinction was drawn between sins of ignorance, committed unwittingly, which could be cleansed through sacrifice, and wanton or 'presumptuous' sins (Ps. 19:13), committed 'with a high hand', for which there was no forgiveness. The same distinction was 'common among Rabbinic writers' (Westcott), and certain early Christian fathers carried it over into the gospel age." **Stott** then summarizes this candidate writing "although the rendering is 'a mortal sin' in RSV and 'a deadly sin' in NEB, it is doubtful whether John is referring to specific 'sins' at all, as opposed to 'sin' (as in 1:8), that is, 'a state or habit of sin willfully chosen and persisted in' (Plummer)."

The Bible does mention specific sins that resulted in death. [Jack Arnold gives examples](#) of 3 sins that resulted in death:

**Moses** (Nu 20:8-13+): God commanded Moses to speak unto the rock and out from the rock would flow water for Israel. Moses lost his cool and in anger struck the rock. God in grace gave the water but Moses was forbidden to take the children of Israel into the land and he was left to die on Mount Nebo. Why? Because of disobedience. Disobedience can have serious consequences.

**Ananias and Sapphira** (Acts 5:1-11+): These two had kept back part of their possessions, giving another part to the Lord's work. But they lied to the Apostles about the part that was not given. This was willful disobedience and they were struck dead immediately. Dishonesty and lying can have serious consequences. (SEE [Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira for lying? | GotQuestions.org](#))

**Drunken Christians** (1 Cor. 11): Some of these Christians were partaking of the Lord's Table in a drunken state, showing selfishness and ill-behavior towards other Christians. Thus Paul says "many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep (**ED**: EUPHEMISM FOR DEATH)." (1Cor 11:30+). Perhaps much of the physical weakness that is apparent among Christians today may arise from this very cause. Not all physical weakness comes from this, not all premature deaths arise from this, but some very likely do. It arises from willful rebellion against clear knowledge of the truth.

[Arnold concludes](#) - John's point is that if a professing Christian goes on in rebellion and shows no signs of repentance, there is nothing we can do and there no need to pray. There is nothing you can do but let God's judgment wake him up. Perhaps God in grace will deal patiently with him, give him a time of sickness or weakness, and that will bring him to his senses. But if not, God will take him home.

**(2) Apostasy** - "The second suggestion, favored among modern commentators by [Brooke](#), Law and Dodd, is that the sin that leads to death is neither a specific sin, nor even a 'backsliding', but a total apostasy, the denial of Christ and the renunciation of the faith... It seems clear, unless John's theology is divided against itself (**Ed**: e.g., his statements that a true Christian cannot persist in sin - 1Jn 3:9), that he who sins unto death is not a Christian. If so, the sin cannot be apostasy. We are left with the third alternative." (Stott)

**(3) Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.** In summary this sin as "committed by the Pharisees, was a deliberate, open-eyed rejection of known truth. (See Mk 3:29, Mt 12:32)... the outcome of his sin will be spiritual ruin, the final separation of the soul from God, which is 'the second death', reserved for those whose names are not 'written in the book of life' (Rev. 20:15). But, it may be objected, if the 'sin leading to death' is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit committed by a hardened unbeliever, how can John call him a **brother**? To be exact, he does not. It is the one whose sin does not lead to death who is termed **abrother**; he whose sin lead to death is neither named nor described. Nevertheless, supposing John thinks of each as a **brother**, we must still assert that neither can be regarded as a child of God. The reasons for denying that he who sins 'unto death' is a Christian have already been given; what can be said about him whose sin does not lead to death? An important point, to which commentators surprisingly give no attention, is that he is given **life** in answer to prayer. This means that, although his sin does not lead to death, he is in fact **dead**, since he needs to be given **life**. For how can you give **life** to one who is already **alive**? This person is not a Christian, therefore, for Christians have received life, and do not fall into death when they fall into sin. True, 'life' to John means communion with God, and the sinning Christian cannot enjoy fellowship with God (1Jn 1:5-6), but John would certainly not have said that when the Christian sins he dies and needs to receive eternal life again. The Christian has 'passed from death to life' (1Jn 3:14; cf. John 5:24). Death and judgment are behind him; he 'has life' (1Jn 5:12) as a present and abiding possession. When he stumbles into sin, which he may (1Jn 2:1), he has a heavenly Advocate (1Jn 2:2). He needs to be forgiven and cleansed (1Jn 1:10), but John never says he needs to be 'quickened' 'made alive', or 'given life' all over again. If this is so, then neither he whose sin leads to death nor he whose sin does not lead to death is a Christian, possessing eternal life. Both are 'dead in transgressions and sins' (Eph. 2:1). Each 'remains in death' (1Jn 3:14). The difference between them is that one may receive life through a Christian's intercession, while the other will die the second death. Spiritually dead already, he will die eternally. Only such a serious state as this would lead John to say that he does not advise his readers to pray for such." (John Stott)

I would add one more possibility and that is **physical death of a brother who is disciplined by the Lord** (although I cannot explain why we should not pray for such a one). I have seen situations where a minister was involved in a heinous sin that if exposed to the public would have brought great shame to the body of Christ and the sin was not exposed because the minister was taken out (by a fatal car wreck). Obviously this is a speculative consideration. Frankly, I think passages such as this will only be satisfactorily resolved when we are in the presence of our Lord one day future!

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**QUESTION - [What is the sin unto death?](#) | [GotQuestions.org](#) [WATCH VIDEO](#)**



# What is the SIN unto DEATH?



**ANSWER** - 1 John 5:16 is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to interpret. “If 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.” Of all the interpretations out there, none seem to answer all the questions concerning this verse.

The best interpretation may be found by comparing this verse to what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–10 (see also 1 Corinthians 11:30). The “sin unto death” is willful, continuous, unrepentant sin. God has called His children to holiness (1 Peter 1:16), and God corrects them when they sin. We are not “punished” for our sin in the sense of losing salvation or being eternally separated from God, yet we are disciplined. “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son” (Hebrews 12:6).

1 John 5:16 says there comes a point when God can no longer allow a believer to continue in unrepentant sin. When that point is reached, God may decide to take the life of the stubbornly sinful believer. The “death” is physical death. God at times purifies His church by removing those who deliberately disobey Him. The apostle John makes a distinction between the “sin that leads to death” and the “sin that does not lead to death.” Not all sin in the church is dealt with the same way because not all sin rises to the level of the “sin that leads to death.”

In Acts 5:1–10 and 1 Corinthians 11:28–32, God dealt with intentional, calculated sin in the church by taking the physical life of the sinner. This is perhaps also what Paul meant by “the destruction of the flesh” in 1 Corinthians 5:5.

John says that we should pray for Christians who are sinning, and that God will hear our prayers. However, there may come a time when God decides to cut short a believer’s life due to unrepentant sin. Prayers for such an unheeding person will not be effective.

God is good and just, and He will eventually make us “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27). To further that end, God chastens His children. May the Lord preserve us from the hard-heartedness that would cause us to commit the “sin unto death.”

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## QUESTION - [What is the sin that does not lead to death in 1 John 5:16–17?](#)

**ANSWER** - A sin that does not lead to death (and a sin that does lead to death) is alluded to in 1 John 5:16–17: “If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them 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 you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.”

John wrote his gospel so that people would believe in Jesus and have life in His name (John 20:30–31). He wrote his first epistle, in part, so that those who believe in Jesus would *know* that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). John wants believers to have confidence in their position in Christ and mentions in that context that there are a couple types of sin. One type of sin does not lead to death, and another does.

We find an example of a sin that leads to death in Acts 5. There, [Ananias and Sapphira](#) lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3), and they die as a result. Paul mentions another example of a sin that leads to death in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Some who were abusing the [Lord’s Supper](#) had become sick and had even died. These are the only two clear instances in the New Testament of believers who



committed sins unto death. John mentions a sin unto death in his first epistle, but he does not offer any specifics regarding what the sin is. He is speaking of *categories* of sin, not pointing out specific sins.

The context is John's teaching on prayer. John explains that we can have confidence that, in anything we ask of God according to His will, He hears us (1 John 5:14). To ask something according to His will is to ask for something that God has communicated to us that He desires. When we ask for something that He wants, then we are asking for something that we should be asking Him for. John goes further, explaining that, when God hears these kinds of requests, we have what we have asked for (1 John 5:15). Believers are to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and, as Jesus said in [John 14:12–14](#), the Father is glorified in the Son when His disciples pray in His name. To [pray in Jesus' name](#) is to pray according to His will or pray as if Jesus Himself were asking the Father. But we discover in 1 John 5 there are different types of sin, and that impacts what we should and should not be asking for. The church must recognize the seriousness of sin, avoid continuing in sin, and pray as God has designed.

It is important to note the qualifier that John (and Jesus) places on prayer. God does not promise to do whatever we ask without condition. He affirms that He will grant what is asked according to His will, in the name of Jesus. Jesus was not referring to a magic formula or mantra or suggesting we should add the phrase *in Jesus' name* to our prayers in order to ensure they are granted. We should be asking God for what He has revealed He wants for us. But there are some things that John explains we ought not to ask for. He provides an example: if a brother commits a sin not unto (or does not lead to) death, then the one observing the sin should ask for God's mercy for the offender so that death does not result (1 John 5:16). On the other hand, there is a sin that does lead to death, and John does not suggest one should pray on behalf of the one committing that type of sin (1 John 5:16). John distinguishes between these two kinds of sin even as he acknowledges that all sin is unrighteousness (1 John 5:17).

The distinction John makes between the sin that does not lead to death and the sin that does lead to death illustrates that there are some requests not in accordance with God's will and, thus, some requests the believer should not expect to be granted. This principle is simple and straightforward. If we're praying for things outside of God's will, then we should not expect an answer.

The challenge for interpreters is that nowhere in the context does John detail what sins he is talking about. He speaks of those sins as broad categories. If he had specific sins in mind, no doubt his original readers would understand to what he referred. Because of the ambiguity, it is probably best to simply acknowledge the principle being taught about prayer rather than try to identify what John doesn't provide in the context—the specific nature of the sin that does not lead to death and the sin that does.

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**Wuest** has note quoting at length from Henry Alford - For the exposition of this difficult verse, we turn to **Alford**, and his canons or rules of interpretation. He says: "Our **first canon** of interpretation of **the sin unto death**' and **'not unto death**' is this, that the 'death' and the 'life' must correspond. The former cannot be bodily death, while the latter is eternal and spiritual life. This clears away at once all those commentators who understand the sin unto death to be one for which bodily death is the punishment, either by human law generally, ... or by sickness inflicted by God (**Ed**: Which rules out my consideration given above!).

"**Our second canon** will be, that this sin unto death being thus a sin leading to eternal death, being further explained to the readers here, must be presumed as meant to be understood by what the Evangelist has elsewhere laid down concerning the possession of life and death. Now we have from him a definition immediately preceding this, in verse 12, 'The one who has the Son has the life. The one who does not have the Son of God, the life does not have.' And we may safely say that the words 'unto death' here are to be understood as meaning 'involving the loss of this life which men have only by union with the Son of God.' And this meaning they must have, not by implication only, which would be the case if any obstinate and determined sin were meant, which would be a sign of the fact of severance from the life which is in Christ (see 3:14, 15, where the inference is of this kind), but directly and essentially, i.e., in respect of that very sin which is pointed at by them. Now against this canon are all those interpretations far too numerous to mention, which make any atrocious and obstinate sin to be that intended. It is obvious that our limits are thus confined to abnegation of Christ, not as inferred by its fruits otherwise shown, but as the act of sin itself.

"**Our third canon.** will help us decide, within the above limits, which especial sin is intended. And it is, that by the very analogy of the context, it must be not a state of sin, but an appreciable ACT of sin, seeing that that which is opposed to it in the same kind, as being not unto death, is described by 'if anyone see his brother sinning.' (The verb "see" is aorist subjunctive, speaking of a single act of seeing. K.S.W.)

"In enquiring what this is, we must be guided by the analogy of what St. John says elsewhere. Our state being that of life in Christ Jesus, there are those who have gone out from us, not being of us (1Jn 2:19), who are called antichrists, who not only 'have not' Christ, but are Christ's enemies, denying the Father and the Son (1Jn 2:22), whom we are not even to receive into our houses nor to greet (2John 1:10, 11). These seem to be the persons pointed out here, and this is the sin, namely, the denial that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate Son of God. This alone of all sins bears upon it the stamp of severance from Him who is the Life itself. As the confession of Christ, with the mouth and in the heart, is salvation unto life (Ro 10:9), so denial of Christ with the mouth and in the heart, is sin unto death."

From the above we are led to the conclusion that “**the sin unto death**” refers in the context in which John is writing, to the denial of the Incarnation, and that it would be committed by those whom John designates as antichrists, who did not belong to the true Christian body of believers, but were unsaved. In view of the foregoing interpretation which is based upon the historical background and the context in which John is writing, we can now proceed with the exegesis of this verse. We will look at the Greek text itself. “**See**” is aorist subjunctive, speaking of a single act, not a continuous viewing. The sin in question here therefore is not an habitual one but a single act. The word “**unto**” is pros, “near, facing.” Vincent says: “describing the nature of the sin. The preposition **unto** (pros) signifies tendency toward, not necessarily involving death.” “**He shall ask**” is aiteō, in future tense, the imperative future. Vincent suggests: “In prayer. The future tense expresses not merely permission (it shall be permitted him to ask), but the certainty that, as a Christian brother, he will ask. An injunction to that effect is implied.” “**For it,**” referring to “**the sin unto death,**” is ekeinos, the pronoun of the remote person or thing. Vincent says in this connection. “Note the sharp distinctness with which that terrible sin is thrown out by the pronoun of remote reference and its emphatic position in the sentence.” “**Pray**” is erōtaō, used of one on equal terms with another making request. Vincent suggests that “it may mark a request based upon fellowship with God through Christ, or it may hint at an element of presumption in a prayer for a sin unto death.” The present writer confesses his utter inability to understand this verse except that the sin unto death is the denial of the incarnation, and that it is committed by an unsaved person who professes to be a Christian. The rest of the verse is an enigma to him, and he will not attempt to offer even a suggestion as to its possible interpretation. ([Word Studies from the Greek New Testament](#))

**Ask** (154)(aiteo) means to ask for something or make petition. It can mean to ask with a sense of urgency and even to the point of demanding. For example, **Thayer** notes that the use of **aiteo** in 1Cor 1:22 conveys a stronger sense of *demand*. One gets that same sense of **aiteo** in Mt 27:20 (in fact NJB translates it “demand.”) **Aiteo** is sometimes combined with other prayer words like proseuchomai (Mt 21:22, Col 1:9), so the idea of aiteo is to be asking for something while praying (proseuchomai). Of children of God asking their Father (Mt 6:8). In Mt 7:8-11 three of the uses (Mt 7:8-9, 11) of **aiteo** are in the present tense picturing continued asking. Of the sons of Zebedee making request (present tense) of Jesus (Mt 20:20) In Mt 5:42 commands His readers to be generous with those **asking** (may allude to begging; giving alms was viewed highly in the ancient world). The derivative noun aitema (155) is used in Php 4:6 and 1Jn 5:15 of requests, in the sense of a petition of men to God, both NT uses in the plural. In Lk 23:24 **aitema** is used more in the sense of a demand by the Jews to Pilate.

**Zodhiates** - Ask, request, beg. The seeking by the inferior from the superior (Acts 12:20); by a beggar from the giver (Acts 3:2); by the child from the parent (Matt. 7:9); by man from God (Matt. 7:7; James 1:5; 1 John 3:22). **(I)** To ask, with the acc. of thing in pará (3844), from (with the gen. of person). **(II)** Generally (Matt. 5:42; 7:9, 10; Mark 6:22–25; Luke 11:9–13; 1 John 5:14–16; Sept.: Josh. 15:18; 19:50). Spoken in respect to God, to supplicate, to pray for (Matt. 6:8; 7:11; 18:19; James 1:5, 6). With the word Theós (2316), God, implied (Matt. 7:7, 8; Col. 1:9; James 4:2, 3; Sept.: Is. 7:11, 12). In His requests to the Father, the Lord never uses aitéō, to beg, but erōtáō, to ask as an equal of the Father on behalf of Himself or His disciples (John 14:16; 16:26; 17:9, 15, 20). **(III)** To ask or call for, require, demand (Luke 1:63; 12:48; 23:23; Acts 3:14; 25:15; 1 Pet. 3:15; Sept.: Job 6:22; Dan. 2:49). **(IV)** To desire (Acts 7:46; Sept.: 1 Kgs. 19:4; Eccl. 2:10; Deut. 14:26). (BORROW [The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament](#) page 102)

**Webster** on **ask** - To seek to obtain by making one's wants known. To request; to seek to obtain by words; to petition; with of before the person to whom the request is made. Ask is not equivalent to demand, claim, and require, at least, in modern usage. Ask and request imply no right, but suppose the thing desired to be a favor.

**Aiteo** - 70x in 67v - **NAS Usage:** ask(36), asked(16), asking(7), asks(7), beg(1), called(1), making a request(1), requesting(1). Matt. 5:42; Matt. 6:8; Matt. 7:7; Matt. 7:8; Matt. 7:9; Matt. 7:10; Matt. 7:11; Matt. 14:7; Matt. 18:19; Matt. 20:20; Matt. 20:22; Matt. 21:22; Matt. 27:20; Matt. 27:58; Mk. 6:22; Mk. 6:23; Mk. 6:24; Mk. 6:25; Mk. 10:35; Mk. 10:38; Mk. 11:24; Mk. 15:8; Mk. 15:43; Lk. 1:63; Lk. 6:30; Lk. 11:9; Lk. 11:10; Lk. 11:11; Lk. 11:12; Lk. 11:13; Lk. 12:48; Lk. 23:23; Lk. 23:25; Lk. 23:52; Jn. 4:9; Jn. 4:10; Jn. 11:22; Jn. 14:13; Jn. 14:14; Jn. 15:7; Jn. 15:16; Jn. 16:23; Jn. 16:24; Jn. 16:26; Acts 3:2; Acts 3:14; Acts 7:46; Acts 9:2; Acts 12:20; Acts 13:21; Acts 13:28; Acts 16:29; Acts 25:3; Acts 25:15; 1 Co. 1:22; Eph. 3:13; Eph. 3:20; Col. 1:9; Jas. 1:5; Jas. 1:6; Jas. 4:2; Jas. 4:3; 1 Pet. 3:15; 1 Jn. 3:22; 1 Jn. 5:14; 1 Jn. 5:15; 1 Jn. 5:16.

**Aiteo** - 66v in the **Septuagint** - Ex 3:22; 11:2; 12:35; 22:14; Dt 10:12; 18:16; Josh 14:12; 15:18; 19:50; 21:42; Jdg 1:14; 5:25; 8:24, 26; 1Sa 1:17, 20, 27; 8:10; 12:17, 19; 2Sa 3:13; 12:20; 1Kgs 2:16, 20, 22; 3:5, 10f, 13; 10:13; 12:24; 19:4; 2Kgs 2:9f; 4:3, 28; 1Chr 4:10; 2Chr 1:7, 11; 9:12; 11:23; Ezra 6:9; 7:21; 8:22; Neh 13:6; Esther 8:12; Job 6:22, 25; Ps 2:8; 21:4; 27:4; 40:6; 78:18; 105:40; Prov 30:7; Eccl 2:10; Isa 7:11-12; 58:2; Lam 4:4; Dan 2:49; 6:7, 12f; Mic 7:3; Zech 10:1

Here are some representative uses of **aiteo** in the **Septuagint**...

Ps 2:8 ‘**Ask** of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, And the [very] ends of the earth

as Thy possession.

Ps 27:4 One thing I have **asked** from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to meditate in His temple.

**Aiteo** and **erotao** are used in the same verse in Jn 16:23, John 16:26, 1Jn 5:16.

"And in that day you will **ask** (**erotao**) Me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall **ask** (**aiteo**) the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name. (Jn 16:23)

""In that day you will **ask** (**aiteo**) in My name, and I do not say to you that I will **request** (**erotao**) the Father on your behalf;

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall **ask** (**erotao**) 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** (**erotao**) for this.

**Erotao** suggests that the person making the petition is on a footing of equality or **familiarity** with the person he is petitioning and is the word that Jesus used when addressing God the Father. **Aiteo** is never used to describe Jesus' prayers to His Father. **Aiteo** means to ask for, with a claim on receipt of an answer. As noted **aiteo** more frequently suggests attitude of a suppliant, that is, of the petition of one who is lesser in position than he to whom the petition is made, as of men in asking something from God (Mt 7:7, Jas 1:5 1Jn 3:22), as of a child from a parent (Mt 7:9-10), as of a subject from a king (Acts 12:20), as of priests and people from Pilate (Lu 23:23) or finally as of a beggar from a passer by (Acts 3:2).

### Trench's Synonyms - aiteo and erotao

Aiteo and erotao are frequently translated as though they were synonymous. In numerous instances it is correct to translate either word by "to ask," though sometimes the translators of the Authorized Version marred the perspicuity of their work by not varying their words where the original indicates a difference. For example, obliterating the distinction between aitein and erotan in John 16:23 might easily suggest a wrong interpretation of the verse as though its two clauses were closely related and directly antithetical, which is not the case. Our English version reads: "In that day you will ask Me nothing [eme ouk erotesete ouden]. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask [hora an aitesete] the Father in my name He will give you." All competent scholars agree that the "you will ask" in the first half of the verse has nothing to do with the "you ask" in the second. In the first half Christ is referring back to the ethelon auton erotan of John 16:19 to the questions the disciples wanted to ask him, the perplexities they wanted him to resolve if only they dared to ask. "In that day," he would say, "in the day of my seeing you again I will by the Spirit so teach you all things that you will be no longer perplexed, no longer wishing to ask me questions [cf. John 21:12], if only you might venture to do so." Thus Lampe well stated:

It is a new promise for the fullest light of understanding, by which the situation in the New Testament must be properly illuminated. For as an inquiry presupposes ignorance, so the person who no more asks questions believes that he has been fully taught, and he agrees to a teaching as completely explained and understood.

This verse does not draw a contrast between asking the Son, which will cease, and asking the Father, which will begin. The first half of the verse closes the declaration of one blessing: from now on the Spirit will teach them so that they will have nothing further to inquire; the second half of the verse begins the declaration of a new blessing: whatever they seek from the Father in the Son's name, he will give to them. No one would say that this is the impression conveyed by the English text.

The distinction between aiteo and erotao is as follows. Aiteo is the more submissive and suppliant term. It is consistently used to refer to an inferior's seeking something from a superior (Acts 12:20), of a beggar's seeking alms from a potential donor (Acts 3:2), of a child's seeking something from a parent (Lamentations 4:4; Matthew 7:9; Luke 6:11), of a subject's seeking something from a ruler (Ezra 8:22), and of a man's seeking something from God. In classical Greek, erotao never means "to ask" but only "to interrogate," or "to inquire." Like rogare (inquire), erotao implies an equality between the one who asks and the one who is asked as a king with another king (Luke 14:32) or if not equality, then a familiarity that lends authority to the request.

It is noteworthy that Jesus never used aitein or aiteisthai to refer to himself when speaking to God on behalf of his disciples, for his is not the petition of the creature to the Creator but the request of the Son to the Father. Jesus' consciousness of his equal dignity and prevailing intercession appears whenever he asks (or declares that he will ask) anything of the Father, because he always uses eroto or eroteso, an asking on equal terms (John 14:16; John 16:26; John 17:9; John 17:15; John 17:20), and never aiteo or aiteso. Martha, on the

contrary, by ascribing aitheisthai to Jesus, recognized him as no more than a prophet and thus revealed her poor conception of him.

Erotan, the term of authority, is proper for Christ but not for his creatures to use. In fact, in the New Testament erotan is never used to refer to a man's prayer to God. The only passage that seems to contradict this assertion is 1 John 5:16, a difficult verse. Whatever solution is accepted will not be a true exception to the rule, and perhaps, in the substitution of erotese for the aitesei of the earlier clause of the verse, will rather confirm it. (Trench's Synonyms)

**Brother** (80)(**adelphos** from **a** = denotes unity + **delphus** = a womb) means brother or near kinsman. "Adelphós generally denotes a fellowship of life based on identity of origin, e.g., members of the same family (Mt. 1:2; Lk 3:1, 19; 6:14); members of the same tribe, countrymen, and so forth (Acts 3:22; 7:23; Ro 9:3)." (Zodhiates) Figuratively, adelphos describes members of the Christian community, spiritual brother, fellow Christian, fellow believer (Ro 8:29). Jews used adelphos to describe fellow countrymen (Acts 3:22). One of the same nature, a fellow man was regarded as a brother (Mt. 5:22–24, 47). Adelphós also came to designate a fellowship of love equivalent to or bringing with it a community of life (Matt. 12:50; Mark 3:35; 10:29, 30; Acts 12:17). In this manner Jesus speaks of His brethren (Mt. 25:40; 28:10; John 20:17; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:11, 17). The members of the same Christian community are called brothers (Jn 21:23; Acts 9:30; Rom. 16:14; 1 Cor. 7:12).

**W E Vine** summarizes **adelphos** - (1) male children of the same parents, Mt. 1:2; 14:3; Jn 1:41 (2) male descendants of the same parents, Acts 7:23, 26; Heb 7:5; (3) male children of the same mother, Mt 13:55; 1Cor 9:5; Gal. 1:19; (4) people of the same nationality, Acts 3:17, 22; Ro 9:3. With "men" (aner, "male"), prefixed, it is used in addresses only, Acts 2:29, 37, etc.; (5) any man, a neighbor, Lk 10:29; Mt. 5:22; 7:3; (6) persons united by a common interest, Mt. 5:47; (7) persons united by a common calling, Rev. 22:9; (8) mankind, Mt. 25:40; Heb 2:17; (9) the disciples, and so, by implication, all believers, Mt. 28:10; John 20:17; (10) believers, apart from sex, Mt 23:8; Acts 1:15; Ro 1:13; 1Th 1:4; Rev. 19:10 (the word "sisters" is used of believers, only in 1 Tim. 5:2); (11) believers, with aner, "male," prefixed, and with "or sister" added, 1Cor 7:14 (RV), 15; Jas. 2:15, male as distinct from female, Acts 1:16; 15:7, 13, but not Acts 6:3. ([Vine's Expository Dictionary](#))

**TDNT - 1. Physical Brotherhood.** There are references to the physical brothers of Judah in Mt. 1:2, to brothers among the disciples in Mk. 1:16, 19, to the brother of Mary and Martha in Jn. 11:2ff., to Paul's sister in Acts 23:16, to brothers of Jesus in Mk. 3:31ff., and to various other brothers, e.g., in Mk. 12:19–20; Lk. 15:27; Lk. 16:28; Lk. 12:13; and Mk. 10:29–30.

**2. Spiritual Brotherhood.** adelphós also refers to fellow believers some 30 times in Acts and 130 in Paul. This usage has an OT and Jewish basis (cf. Acts 3:22; Mt. 5:22–23; Acts 2:29; 3:17, etc.). Jesus uses the term in Mt. 23:8; 25:40. Christians are his brethren (Rom. 8:29) and are to love one another as such (1 Jn. 2–3). adelphótēs denotes the brotherhood (1Pet. 2:17) and means brotherly disposition in Hermas (Mandates 8.10). (BORROW [Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament : abridged in one volume](#))

**Sin** (266)(**hamartia**) literally conveys the idea of missing the mark as when hunting with a bow and arrow (in Homer some hundred times of a warrior hurling his spear but missing his foe). Later **hamartia** came to mean missing or falling short of any goal, standard, or purpose. **Hamartia** in the Bible signifies a departure from God's holy, perfect standard of what is right in word or deed (righteous). It pictures the idea of missing His appointed goal (His will) which results in a deviation from what is pleasing to Him. In short, sin is conceived as a missing the true end and scope of our lives, which is the Triune God Himself. As **Martin Luther** put it "Sin is essentially a departure from God."

**Death** (2288)(**thanatos**) is a permanent cessation of all vital functions and thus is the end of life on earth (as we know it). The separation of the soul from the body and the end of earthly life. Spiritual death is separation from the life of God forever by dying without being born again. The first use in the Septuagint is in a well known promise from God "you shall surely die (Lxx = thanatos apothnesko)." (Ge 2:17) followed by the second use in the deceptive lie by Satan "You surely shall not die (thanatos apothnesko)!" (Ge 3:4) Death is natural to humanity as part of the created world. Death is a result of Adam's sin (Ro 5:12). Death is universal - no one can escape it.

**Friberg** has a simple summary of **thanatos** - (1) physically, as the separation of soul from body (physical) death (Jn 11:13); (2) as a legal technical term, of capital punishment (physical) death (Mt 26:66); (3) spiritually, as the separation of soul from God (spiritual) death (Jn 5:24; Jas 1:15), opposite zoe (life); (4) spiritually, as the separation of soul from spirit or from the possibility of knowing God, as the result of judgment (eternal) death (Ro 1:32); called second death in Rev 2:11; 20:6; (5) by metonymy deadly disease, pestilence (Rev 6.8) (Borrow [Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#))

**Life** (2222) **zoe** in Scripture is used (1) to refer to **physical life** (Ro 8:38+, 1Co 3:22, Php 1:20+, Jas 4:14, etc) but more often to (2) to **supernatural life** in contrast to a life subject to eternal death (Jn 3:36+). This quality of life speaks of fullness of life which alone belongs to God the Giver of life and is available to His children now (Ro 6:4+, Ep 4:18+) as well as in eternity future (Mk 10:30, Titus

- [Click for an in depth 8 PAGE discussion of zoe and see preceding discussion of "BIOS" in the New International Dictionary of the New Testament](#)

**Request** (2065)(**erotao** from **éromai** = ask) means **(1)** to ask for information, to put a query to someone, to ask for, usually with an implication of an underlying question (Lk 9:45, 22:68, Jn 1:25, 8:7, 9:21, 16:19; of disciples requesting or urging Jesus to eat Jn 4:31). To interrogate, to inquire (Mt 16:13, Jn 1:19, 16:5) The other major sense of **erotao** is **(2)** to ask for something in the sense of to request, to beg, to urge (Jn 4:40; 19:31, Lk 14:32, Acts 3:3). Of the rich man begging Abraham in Hades (Lk 16:27, cp similar sense of begging by the man whose son was at the point of death = Jn 4:47). In Acts 16:39 Acts 16:39 they kept **begging**" (Imperfect tense - over and over). **Robertson** notes that use of **erotao** in "this sense of beg or petition is common in the papyri and Koine generally. The original use of asking a question survives also."

See also **Trench's Synonyms** [above](#) for his discussion of **aiteo** and **erotao**.

**Zodhiates** adds that "A very distinct meaning of the verberōtaō is "to pray," but it is in contrast to the verbaiteo. **Erotao** provides the most delicate and tender expression for prayer or request with the one asking and the one being asked being on an equal level, such as the Lord Jesus asking of the Father. The contrast is made clear in Jn 14:13-14, where the word **aiteo** is used in the case of our asking God as **an inferior to a superior**, leaving it up to Him to do that which pleases Him. However, in John 14:16 ("I will ask [**erotao**] the Father and He will give you another Helper"), when the Lord Jesus is praying to the Father or asking the Father, the verb **erotao** is used, as also in John 17:9, 15, 20."

And so **erotao** is generally more conversational than **aiteo** and at times may express a more intimate relation between the parties than **aiteo** would. Jesus always used **erōtaō** in prayer to His Father (John 14:16), whereas the disciples use **aiteo** in prayers to God.

**Aiteo** and **erotao** are used in the same verse in Jn 16:23, John 16:26, 1Jn 5:16.

"And in that day you will **ask (erotao)** Me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall **ask (aiteo)** the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name. (Jn 16:23)

""In that day you will **ask (aiteo)** in My name, and I do not say to you that I will **request (erotao)** the Father on your behalf; (Jn 16:26)

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall **ask (erotao)** 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 (erotao)** for this. (1Jn 5:16)

**Friberg** on **erotao** - (1) as seeking information ask, inquire, question (Mt 19:17); (2) as making a request ask, demand, beg someone to do something (Jn 4.40); as making a request to God ask, pray (Jn 16.26)

**NIDNTT** on **erotao** - It commonly means to ask, inquire. Jesus' asking and counter-questions were part of his teaching method, designed to expose the person concerned to the implications of his own questions or make him reflect on his attitudes (e.g. Mt. 16:13; 19:17; 21:24; Mk. 8:5; Lk. 20:3). But it is also used of the theological questions put by the disciples (Mk. 4:10; Lk. 9:45; Acts 1:6). Jn. 16:23 implies that in the future salvation there will be no need to ask Jesus further questions. Asking implies imperfect knowledge which will be overcome by perfect fellowship with Jesus (cf. Jn. 16:30; cf. Jn 16:5, 19). Conversely Jesus does not need to ask questions, for he knows already what is in man (Jn. 2:25). Apart from Jn. 9:2 and the final discourses, the disciples are never said to ask Jesus. In John asking is characteristic of the doubting, contentious questions of the Jews (Jn. 1:19, 21, 25; 4:31, 40, 47; 5:12; 8:7; 9:15, 19, 21, 23; 18:19, 21; 19:31, 38). But it may be compared with the question of the Greeks (Jn 12:21) and those of Jesus (Jn 14:16; 17:9, 15, 20; of the intercession of Jesus, where Jesus asks things for his disciples of the Father). The verb is used of the efficacy of intercession in 1Jn. 5:16. The use here of the verb of the praying believer extends to him a sense of the verb which in Jn. is only applied to Jesus. H. Greeven thinks that the use of **erōtaō** in the sense of to pray may be a Semitism (TDNT II 686 f.). In 2 Jn. 5 it describes the action of the author in begging his readers to follow love (cf. 2Jn 1:6). In Acts 1:6 it means to ask (a question). Elsewhere it generally means to request: of the disciples to Jesus (Mt. 15:23; Lk. 4:38); of the Jews to Pilate (Jn. 19:31); and in the Lucan writings of invitations (Lk. 7:36; 11:37; Acts 10:48; 18:20). In Lk. 14:18f. it has the polite, weakened sense of "I pray you".

**Vine** on **erotao** - more frequently suggests that the petitioner is on a footing of equality or familiarity with the person whom he requests. It is used of a king in making request from another king, Luke 14:32; of the Pharisee who "desired" Christ that He would eat with him, an indication of the inferior conception he had of Christ, Luke 7:36; cp. Luke 11:37; John 9:15; 18:19 .

In this respect it is significant that the Lord Jesus never used **aiteo** in the matter of making request to the Father. "The consciousness of His equal dignity, of His potent and prevailing intercession, speaks out in this,



that as often as He asks, or declares that He will ask anything of the Father, it is always erotao, an asking, that is, upon equal terms, John 14:16; 16:26; 17:9,15,20 , never aiteo, that He uses. Martha, on the contrary, plainly reveals her poor unworthy conception of His person, that ... she ascribes that aiteo to Him which He never ascribes to Himself, John 11:22 " (Trench, Syn. xl).

In passages where both words are used, the distinction should be noticed, even if it cannot be adequately represented in English. In John 16:23 , "in that day ye shall ask Me nothing," the verb is erotao, whereas in the latter part of the verse, in the sentence, "If ye shall ask anything of the Father," the verb is aiteo. The distinction is brought out in the RV margin, which renders the former clause "Ye shall ask Me no question," and this meaning is confirmed by the fact that the disciples had been desirous of "asking" Him a question (arotao, John 16:19 ). If the Holy Spirit had been given, the time for "asking" questions from the Lord would have ceased. In John 14:14 , where, not a question, but a request is made by the disciples, aiteo, is used.

Both verbs are found in 1 John 5:16 : in the sentence "he shall ask, and God will give him life for them that sin not unto death," the verb is aiteo, but with regard to the sin unto death, in the sentence "not concerning this do I say that he shall make request," the verb is erotao.

Later, the tendency was for erotao to approximate to aiteo. [Vine's Expository Dictionary](#))

In classical Greek **erōtaō** usually means "to ask a question" in order to gain information. It may also mean "to challenge a person" or "to request something from someone." In the Septuagint the primary meaning of **erōtaō** is "to ask for information." Another use of **erōtaō** in the Septuagint is in connection with prayers to God. Prayers using **erōtaō** are generally requests for guidance. The Christian use of **erōtaō** in prayers to God is documented by an inscription in a Roman catacomb (Complete Biblical Library Greek-English Dictionary)

**Webster on request** - To ask; to solicit; to express desire for. To express desire to; to ask. We requested a friend to accompany us.

**Erotao** - 63x in 61v - **NAS Usage:** ask(15), ask a question(1), asked(14), asking(11), asks(3), beg(1), begging(1), implored(1), imploring(1), make request(1), please(2), question(5), questioned(2), request(4), requesting(1), urging(1). Note the majority of uses in John. Matt. 15:23; Matt. 16:13; Matt. 19:17; Matt. 21:24; Mk. 4:10; Mk. 7:26; Mk. 8:5; Lk. 4:38; Lk. 5:3; Lk. 7:3; Lk. 7:36; Lk. 8:37; Lk. 9:45; Lk. 11:37; Lk. 14:18; Lk. 14:19; Lk. 14:32; Lk. 16:27; Lk. 19:31; Lk. 20:3; Lk. 22:68; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 1:19; Jn. 1:21; Jn. 1:25; Jn. 4:31; Jn. 4:40; Jn. 4:47; Jn. 5:12; Jn. 8:7; Jn. 9:2; Jn. 9:15; Jn. 9:19; Jn. 9:21; Jn. 9:23; Jn. 12:21; Jn. 14:16; Jn. 16:5; Jn. 16:19; Jn. 16:23; Jn. 16:26; Jn. 16:30; Jn. 17:9; Jn. 17:15; Jn. 17:20; Jn. 18:19; Jn. 18:21; Jn. 19:31; Jn. 19:38; Acts 1:6; Acts 3:3; Acts 10:48; Acts 16:39; Acts 18:20; Acts 23:18; Acts 23:20; Phil. 4:3; 1 Thess. 4:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 2 Thess. 2:1; 1 Jn. 5:16; 2 Jn. 1:5

**Erotao** - 54v in the **Septuagint** - Ge 24:47, 57; 32:17, 29; 37:15; 40:7; 43:7, 27; 44:19; Ex 3:13; 13:14; Deut 6:20; 13:14; Josh 4:6, 21; Jdg 4:20; 13:6, 18; 18:5, 15; 20:18, 23; 1Sa 10:4; 19:22; 22:10, 13, 15; 23:4; 25:5, 8; 30:21; 2Sa 5:19; 8:10; 20:18; 1Chr 14:10, 14; 18:10; Ezra 5:9-10; Neh 1:2; Job 21:29; 38:3; 40:7; 42:4; Ps 35:11; 122:6; Isa 41:28; 45:11; Jer 6:16; 18:13; 23:33; 30:6; 36:17; 37:17; 38:14, 27; 48:19; 50:5; Da 2:10

In the **Septuagint** the primary meaning of **erōtaō** is "to ask for information." A fairly common use of **oferōtaō** in the Septuagint is in connection with prayers to God. (Complete Biblical Library Greek-English Dictionary)

Psalms 122:6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

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## Oswald Chambers - Heedfulness v. hypocrisy in ourselves

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. 1 John 5:16.

If we are not heedful of the way the Spirit of God works in us, we shall become spiritual hypocrites. We see where other folks are failing, and we turn our discernment into the gibe of criticism instead of into intercession on their behalf. The revelation is made to us not through the acuteness of our minds, but by the direct penetration of the Spirit of God, and if we are not heedful of the source of the revelation, we shall become criticizing centres and forget that God says—"... he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death." Take care lest you play the hypocrite by spending all your time trying to get others right before you worship God yourself.

One of the subtlest burdens God ever puts on us as saints is this burden of discernment concerning other souls. He reveals things in order that we may take the burden of these souls before Him and form the mind of Christ about them, and as we intercede on His line, God says He will give us "life for them that sin not unto death." It is not that we bring God into touch with our minds, but that we



rouse ourselves until God is able to convey His mind to us about the one for whom we intercede.

Is Jesus Christ seeing of the travail of His soul in us? He cannot unless we are so identified with Himself that we are roused up to get His view about the people for whom we pray. May we learn to intercede so whole-heartedly that Jesus Christ will be abundantly satisfied with us as intercessors.

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## **SIN UNTO DEATH 1 JOHN 5:16 - James Bolick**

INTRODUCTION. This Epistle of John was written to the saved; however, there is a sin unto death for the sinner as well as the saint. The Bible holds that God will kill either, sinner or saint, when they are guilty of committing a sin unto death.

### **I. THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT A MAN'S LIFE CAN BE SHORTENED BY SIN.**

- A. Sin results in death. James 1:14, 15.
- B. Wickedness will cause a man's life to be cut off. Prov. 10:27.
- C. The "bloody, and deceitful man shall not live out half his days." Ps. 55:23.

### **II. WHAT IS THIS SIN UNTO DEATH?**

- A. I cannot be dogmatic; But, I believe that it can be almost any sin, and I do know that it can be committed.
- B. When a person is continually warned of some sin in their life by the Holy Spirit, and willfully disobeys, he is in danger.

### **III. SINS IN THE BIBLE THAT WERE UNTO DEATH.**

- A. Putting off salvation—leaving God out of our lives. Luke 12:16–20; Prov. 29:1.
- B. Rebellion against God, and leading others to rebel. Jer. 28:16, 17.
- C. Murmuring against God, and God's man. Num. 16:41–48.
- D. Lying to the Holy Spirit of God. Acts 5:1–11.
- E. Refusing to judge ourselves. 1 Cor. 11:30–32.

NOTE: In the above references you will see that God not only killed some who were saved, but He killed some who were lost.

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## **Norman Geisler - [When Critics Ask](#)**

1 JOHN 5:16—What is a sin unto death? Is it forgivable?

**PROBLEM:** On the one hand, the Scriptures speak of God's free and unconditional forgiveness to all who want it (cf. Acts 13:38–39; Rom. 5:20; 1 John 2:1). On the other hand, Jesus spoke of an unpardonable sin that can never be forgiven. And John declares here that there is a "sin leading to death."

**SOLUTION:** Bible commentators differ on just what John had in mind here. Some say he was referring to repeated sin (see comments on 1 John 3:9). Others believe he was speaking of a grave sin. Still others believe he had apostasy in mind (cf. 2 Peter 2).

Whatever John envisioned, there is no reason that it could not refer to a sin so serious that it would eventuate in physical death. Paul mentioned that the Corinthians had so participated in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner that some were sick and others were dead as a result (1 Cor. 11:29–30). In fact, the priests Nadab and Abihu were smitten dead for their disobedience to the Lord (Num. 3:4), as were Ananias and Sapphira for their sin (Acts 5:1–9). So, it is entirely possible that John has some such serious sin in mind here whereby the believer is turned over to Satan for "the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:5).

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## **Walter Kaiser - [HARD SAYINGS](#) - 5:16–17 A Sin That Leads to Death?**

Is there a sin from which there is no recovery? There is certainly no problem with the concept that one should pray for a fellow Christian who sins. With John, Christians recognize that "all wrongdoing is sin" and that all of it separates individuals from God. Thus prayer and restorative counsel (Gal 6:1) appear to be in order when we observe a fellow believer who has sinned. Where John causes problems, however, is in mentioning "a sin that leads to death," for which prayer is not in order (not that it is necessarily wrong, but that it is useless). What type of sin is this? And what type of death is intended—physical or spiritual death? Since we ourselves fall into sin at times, the questions are of practical importance to each of us. This is no mere resolving an academic problem of Scripture.

This passage occurs at the end of 1 John, right after an encouragement to pray (1 Jn 5:13–15). According to John, it is because "we know that we have what we ask from him" that one should pray for the "brother" who sins. James has a similar structure in the

conclusion of his letter. After talking about prayer for healing (Jas 5:13–16), he notes the encouragement to pray that Elijah's example gives (Jas 5:17–18) and then talks about turning a sinner from the error of his or her way and thus saving him or her from death (Jas 5:19–20), the purpose of his book. This structure of health wish plus purpose statement in the conclusion of a letter was typical of one form of Greek letters. Thus it is not surprising that in his conclusion John also has a modified health wish before reaching his final purpose statement (probably 1 Jn 5:20).

But what type of life and death is John talking about? This is a modern question; it was not one for John's readers, for the brevity of his reference assumes that they would know what he was talking about. We have to discover this from the rest of his letter. We note, then, that 1 John uses the term life thirteen times, seven of them in this chapter. Since he means spiritual life (eternal life) in every other case in which he uses the term, we would expect that this would also be the meaning here. Likewise the two other places where he uses death (both in 1 Jn 3:14) refer to spiritual death, not physical death. So even though in the New Testament sin can lead to physical death (1 Cor 11:30; compare Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor 5:5) and physical sickness (Jas 5:15–16), it is unlikely that that is the meaning here. This is especially true in that in both his Gospel and epistle John sees physical death as something already transcended by the believer (Jn 8:51; 11:26; 1 Jn 3:14).

What, then, is the sin (not specific acts of sin, but a quality of sin) that leads to this spiritual death? In the Old Testament some sins carried the death penalty, while others did not (Num 18:22; Deut 22:26). In particular, deliberate or willful breaking of the commandments required death, while inadvertent sin did not (Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15, 17–18; Num 15:27–31; Deut 17:12). Both of these distinctions were common in first-century Jewish literature as well. While all of these Old Testament references are to the physical death of the offender, it would not be surprising for John to reinterpret the concept in terms of spiritual life and death, for that is his focus. In this he had help from Jesus, who referred to a category of sin that would not be forgiven (Mk 3:28 and parallels). What type of sin is this? For Jesus it was observing the activity of the Holy Spirit and calling it the devil's work.

Similarly, John has been concerned with a group of apostates, people who were part of the Christian community and have left. What is their sin? They are continuing in (and therefore condoning) sin, they are hating and separating from their fellow Christians (thus not living out the command of love), they love the world and they even deny that Jesus has come "in the flesh" (probably a denial that Christ had a real human body). These are not casual errors or lapses into this or that sin, but a knowing and deliberate turning away from the truth they experienced in the Christian community. While they would probably still consider themselves Christians, John knows that their standards and their doctrines are quite different from those of his group.

*The answer is because such prayer is useless.  
It is not that it is absolutely wrong to pray.*

Why, then, doesn't John say that one should pray for them? The answer is because such prayer is useless. It is not that it is absolutely wrong to pray. While John clearly does not intend Christians to pray for the forgiveness of such people, he words himself carefully so as not to forbid it. The issue is that these people are not repenting or about to repent. Like the people envisioned in Hebrews 6, they have known the truth and experienced the fullness of what God has, but have turned away. While God would surely forgive such people if they did repent, no argument will change their minds. They have left the true Christian community. They "know" they are right and John's group is wrong. Asking for their forgiveness is useless. Forgiveness comes to the repentant, not those willfully persisting in sin.

But that is not John's focus. His point is that Christians should pray for other members of the Christian community who sin. Why should they do this? First, God seems to prefer to grant forgiveness through confession to another and the other's praying (as in Jas 5:15–16). Psychologically this makes the repentance much more concrete and thus lasting. Second, sin is to be taken seriously. Today's slip, if persisted in, could turn into deception, and the brother or sister could slip farther and farther from God until they become part of the apostate group. The time to intervene is not when the person has become hardened in turning away from God, but when the first sin is observed. If one prays then, life will be granted and the individual will not slip further away from God.

John, then, is calling for two things that are often poorly practiced in the church today.

The first is the taking of responsibility for the spiritual well-being of fellow Christians; that is, for observing errors (the point is that one "sees" the sin; it is observable), correcting the sinners (Gal 6:1–2) and praying for their forgiveness.

The second is the taking of sin seriously, realizing that it can indeed lead to grave consequences if persisted in, and thus living in and calling others to live in a holy fear before God.

John has no intention of our living in fear that we have sinned "the sin that leads to death," for the very fear is an indication of our repentance and thus that we have not sinned such a sin. John has every intention of calling us to lead lives open to each other so that we give and receive correction and thus not only keep each other from deliberate rebellion and its consequences, but also assist each other in walking in close fellowship with the God who is light (1 Jn 1:5).

**Lehman Strauss -** (1 John 5:16)

I have found this verse to be one of the most difficult to interpret in the entire Epistle. But we must proceed prayerfully, for surely there is something here for us.

One important observation should be reiterated, namely, the Epistle is addressed to the children of God. The words “brother” and “pray” would substantiate that this verse likewise fits into the category of the redeemed ones. We may conclude, therefore, that for the child of God, “there is a sin unto death,” the reference being, of course, to physical death. This seems to indicate, not any one particular kind of sin, but rather a state of sinning in which the Christian continues. It most assuredly is not the unpardonable sin.

Here the brother who is in fellowship with God is exhorted to pray for his brother whose fellowship with God has been severed because of sin. An erring brother should motivate us to unselfish prayer that God will deliver him from the error of his way, thereby prolonging his life. Do not become a censorious critic, but pray for him.

To continue in sin is to “sin unto death,” for sin tends toward death. “When lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:15). In the case of the unbeliever it is both physical and eternal; in that of the believer it is physical only, as in the case of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:48–52), Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1–2), Korah (Numbers 16:31–34), Achan (Joshua 7:16–26), Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1–7), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), the moral delinquent in the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1–5), and those who partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27–30). Whenever God deals with one of His own in stern discipline, it has passed beyond the slightest comment from any of us. We can only leave the entire matter with our heavenly Father. (Borrow [The Epistles of John : Strauss, Lehman](#) - devotional commentary)

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**[Sam Storms - Can a Christian commit the Sin Unto Death?](#)** (see also the [following article](#))

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that” (ESV).

The problems posed by this passage are innumerable and therefore so are the interpretations placed upon it. Here are the more cogent views and my critical interaction with each.

**A. Sin unto Death is Apostasy**

This interpretation of the passage is one proposed by many Arminians, those who believe a Christian can apostatize from the faith (i.e., fall from grace) and lose his/her salvation. I. Howard Marshall represents this position. The principal elements in his explanation of the text are these.

The “brother” about whom John speaks is a genuine, born-again believer, as the usage of the term brother in 1 John would appear to demand (see 1 John 2:9; 10, 11; 3:10, 12[twice], 13, 14, 15, 16, 17; 4:20[twice], 21; 5:16). The kind of “death” John has in mind is spiritual, eternal death, even as the “life” with which it is contrasted is spiritual and eternal.

That “sin” which leads to death or results in death is any sin that is incompatible with being a child of God. What sins qualify? According to 1 John, “Sin that leads to death is deliberate refusal to believe in Jesus Christ, to follow God’s commands, and to love one’s brothers. It leads to death because it includes a deliberate refusal to believe in the One who alone can give life, Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (248).

On the other hand, sin or sins that do not lead to death “are those which are committed unwittingly and which do not involve rejection of God and his way of salvation. The sinner is overcome by temptation against his will; he still wants to love God and his neighbor, he still believes in Jesus Christ, he still longs to be freed from sin” (248). Marshall makes this distinction between deliberate apostasy (“sin that leads to death”) and unwitting transgression (“sin that does not lead to death”) on the basis of the Old Testament distinction between “unintentional” or “unwitting” sins, for which atonement was possible, and “deliberate” or “high-handed” sins, for which the Levitical sacrificial system provided no forgiveness (see Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27; 5:15, 17–18; Num. 15:27–31; Deut. 17:12).

Christians can commit both types of sin. If someone sees a brother committing sin that does not lead to death, one should pray for him and God will use the prayer to give him life. However, if someone sees a Christian brother engaged in open refusal to repent and believe, he is on his way to death. John did not require (but neither does he forbid) that anyone pray for him. Consequently, some Christians may in fact apostatize from the faith by committing sin that leads to their eternal death. The doctrine of eternal

security is obviously incompatible with this view.

Several comments should be made about this interpretation.

- First, the text does not say that the “brother” commits sin that leads to death. John refers to a brother only with regard to sin that is not to death.
- Second, if the sin of the Christian brother is not the kind that leads to death, why must we pray that God would give him life? Marshall’s answer is that “there is always the danger that a person who sins unconsciously or unwittingly may move to the point of sinning deliberately and then of turning his back completely on God and the way of forgiveness. Because of this danger, it is essential that Christians pray for one another lest any of their number cross the line that leads to open and deliberate rejection of the way of life. No sin is of such a kind as to prevent forgiveness, provided that we repent of it. We are to pray for our brothers that they will repent of all sin. When we do this, we have God’s promise that he will hear our prayers” (248–49). But John does not say that the brother was about to “cross over” some such line. Indeed, he says just the opposite. It was to the brother who was not committing sin unto death that God promised to give life.
- Furthermore, it would be difficult to think of another New Testament author who affirms the doctrine of eternal security with any greater conviction or frequency than the Apostle John (John 6:37–44; 10:11–18, 27–30; 17:1–2, 7–12; 1 John 5:18). Other texts likewise deny what Marshall affirms (Rom. 8:29–39; 1 Cor. 1:4–9; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23–24; 2 Thess. 2:13–15; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Pet. 1:5; Jude 24).
- Finally, why would John not require us to pray for an apostate? Marshall says it is because “where a person himself refuses to seek salvation and forgiveness there is not much point in praying for him” (249). But isn’t that a description that applies to everyone in the world who is not a Christian? Are we not to pray for unbelievers at all?

Raymond Brown (Epistles of John), a Roman Catholic scholar, seems to argue for a position similar to Marshall’s. Those who sin unto death, he says, are “former brothers and sisters who have opted to be children of the devil by going out to the world that prefers darkness to light. Since Jesus refused to pray for such a world (John 17:9), the author’s adherents should not pray for those who belong to the world (1 John 4:5). When his readers came to faith and joined the Johannine community of ‘brothers,’ they passed from death to life (1 John 3:14). By leaving the Community the secessionists have shown that they hate the ‘brothers’ and have reversed the process by passing from life to death. In that sense theirs is a sin unto death” (636). But then in a footnote Brown balks, saying that it is unclear “whether the author would admit they ever had life, since he says that the secessionists never really belonged to the Community (1 John 2:19)” (636, n. 17). Stephen Smalley also argues for a position in many ways identical to Marshall. Whereas John “expected his readers to walk in the light as sons of God ... he did not ignore the possibility that some believing but heretically inclined members of his community might become apostate.... We conclude that John attributes the possibility of ‘sin which does not lead to death’ to believers, but ‘mortal sin’ to unbelievers who are, or believers who have become, antichristian” (299; emphasis mine).

## **B. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit**

Others say the “sin unto death” is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This view finds its most able proponent in John Stott. His arguments are as follows.

The brother about whom John speaks is not a Christian man. The term brother is being used in “the broader sense of a ‘neighbor’ or of a nominal Christian, a church member who professes to be a ‘brother’ ” but who in reality is a counterfeit (190). He appeals to 1 John 2:9–11 for an example of this broad use of the term. Also, how can a Christian with eternal “life” (1 John 3:14) be given “life” as John affirms? “How can you give life to one who is already alive? This man is not a Christian, for Christians do not fall into death when they fall into sin” (189). Stott agrees with Marshall that both the “life” and “death” of which John speaks are spiritual and eternal in nature.

However, neither individual in verse 16 is a Christian. The individual in verse 16b who commits “sin that leads to death” is no more a believer than the “brother” of verse 16a. He is, most likely, one of the false teachers about whom John has been warning his readers, a counterfeit Christian who is exposed by his eventual departure from the church (1 John 2:19). The sin which “leads to death” is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22–32), that is to say, deliberate, open-eyed, and persistent rejection of Jesus Christ. Sin that leads to death, therefore, is not some solitary sin, but a settled state of sin. It is the high-handed and obstinate repudiation of the claims of Christ as made known in the gospel.

Although John did not forbid us to pray for someone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit, he did not recommend it because he could not be certain that God would answer it.

Again, several observations are in order.

- First, although it is possible, I think it is highly unlikely that John would here refer to a non-Christian as a “brother.” Most commentators agree on this point.
- Second, if both men in verse 16 are nonbelievers, men who reject and disbelieve the gospel of Jesus Christ, how are we to know which one has committed sin that does not lead to death and which one has committed sin that does lead to death? How are we supposed to differentiate between an unbeliever and a so-called “hardened” unbeliever, in order that we might pray for the former but not the latter? If John was supposed to be giving us guidance for knowing when and when not to pray, he was uncharacteristically fuzzy about it.
- Third, Stott’s view must also face a problem that plagues every interpretation. When we read verse 16 in the light of its immediately preceding context (verses 14–15), one gets the impression that John was describing a particular kind of prayer that we could know would always be answered. In other words, prayer for a brother whose sin is not unto death is always according to God’s will. Consequently, John assured us that in response to such prayer God would give life to the errant brother. If this is correct, the implications are astounding, for it would mean that any non-Christian for whom we pray, assuming that he has not sinned unto death, will be saved, will be given eternal life. Even were we to interpret “brother” as referring to a Christian, the problem remains. In the latter case, it would imply that any sinning Christian for whom we pray will be restored and renewed. This, however, ascribes more to the power of prayer than the rest of Scripture would allow. And although it is not a final authority, experience itself teaches us that not every believer for whom we intercede responds and repents.
- Also, what about the man who commits sin that leads to death? In Stott’s view, John was saying that he does not recommend we pray for him because it is doubtful if that prayer will be answered. If “sin that leads to death” is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, as Stott argues, then whoever commits this sin will never be saved. But if it is never God’s will to give life to a man who is committing sin unto death, why doesn’t John explicitly forbid prayer for him? The fact is, whereas John does not require that we pray for this man, neither does he prohibit such prayer. But why doesn’t he forbid it if by definition (on Stott’s view) the sin he has committed is unforgivable?

Donald Burdick, although not agreeing in every particular with Stott (he said the “brother” is a believer), suggests that one reason why God may not answer prayer for the man sinning to death is because “the stubborn will of the sinner may not bend. God,” says Burdick, “though sovereign, chooses not to coerce the will and thus violate the integrity of the personality he created in his own image” (408).

- But God’s effectual grace in converting the sinner is persuasive, not coercive. More important still, if Burdick’s point is valid, why would it not also apply to the brother who commits sin not unto death? Why should we think that God’s activity with regard to the brother not sinning to death is any less “coercive” or any less a “violation” of the integrity of his personality than God’s activity with regard to the man whose sin is unto death? Sin is a stubborn, rebellious act of one’s will, both in the believer and unbeliever, regardless of who commits it. The alleged coercion or violation that concerns Burdick, irrespective of its degree or intensity, is coercion and violation nonetheless.
- Perhaps a way to avoid this problem is to understand John to be saying that giving life to brethren who do not sin unto death is something that God often desires to do. Therefore, we should pray to that end. There is no guarantee that it is always God’s will to answer such prayers, even though the language of verse 16a is seemingly unconditional. But even this does not explain why John does not forbid prayer for those who, by definition (on Stott’s view), can never be forgiven of their sins (for remember, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is, according to Jesus, “unforgivable”).
- Finally, if the man who commits sin unto death is a non-Christian, he is already dead. What, then, could John have meant by saying that if he sins deliberately and persistently, that is, if he blasphemes the Holy Spirit, he will die? Stott agrees that the man is already dead, but by persisting in unbelief he will die the “second death” (Rev. 20:11–15). “Spiritually dead already, he will die eternally” (190).

### C. Sins Within and Sins Without

This third view is difficult to label. It is somewhat of a mediating position between the views of Marshall and Stott. David M. Scholer is its most convincing defender.

Scholer agrees with Marshall that the “brother” is a Christian man and that “death” is spiritual and eternal in nature. He also agrees with Marshall that “sin that leads to death” must be identified and defined from within the epistle of 1 John itself. It consists primarily of hating the brethren and denying that Jesus is the Christ.

However, unlike Marshall he insists that believers do not commit sin that leads to death. Nowhere in the passage, Scholer strenuously claims, is it ever said that a true believer, a “brother,” commits sin that leads to death. Believers do commit sin that does not lead to death (1 John 1:8; 2:1), and the Christian community is to intercede for them. Prayer for such sinning Christians will be used by God to renew and reconfirm the “life” they already have in Christ (1 John 3:14).

John is not primarily concerned with the sins of unbelieving outsiders, such sins that lead to death, and therefore does not speak in order that anyone should pray about it. "Prayer," says Scholer, "is not absolutely forbidden concerning the matter, nor is it said that one who commits the 'sin unto death' is forever beyond the hope of becoming a member of the believing community. But throughout 1 John there is a radical separation between the believing community and the unbelieving world so that prayer for the unbelieving world would not be a 'normal' or 'effective' practice" ("Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16–18," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne [Eerdmans 1975], 243).

Scholer proceeds to interpret 1 John 3:6, 9 and 5:18 in the light of 5:16–17. Simply put, the "sin" that Christians cannot commit is not a reference to the practice of sin in general or persistence in sin. Rather, the sin the believer can't commit is "sin that leads to death," namely, hatred of believers and denial of Jesus.

Essential to this view is a rephrasing of the closing statement in verse 16. The New American Standard Bible translates this phrase, "I do not say that he should make request for this." The New International Version renders it, "I am not saying that he should pray about that." Both of these translations make it appear that John was recommending we not pray about the sin unto death or for the one who commits it. Scholer would translate this phrase in another way: "I am not speaking concerning that (i.e., sin unto death), in order that you should pray." In other words, John's purpose is not to enlist prayer concerning sin unto death and those who commit it, although in another context and at another time it may be legitimate to do so. Rather, it is the sin of believers, sin that is not unto death, that he is speaking about and for which he asks that his readers pray.

To sum up, "sin that leads to death" consists principally of hating believers (what John called "murder") and not confessing Jesus (what John called "lying"). This sin cannot be committed by believers for the simple reason that, by definition, this is the sin that makes one an unbeliever. Believers are guilty of sin that does not lead to death, that is, "they do break fellowship with God (1:6–2:1), but without participating in hating the brothers or denying Jesus" (242). Sin unto death is a sin of those who are "disruptive, heretical outsiders" (242). Consequently, John is not here concerned with them or their sin. His concern is with the sin of "insiders," that is, believers within the community of faith.

This view has much to commend it.

- First, it looks for the meaning of "sin that leads to death" within 1 John itself and interprets "brother" and "death" in keeping with their usage in this epistle.
- Second, this view has the advantage of restricting sin unto death to unbelievers. Similar to Stott's interpretation, the "death" into which the sin of these unbelievers leads them is the second, eternal death.
- Third, Scholer's interpretation supplies us with a cogent solution to other problem texts in 1 John, namely, those that assert that the one born of God cannot or is not able to sin. When 1 John 5:18 (literally, "no one who is born of God sins") is read in the light of 5:16–17, one can see the sense in taking verse 18 to mean, "no one who is born of God sins sin that leads to death."

The only problem one might have with this view is the phrase "God will give him life." To say this means "he will renew and reconfirm the life he already has" lacks explicit parallel in 1 John and is not, so far as I can tell, stated in precisely these terms elsewhere in the New Testament. But given the number of difficulties the other interpretations face, this one problem is slight by comparison.

#### **D. Physical Death**

The interpretation of Benjamin B. Warfield is one deserving of careful attention. Warfield agrees with Marshall on two points. The "brother" is a Christian, and it is possible for him/her to commit "sin that leads to death." Where Warfield disagrees with Marshall (in addition to his affirmation of eternal security, which Marshall denied), is in his belief that the death in view is physical, not spiritual. The New Testament does refer to believers suffering illness and occasionally physical death because of persistent and unrepentant sin (see Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 5:5(?); 11:29–30; James 5:14–15, 19–20).

According to Warfield's interpretation, this brother is not sinning in such a way that his physical life is in jeopardy, and since he is a Christian he already has spiritual life. What, then, could John have meant when he said that God would give him "life" in response to our prayers? Warfield writes:

"We may suppose that by giving life there is meant rather the maintaining or perfecting than the initiating of life. He who lives below his privileges, in whom the life which he has received is languid or weak in its manifestations, is made by our prayers the recipient of fresh vital impulses, or powers, that he may live as the Christian should live. Hitherto living on a plane which can be spoken of only as sinful—though not mortally sinful—he will through our prayers receive newness of life" ("Praying for Erring," *Expository Times* XXX, Summer 1919, 537).



In saying that some sin leads to death and other sin does not, John is not giving us a criterion by which we may examine the lives of other believers in order to determine whether or not we should pray for them. He differentiates between these two kinds of sin simply to tell us why it is that some of our prayers are answered and others are not. Warfield explains:

“He is merely saying that of those whom we observe to be sinning in the community, some are, in point of fact, sinning to death, and others not; and that, in point of fact, our prayers will be of benefit to the one and not to the other. Who they are who are sinning to death, we do not in any case know. John does not suppose us to know. Only, in urging us to pray for our sinful brethren, and promising us an answer to our prayers, the gift of life to them, he warns us that there are some for whom our petitions will not thus avail. But he warns us of this, not that we may avoid praying for these unhappy ones, but that we may be prepared for the failure of our prayers in their case” (539).

That no sinner is to be excluded from our prayers is proved, says Warfield, by noting the difference between two Greek words John uses in verse 16 (the NIV translation renders both of these words by the single English term, “pray”). The word in verse 16a translated “he should pray” (aiteo) refers to genuine Christian prayer. But the word in verse 16b (erotao), likewise translated “he should pray,” does not refer to intercessory prayer. Rather it denotes the asking of questions, the seeking of information, perhaps for the purpose of debate or discussion. If this understanding of the two words is correct,

“the passage would no longer have even the surface appearance of excluding one kind of sinners from our prayers.... It would, on the contrary, expressly require us to pray for all sinners, intimating that though there is a sin to death, that is a matter about which we are not to make anxious inquiry before we pray, but, leaving it to God, we are for ourselves to pray for all our brethren whom we observe to be living sinful lives” (539).

The purpose of this passage, therefore, is not to set us upon the task of determining what the sin unto death is or who may or may not have committed it. The message of the apostle is that sin is deadly, and that if we would have life we must avoid it. Let us therefore come to the aid of our brethren by praying for one another. If the sin of the brother for whom we pray is, in point of fact, sin unto death, our prayers will not be answered. His sin has taken him beyond the point at which our prayers will restore him. However, that his sin is unto death is not something we can know before we pray. On the other hand, if the sin of the brother for whom we pray is not, in point of fact, sufficiently severe and persistent to put his physical life in jeopardy, God will answer our prayer and restore this brother to the fullness of joy and spiritual energy in his daily life with Christ. But again, that his sin is not the kind that leads to death is not something we can know before we pray.

Although Warfield’s interpretation is intriguing, like the others it is subject to several objections.

- In the first place, it is unlikely that “death” means physical death, that is to say, the chastisement by God of an errant believer. Scholer reminds us that in 1 John “death is the state in which one is before he becomes a believer and out of which he is transferred unto life (3:14; see John 5:24). The one who does not love the brothers (that is, believers) remains in death (3:14). Those who do not love (unbelievers; see 3:9–10; 4:7–8) are not of God (3:10), are in darkness (2:11; see 1:5) and do not know God (4:8; see 4:7). Thus it is clear that a ‘sin unto death’ is one which signifies the complete absence of any fellowship with God” (240). Of course, this is not to say that it was impossible for John to shift his emphasis from spiritual to physical death, but only that it seems improbable for him to have done so.
- Second, Warfield says that John did not mean to tell us that before we pray we could actually know whether a brother’s sin is unto death or not unto death. We are to pray, and if his sin is not to death God will answer our prayer. If it is to death, our prayer will fail. But this seems overly subtle of John, if not downright obscure. A straightforward reading of verse 16 appears to indicate that the brother for whom we are to pray is the brother whom we see sinning the sort of sin that is not to death. If John did not expect us to be able to know whether his sin was to death, he surely chose an odd way of saying so.
- Finally, there is some doubt to the validity of drawing a sharp distinction between the Greek words aiteo (used in verse 16a) and erotao (used in verse 16b). There are several verses in John’s gospel (John 14:14; and 16:19, 23) in which the distinction most likely does apply. In 1 John 5, however, most modern commentators insist that the words are synonymous and that the apostle’s shift from one to the other is purely stylistic. Note well, though, that even should one accept the distinction between these two terms as a valid one, it doesn’t necessarily follow that “death” is physical. It is conceivable that all the views we have examined are compatible with this distinction.

Dr. Sam Storms Enjoying God Ministries

The "sin unto death" in 1 John 5:16 has provoked widespread discussion. The correct meaning revolves around the nature of the sin and the nature of the death referred to. The context and word selection point to the conclusion that the individual "committing a sin not unto death" is an unsaved man who professes to be a believer, but who is, in actuality, in need of salvation. On the one hand, John refers to one who is sinning but is not doing so to the point of the impossibility of being granted eternal life. The apostle encourages intercessory prayer for such an individual, that God may grant to him eternal life. On the other hand, he asserts that if a man does sin to such an extent that repentance and forgiveness are impossible, it would be "unto death," spiritual death in the sense that his condition is irrevocable (cf. Matt 12:31–32).

\* \* \* \* \*

Diversity of opinion has abounded concerning the interpretation of the problematic portion found in 1 John 5:16 where the apostle John writes,

If any one 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.[1](#)

The OT frequently mentions specific sins which merit punishment by death. Num 15:30–31 indicates that the one who willfully and defiantly sins "shall be cut off from among his people." The sin of coming near to the tent of meeting was punishable by death (Num 18:22). Ps 19:13 suggests the same penalty for presumptuous sins.[2](#)

The NT has similar examples, the most prominent being that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–10). Other examples include that of Herod (Acts 12) and those who had taken the Lord's Supper unworthily (1 Cor 11:30).

There are two notable differences between the other passages and this one, however. First of all, in the above cases, the sin which led to the punishment is more or less evident; in this instance, it is not revealed. Secondly, the exact nature of the death penalty is ambiguous here, while elsewhere it is not. So the problem encountered here is unique.

*Can the sin be committed today by Christians?*

Two basic questions call for a response in this passage: (1) What is the nature of the sin? And (2) What is the nature of the death? The answers to these will essentially answer a third, namely, can the sin be committed today by Christians?

### **The Context**

The entirety of 1 John deals with tests of life, tests designed to give assurance of salvation to believers (cp. 1Jn 5:13 with 1Jn 1:4; 2:12–14) and to expose those who are not really believers: "We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him" (1 John 3:19).[3](#) The fact that one is or is not a believer is not always obvious; rather, continuation in the truth is a test which will ultimately reflect the validity of the profession.[4](#)

In the preceding verses (1Jn 5:14–15), John speaks about prayer and the confidence a believer may have concerning the acceptance of that prayer before God and the granting of the request. In 1Jn 5:16–17, he gives a specific illustration and limitation within which the prayer of a Christian may be benevolently and effectually employed, namely, in rescuing a brother from death.

It is not now a case of petition, but of intercession. The assurance of eternal life which the Christian should enjoy (1Jn 5:13) ought not to lead him into preoccupation with himself to the neglect of others. On the contrary, he will recognize his duty in love to care for his brother in need.... The future tense he shall ask expresses not the writer's command but the Christian's inevitable and spontaneous reaction.[5](#)

Thus it is that when one comes to the throne of God in prayer, the standing of his brother is immediately brought into focus. This connection has led Cameron to remark, "Our holiest hours of prayer and worship should be marked by benevolence toward our brethren."[6](#)

### **The Nature of the Sin**

Various attempts in satisfactorily resolving the difficulties regarding the character of the sin have been made. Some of the many interpretations include:

(1) the sin against the Holy Spirit,

- (2) any great sin, such as murder or adultery,
- (3) rejection of Christ as Messiah,
- (4) deliberate and willful sins,
- (5) apostasy, and
- (6) post-baptismal sins.[7](#)

The most significant of these will be examined.

### **Mortal sins**

The Church of Rome has consistently maintained that the “sin unto death” is a grave, post-baptismal sin.[8](#) This sin is commonly referred to as “mortal” sin, as compared with the less significant sin which is called “venial.” Although the designations are not specifically named in Scripture, it is asserted that the distinction between the two types of sin is clearly affirmed. In general, mortal sins are said to be those which exclude the offender from the kingdom (e.g., Eph 5:5; Gal 5:19–21) and venial sins are those which do not (e.g., James 3:2; 1 John 1:8; Eccl 7:21).[9](#) Additional proof for such distinctions is given by Dens, as quoted by M’Clintock and Strong:

“It is, moreover, certain,” says Dens, “not only from the divine compassion, but from the nature of the thing, that there are venial sins, or such light ones, as in just men may consist with a state of grace and friendship with God; implying that there is a certain kind of sin of which a man may be guilty without offending God.”[10](#)

A more specific basis for these definitions is provided by Aquinas. Describing the distinctiveness of the two types, he explains,

The difference between venial and mortal sin follows upon a diversity of disorder inherent in the concept of sin itself. This disorder is twofold: the one involves the abandonment of the very source of order, the other only involves departure from secondary elements in that order.... Hence, when the soul is so disordered by sin that it turns away from its ultimate goal, God, to whom it is united by charity, then we speak of mortal sin. However, when this disorder stops short of turning away from God, then the sin is venial.[11](#)

Venial sins, therefore, do not make one the offender of God; they do not cause a diminution of sanctifying grace. Though they constitute a violation of God’s law, they are too small and insignificant to divert one from his ultimate goal, God. Mortal sin, on the other hand, constitutes an act in which the offender deliberately chooses “some created good as a final end in preference to the Supreme Good, with a consequent loss of sanctifying grace.”[12](#)

The NT does teach that sins differ in magnitude (cf. Matt 10:15; 11:22, 24; Luke 10:12, 14; 12:47, 48). Nevertheless, holding such an interpretation as set forth by the Roman Church entails several difficulties. First, the definition of venial and mortal is imprecise, essentially destroying any real distinction between the two. Because their general definition of sin specifically states that “sin is a deliberate and voluntary act,...an act marked by a want of conformity with the law of God,”[13](#) they are forced to make some fine differentiations and to conclude that venial sin is “imperfectly deliberate” while mortal sin is “fully deliberate.”[14](#) Such terminology makes a distinction virtually imperceptible. Furthermore, the definition is untenable in light of certain scriptural examples. Paul persecuted the first century Christians in ignorance (1 Tim 1:13), yet he designates himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Eve was deceived by Satan (1 Tim 2:14) but bore the consequences of mortal sin.

Secondly, Scripture teaches that every offense is deadly and subject to the claims of divine justice. Thus Ezek 18:20 declares, “The person who sins will die.” Likewise Rom 6:23 asserts, “The wages of sin is death.” The malicious motivation behind the sin, or the lack of it, makes no difference, as James 2:10 indicates: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” On the other hand, the Bible explicitly and implicitly declares that no sin is too great to be beyond the scope of God’s forgiveness (cf. 1 Tim 1:15).

Thirdly, that the kind of sin does not determine whether its punishment is temporal or eternal but merely results in greater or lesser punishments is illustrated by the appointed sacrifices of the OT. Different sins demanded different sacrifices; nevertheless, “without the shedding of blood there was no remission” (cf. Heb 9:22). Though sins differ in degree, the essential character of sin does not vary.

The classification of sins as adumbrated by the Roman Catholic Church has no basis in Scripture, neither in 1 John nor elsewhere. The NT gives no precedent for such a practice nor does it warrant such an arbitrary conclusion.

### **Apostasy**

Some authors have suggested that the “sin unto death” refers to total apostasy, exemplified by the renunciation of the faith. Brooke, a proponent of the view, maintains that the sin is a deliberate rejection of Christ and His claims, for such “was probably the most prominent in the writer’s thought.”<sup>15</sup> That this is so, it is contended, is evident from 1 John 2:18–19 where the false teachers are reported to have left the fellowship of believers.<sup>16</sup>

Brooke further explains that since apostasy exhibits itself apart from any specific act of sin, this conclusion dovetails with the fact that no specific sins are mentioned here. He concludes that “in the author’s view any sin which involves a deliberate rejection of the claims of Christ may be described as ‘unto death.’”<sup>17</sup>

Lenski concurs with this assessment:

Since ζωή (zōē) “life eternal” (1Jn 5:13), which, as we now “have” it, is spiritual, “death” must be its opposite, namely the loss of spiritual life, which is spiritual death. Once having been born from God (1Jn 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:4, 18) into the new life, “death” means that this life has been lost.<sup>18</sup>

The major difficulty with this conclusion, however, is the fact that Scripture nowhere teaches that the genuinely regenerated person can apostatize. This same writer in his Gospel contends that the believer is secure (John 10:28, 29). Elsewhere in this Epistle, he reiterates that the one who is born of God does not habitually sin (1 John 3:9; 5:18). Scholer elaborates,

There is no reference to apostasy. This is made very clear in 1 John 2:19.... After stating that many antichrists, already present and active (1Jn 2:18; cf. 4:1–5), have come from the Christian community (1Jn 2:19), the statement is modified in such a way as to negate it. In actuality the antichrists were not from the Christian community, for if they had been they would not have left it. The fact that antichrists left the community was a good thing; it showed conclusively that they were never real members of it in the first place; they had been pretenders only.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that they were never regenerated is also indicated by John’s use of the imperfect verb ἦσαν (ēsan, “they were”) in 1Jn 2:19:

The imperfect tense, used twice, indicates that those who depart were not real Christians in the past. This agrees with the use of the perfect tense in the epistle to indicate that a man’s life reflects evidence whether he has or has not been born of God in the past.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the preposition εἰς (eis, “in, into”) is usually employed by John when referring to entrance into the new life in Christ (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14). The same preposition could be expected if he had in mind a reversal of that act. Rather, πρὸς (pros, “toward, unto”) is used here, indicating motion toward. Brooke explains that πρὸς θάνατον (pros thanaton, “toward, unto death”) must, of course, denote a tendency in the direction of death, and not an attained result.<sup>21</sup>

Passages within the Johannine corpus, as well as many references outside it (cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 1:6; Jude 1), lend strong evidence that the Christian will not apostatize, but will persevere in the faith.

### **Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit**

A third view suggests that John is referring to the “unpardonable sin” spoken of in Matt 12. Sawtelle explains,

It is a sin that John has terribly marked again and again in our Epistle, that of willfully rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit as to the true nature and Messiahship of Jesus, the denying of Christ in his true nature. That it is a sin which connects itself with one’s treatment of Christ is a fair inference from the doctrine of ver. 12.<sup>22</sup>

Stott embraces this view also, contending that the one who is depicted in Matt 12:31–32 as deliberately and willfully rejecting known truth is also referred to here. “In John’s own language he has ‘loved darkness rather than light’ (John 3:18–21), and in consequence he will ‘die in his sins’ (John 8:24). His sin is, in fact, unto death.”<sup>23</sup>

Support for this conclusion is obtained primarily from the polemic of John which is evident throughout the Epistle and especially in the context of the fifth chapter. The apostle frequently expresses the necessity of recognizing and believing that Jesus is God in the flesh (1Jn 1:1–3; 2:22–24; 4:2–3, 15; 5:1). In chapter five, he specifically notes how the Holy Spirit bears witness to this very fact (1Jn 5:6–10).<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the argument proceeds, John’s comments regarding the witness of the Spirit may have been intended to recall the warning against blaspheming the Holy Spirit recorded in the Synoptics.

This interpretation has much to commend it and is certainly a possible solution. However, the view has some problems. First, the passage really does not connect itself with the “unpardonable sin” of Matt 12. It contains no concrete evidence that such a connection was intended by the writer.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the one who had committed the “unpardonable sin” would not be considered a “brother” in the local fellowship. Willful and

deliberate rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit, as described in the gospels, would be difficult to disguise. One guilty of such would hardly be accepted as a brother. Such open antagonism could not be masked and go unnoticed by the others in the fellowship.

## Habitual Sinning

A fourth possibility is that the “sin unto death” refers to one who persists in committing sin. He habitually practices sin to the extent that his character and lifestyle ultimately show others within the local body of believers that he is not a believer.

The main thematic thread of the Epistle supports this contention, for the true believer does not practice sin (1Jn 2:1; 3:4, 6, 8, 9). The immediate context supports this conclusion also, for the following verse reiterates the same fact. This teaching is not limited to the Johannine corpus, for such a teaching is also found in Gal 5:21; 6:8; and Rom 6:21–23. Although there may be occasional sins, the believer’s life will not be characterized by sin as a lifestyle.

The NT elsewhere teaches that those who are immoral, covetous, idolatrous, revilers, drunkards, and swindlers shall not inherit the kingdom (1 Cor 5:9–13; 6:9–11; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:5), for their works are the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19; so also 1 Pet 4:3–5; 1 John 3:15; Rev 21:7–8; 22:14–15). Continuation in and habitual pursuit of such activity is inconsistent with a believer’s life in Christ. An isolated act does not necessarily deny one an inheritance in the kingdom of God, but the constant practice of such things does.

The major difficulty which this view faces is the fact that 1 John 5:16 refers to a sinning “brother.” Scholer, for example, asserts that the above argument “breaks down completely because of the use of the present tense of hamartanein in 1Jn 5:16 with reference to the sinning of a believer as well as the use of the present tense in 1Jn 1:8.”[26](#)

However, neither 1Jn 1:8 nor 1Jn 5:16 furnish conclusive evidence that the one sinning is definitely a saved man. In fact, the designation of “brother” may also include one who has only professed but does not actually possess eternal life. This kind of brother is inferred in 1Jn 2:9, 11, and 1Jn 3:15, for “the one who hates his brother is in the darkness until now” (cf. 1Jn 4:20). It is not uncommon for the Scriptures to speak to professing believers when addressing the church, such as in 1 Cor 5:11; 2 Cor 11:26; and Gal 2:4. Even the unregenerate of 1 John 2:19 were most probably called brothers.[27](#)

Furthermore, the use of the present active participle *μαρτώνοντα* (hamartanonta, “sinning”), suggests that John has an unsaved man in view, for he consistently employs the present tense to refer to the sins which characterize the unsaved (1Jn 3:4, 6, 8; 5:18).[28](#) Other evidences of an unregenerate heart in 1 John are spoken of in the present tense, such as loving the world (1Jn 2:15), not keeping the commandments (1Jn 2:4), hating a brother (1Jn 2:9, 11; 3:10, 14ff; 1Jn 4:8, 20), walking in darkness (1Jn 1:6; 2:12), lying (1Jn 1:6), and denying that Jesus is the Christ (2:22ff).[29](#)

Those who hold to the “believer” view attempt to circumvent this clear indication by attributing a “one time occurrence” to the punctiliar action of the aorist subjunctive *ἴδῃ* (idē, “sees”). But the punctiliar action of the aorist does not rule out the idea of continual, ongoing occurrence; it cannot be restricted to a “one time occurrence/once for all” idea. To hide behind the screen of a “particular occasion of practicing sin” greatly obscures and even negates the obvious Johannine practice of employing the present tense to denote continuing, ongoing, characteristic-of-life issues. Furthermore, even if the “seeing” were conceded to be point action, the “sinning” is still clearly habitual and ongoing, a fact demonstrated by John’s repeated use of the present active participle to denote durative action. At best, the aorist subjunctive only indicates that the ongoing practice of sin was not actually observed on a continual basis.

In light of the above evidence, the most plausible explanation for the sin which leads to death is that it refers to habitual and continual sinning of a professing brother. The apostle probably has no particular sin in mind, for the present participle, hamartanonta, denotes not an act of sin but a continuing state.

## The Nature of the Death

The second issue which confronts the interpreter in 1 John 5:16 is the nature of the death which results from the sinning described by John. The apostle states that the sin either is not *πρὸς θάνατον* or is *πρὸς θάνατον* (pros thanaton, “toward, unto death”). Virtually all grammarians and commentators maintain that the *πρὸς* (pros, “toward, unto”) does not denote “until,” for it nowhere has this meaning in the NT. Rather, it designates that which eventuates in or tends toward death.

The Greek ( *μαρτία πρὸς θάνατον*, [hamartia pros thanaton, “sin unto death”]) would mean properly a sin which tends to death; which would terminate in death; of which death was the penalty or would be the result, unless it were arrested; a sin which, if it had its own course, would terminate thus.[30](#)

Although many different views have been propounded,[31](#) there are basically two views held by present-day scholars regarding the nature of this death.

## Physical death

Probably the most common interpretation is that the death refers to the physical death of a believer. It is a physical punishment or chastisement which God executes as a result of sin in the believer's life.

The sin unto death means a case of transgression, particularly of grievous backsliding from the life and power of godliness, which God determines to punish with temporal death, while at the same time he extends mercy to the penitent soul.... The sin not unto death is any sin which God does not choose thus to punish.[32](#)

The major support for this position is the interpretation of "brother." "The text is explicit. It refers to a 'brother,' which term is never used of the unregenerate, and declares definitely that a Christian may sin in such a way that the chastisement of death may fall upon him."[33](#) Thus it is concluded that since a believer cannot apostatize, John must be speaking of physical death and not spiritual death. However, as was noted earlier, the term "brother" cannot be so restricted; rather, it may be used sometimes to refer to one who is only professing to be a believer, for John does employ the term at times in a more universal sense.

Another proof used for this view is the fact that other passages suggest that sin does sometimes result in the believer's physical death. The most prominent incident is noted in 1 Cor 11:30, where Paul indicates that the partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily (11:27) has been the reason that "many among you sleep."[34](#)

It is granted that the physical death of a believer may be in view in 1 Cor 11. However, this does not prove that physical death of a believer is in view in 1 John 5:16. In addition to the fact that "nothing in this part of 1 John indicates that 'sin leading to death' must be understood as sin punished by fatal bodily illness,"[35](#) there is significant evidence that suggests otherwise.

### Spiritual death

A second view maintains that the death referred to in 1 John 5:16 is spiritual death. This interpretation hinges primarily upon John's use of ζῶν (zōēn, "life") and, by comparison, θάνατον (thanaton, "death"), for these two are natural opposites and must correspond when in antithesis to each other. If physical death is being referred to, then the life must be physical life; conversely, if spiritual death is in view, then the life must be spiritual life. One cannot "mix-n-match" and still maintain a natural understanding of the death-life antithesis in the passage. If correspondence is maintained, then proponents of the physical death view are faced with the difficulty of explaining why one should pray that God will give the sinning one in 5:16a extended physical life when in fact he is committing sin not leading to premature physical death.

First of all, it should be noted that the apostle significantly employs βίος (bios, "life") (2:16) and ψυχὴ (psuchē, "life, breath") (3:16 twice) to refer to physical life, but reserves ζ to refer to spiritual life elsewhere in the Epistle. The nominal form is used eleven times elsewhere (1:1, 2 [twice]; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12 [twice], 13, 20), always meaning eternal or spiritual life. The verbal form, ζῶ (zaē, "I live"), is used only once (4:9), also with the same meaning. This fact strongly suggests that John has spiritual life in view in 5:16 also. Furthermore, this trend characterizes John's Gospel, for zōē, the term used in 5:16, always refers to eternal life, and the verb zaō designates eternal life in all but three (John 4:50, 51, 53) instances. While John does use these terms to refer to physical life in Revelation, the predominant usage is in reference to spiritual life.

Second, John's use of thanatos in the Epistle lends additional support. Apart from its use in the phrases under discussion in 5:16–17, the term occurs only in 3:14. In this passage, John employs the term twice to denote spiritual death: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death."

Consequently, if physical life had been meant by John in 5:16, it is most likely that he would have used one of the other two terms he employed earlier to refer to physical life. And, since it is likely that zōē refers to spiritual life, then thanatos, following its usage in 3:14, must have reference to spiritual death. It is conceded that while all persons are born spiritually dead, they certainly are not confirmed in that state. However, following the apostle's teaching here, there may come a time prior to their physical death when their condition becomes irreversible, when divine forgiveness is no longer available to them (cf. Matt 12:31–32).[36](#)

Third, the immediate context offers important credence to this conclusion, for both before and after the sixteenth verse, zōē is used to refer to eternal, spiritual life (1Jn 5:11, 12, 13, 20). Says Cameron, "If a different kind of life were meant, it would be natural to expect him to indicate it by the use of a different word, elsewhere used for natural life."[37](#)

### Conclusion

The apostle John appears to have in view an unsaved man who professes to be a believer, but who is in actuality in need of salvation. On the one hand, John refers to a man who is sinning but is not doing so to the point of the impossibility of being granted eternal life; he has not yet come to the place where the possibility of divine forgiveness has been revoked. In such cases, as a result of the intercessory prayer of a "brother," God would grant spiritual life. On the other hand, the apostle asserts that if a man does sin to such an extent that repentance and forgiveness is impossible, it would be "unto death" spiritual death, spiritual death in the sense that his condition is irrevocable (cf. Matt 12:31–32). Thus the sin can be committed by a Christian when "Christian" is used in the



broader sense to include those whose Christianity is merely a matter of profession, but it cannot if "Christian" means one who has actually been regenerated.

It is clear that "brother" in Scripture normally refers to a saved individual, but John's usage of the term implies that in some cases there will be a difference between what is professed and what is actually true.

Furthermore, experience has vividly illustrated the power of God to regenerate the most reprobate of sinners, and therefore the believer should be careful not to judge the status of another too quickly. Nevertheless, John asserts that the habitual practice of sin does indicate the spiritual state of a man (cf. Gal 5:21). Consequently, while the believer is to pray for this sinning brother until God reveals otherwise, John reminds him that the efficacy of his prayer may not extend to that person and that the believer's confidence should not be diminished thereby.

This is not an adumbration of the Roman Catholic doctrine regarding mortal sin, for which the consequence is spiritual death (unless it is reversed during this lifetime through confession and penance or after this lifetime while in purgatory through the efforts of relatives still alive). On the contrary, it only maintains that, in keeping with the Johannine theme, persistent sin in the life of anyone who professes to be saved indicates that he is not saved, and that the ultimate end of such is spiritual death. Although acts of sin do not cause one to die spiritually (man is born spiritually dead), the habitual practice of sin may lead to an irreversible state, a condition in which forgiveness will be no longer available. The limitation has only to do with the unbeliever, however, for the believer's full forgiveness was procured by the death of Christ at Calvary.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] <sup>1</sup>Scripture quotations in this essay are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted. "Sin unto death" in the essay title and used frequently throughout the essay is phraseology derived from 1 John 5:16 in the King James Version.

[2]Also cf. Lev 4:2; 5:15; Num 14:2-4; 20:12; and 1 Sam 2:25. This same philosophy was continued in the Qumran Community, as the Manual of Discipline gives evidence (1QS 8:21-9:2). During the first centuries A.D., this concept was taken even further: "Tertullian went a stage further and listed the grosser sins (including murder, adultery, blasphemy and idolatry) as beyond pardon" (John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Tyndale's New Testament Commentaries, ed. by R. V. G. Tasker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 187).

[3]See Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914).

[4]Cf. 1 John 2:19 where some who professed Christ and were a part of the local body of believers were ultimately exposed by their departure.

[5]Stott, *Epistles* 186.

[6]Robert Cameron, *The First Epistle of John* (Philadelphia: A. J. Rowland, 1899) 242.

[7]A list of additional interpretations is given by Barnes, "The First Epistle General of John," *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament Testament*, X (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975[rpt.]) 348-49, and Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (vol. 30 of *The Anchor Bible*; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 611-620.

[8]Deadly sins committed prior to the time of baptism are said to be cleansed at the time of that sacrament (James Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers* [Baltimore: John Murphy, 1905] 303 ff.). For this reason many have waited until their deathbed to be baptized.

[9]I. McGuiness, "Sin (Theology of)," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, XIII (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 245.

[10]John M'Clintock and James Strong, "Sin," *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theo-logical, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, IX (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969[rpt.]) 767.

[11]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (XXV, trans. by Timothy McDermott; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969) 43.

[12]McGuiness, "Sin" 241.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (in the International Critical Commentary, ed. by C. A. Briggs, et. al.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971) 147. Marvin Vincent appears to embrace this view also, for he states that "whatever breaks fellowship between the soul and Christ . . . is unto death for there is no life apart from Christ" (*Word Studies* [Vol. II; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911] 371).

[16]Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-29 are usually associated with this view and are frequently employed as proof of its veracity.

[17]Brooke, pp. 146-47. Lenski agrees, stating that this sin results in "the loss of spiritual life, which is spiritual death" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961] 535-36).

[18]Lenski, *St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* 535-36.

[19]David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-17," *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 242.

[20]James E. Rosscup, "Paul's Teaching on the Christian's Future Reward With Special Reference to 1 Corinthians 3:10-17" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 1976) 448.

[21]Brooke, *Johannine Epistles* 147.

[22]Henry A. Sawtelle, *Commentary on the Epistles of John* (in *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. by Alvah Hovey; Valley Forge: Judson, 1888) 61.

[23]Stott, *Epistles* 189. Also cf. George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.) 406-07, and Baird Tipson, "A Dark Side of 17th Century English Protestantism: the Sin against the Holy Spirit," *HTR* 77/3-4 (July-Oct 1984) 301-330.

[24]Stott (*Epistles* 188 ff.) contends that both parties in 5:16 are unbelievers while John Murray maintains that only the one who commits a sin unto death is not a believer, citing John 9:41; 15:22; 1 John 4:2-3; 5:1 as proof. Nevertheless, they both agree as to the nature of the sin unto death, namely, "the denial of Jesus as come in the flesh" (John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," *Calvin Theological Journal* 2:1 [April, 1967] 11).

[25]Brooke, *Johannine Epistles* 147.

[26]Scholer, "Sins Within" 231. Scholer, with Murray ("Definitive Sanctification" 11), contends that when John speaks of the believer as not sinning, he is *not* speaking of habitual sinning; rather, such references refer to the fact that the believer does not sin unto death, i.e. he does not and cannot deny Jesus as come in the flesh. The believer may, however, sin sin not unto death (246). Also cf. Henry W. Holloman, "The Meaning of 'Sin unto Death' in 1 John 5:16-17" (paper read at Far West Section of the Evangelical Theological Society, Apr 23, 1982) 1-6.

[27]Cf. Stott, *Epistles* 189-90, for a helpful discussion.

[28]Scholer ("Sins Within" 246) and Murray ("Definitive Sanctification" 11) seek to answer the Johannine use of the present tense by suggesting that the believer does sin (present tense) not unto death but does not sin (present tense) *unto death*. But 5:18 says nothing of the believer not sinning unto death; it merely says that the believer does not sin (present tense).

[29]Rosscup, "Paul's Teaching" 447-48.

[30]Barnes, *Barnes' Notes* 249. Lenski concurs: "John says twice that in these cases the sinning is 'not unto death'; prw is used as it was in v. 14 with the meaning not facing death as the inevitable result" (*St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* 535).

[31]Cf. Barnes, *Barnes' Notes* 348-49, for a list of additional interpretations.

[32]Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments With a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: Abingdon, n.d.) VI, 925.

[33]Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947) III, 310. Cook similarly contends, "The implication is, however, that 'sin unto death' will sometimes lead to untimely physical death despite our prayers because God knows that chastisement, not forgiveness in this life, is the best thing" (W. Robert Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," *BSac* 123:491 [July-September, 1966] 259).

[34]A number of other biblical examples have been cited, such as Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10), Korah and his sons (Num 16), Achan (Josh 7), the disobedient prophet (1 Kgs 13), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). However, these accounts are somewhat ambiguous concerning the actual spiritual standing of the individuals before God.

[35]Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (vol. 51 of *Word Biblical Commentary*; Waco, TX: Word, 1984) 297.

[36]The difference between the case described in Matt 12 and the one found in 1 John 5 appears to be that those in the former instance are guilty of open, blatant opposition and rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit, while in the latter instance, the action

appears to be more covert and disguised, occurring among those who profess to believe but in reality do not (cf. 1 John 2:19). In both cases, however, the result is the same, an irreversible, confirmed condition in which divine forgiveness is no longer available.

[37]Cameron, *First Epistle* 243.