

PRAYER, SIN, AND IDOLS

1 John 5:14-21

PRAYER:

As we begin examining prayer in this particular part of John's epistle, we must understand we cannot give the attention and consideration to this amazing subject that it deserves. Why? Well, in some degree it is all but an inexhaustible subject. May I make an open confession? Although I understand what prayer is and some of the amazing privileges which accompany it, it remains somewhat of a mystery to me. Please know, although I don't understand prayer I still pray regularly and thank God for the privilege to prayer.

Why is it somewhat of a mystery to me? Well, I am amazed that a sinner that has been saved by grace can bow his head and humble his heart on Earth and can, because of what Christ did at Calvary, enter into the Throne Room of Heaven where the King of Kings, and Lord of Lord rules and reigns and have personal audience with Him. When we prayer, we enter into that place where those strange creature referred to as "beasts" in **Revelation 4:6-7** continually cry: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and which is to come." And yet you and I can be heard by the great "I AM THAT I AM" (**Exodus 3:14**) as if we were the only ones in the universe when we pray. Amazing I think!

Can you not see why it is somewhat of a mystery to me a little better now?

But be it known, prayer is not just a privilege. It is a command of God. We are commanded to pray. Prayer is not an attempt for us to get our will done in Heaven, but rather it is the means by which God gets His will done on Earth. Prayer isn't as much about us changing God as it is about God changing us. Prayer, if done according to God's Word, may not change the situation, *but* it will change us regardless of the situation.

With that and more in mind, please listen to what John says to us about our prayers in **verse 14**: "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us." John is saying to us who are sinners saved by grace that we have a right to come to God in prayer. In fact, we are to come to Him in prayer with boldness and confidence. Confidence He will not only hear what we have to say but will also answer our prayers. In His way; in His time; according to His will. Wow!

May I make a note of something? For a long time I wondered why John would include a reference to prayer in this closing passage. As I pondered its purpose the thought came to me, prayer is always in order especially here is light of the subject being considered which is a sin unto death.

I'm sure you recall what Paul told the Hebrew believers to do in **Hebrews 4:16** in reference to prayer. There he states: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in the time of need." We are not to be brazen as we approach God's Throne, but we are to be confident. We are to come confident as a child would come to his father. In fact, as a believer that is exactly what we are doing. We are coming to our Heavenly Father who taught us to "cry, Abba, Father" in **Romans 8:15**. When we come to God in prayer we aren't to come as beggars, but as sons and daughters. After all, hasn't John referred to us several times in this letter as God's "little children?"

ASSURANCE OF PRAYER:

Verse 15 continues with a word of assurance: "And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desire of him." I'm afraid in this day of charismatic thinking there are a lot of preachers and teachers which promote the idea all we have to do as believers is to name what we want in prayer and then claim it. In fact, many of them discourage ending prayer with the phrase "thy will be done" although that is exactly what **Matthew 6:10, 26:39** teaches us to do.

They also suggest the reason believers do not get their prayers answered is due to the lack of faith in the one making the petition. In fact, I've heard some of them say the reason Paul could not get rid of the thorn in his flesh he prayed about (no less than three times) was because he did not have enough faith to be healed! I don't know about you, but in my opinion, that is the epitome of ignorance and arrogance! As the charismatic preaches and teaches on prayer, they say nothing about the matter of seeking for and finding God's will in the matter being taken before the Throne of God in prayer.

NOT YOUR ORDINARY SIN:

So much time could be invested on the subject of prayer, but we will discover that **verses 16-18** will demand a great deal of careful consideration from us. From the beginning of this letter, John has dealt with the issue of sin in the life of a believer

and how sin negatively affects their fellowship with the Father. John has in no way avoided dealing with the issue of sin but has, rather, addressed it plainly.

From before the time God created man God knew sin would be a problem for Him and the man He was to create. Knowing what He did, He made provision in eternity past to take care of the whole issue of sin. He knew (because of the fallen nature man would inherit as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden) sin would be an issue demanding action as long as man lived.

In this passage we find John instructing fellow believers about whether or not to pray for someone we know who has sinned a sin unto death. He also deals with something which may seem strange to us. Yet, as we have read the Bible through from **Genesis** to this point in **1 John**, we have seen on a number of occasions how someone's sin resulted in their death as a judgment. The death I am speaking of is premature death as the result of some particular sin.

In **verse 16** John assures us that not every sin a person sins is a sin unto death (meaning the premature physical death of a believer). But all death (physical, spiritual, eternal) is the result of sin. We learn death is the result of the choice Adam and Eve made to disobey God in the Garden of Eden in the beginning. But, lest there be any doubt about the kind of death being spoken of here by John, rest assured John is speaking about physical death.

How can we know that for sure? Simply by remembering when a sinner is saved he becomes a recipient of eternal life. Eternal life is a kind of life which knows no death or end. Whether or not one can lose eternal life is not the issue here, although that is impossible. What we need to understand is the fact a believer *can commit a sin unto death* for which our Heavenly Father will call them home in a premature physical death. It is quite possible a "sin unto death" is a one-time sin. In fact the examples I will give in a moment will prove this point. It is possible that a sin which is a "sin unto death" is a sin which is done repetitively and rebelliously in the face of God's warnings and wooing.

Let's do our best to work through these verses and see what we can glean. In **verse 16** John begins by saying: "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." As I type this verse I am reminded by the Holy Spirit of the question Cain asked the Lord in the

beginning soon after he had slain his brother. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” in **Genesis 4:9**. To answer the question here, to some degree, it seems as if we are.

It seems we are to be paying attention to the kind of life our brother in Christ is living. When it is apparent it does not match his normal walk, prayer by us on his behalf is warranted. It is evident we all sin. As I have said, John has dealt with the issue of sin in the life of a believer early in this epistle. In fact, **verse 18** tells us: “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not, (which means they *do not make sin a life-style or a habit of life*). So it is obvious there are sins a believer can commit that do not merit a premature loss of life. Those sins can be taken care of by the means of self judgment and chastisement. (**1 Corinthians 11; Hebrews 12**) As with Samson, forgiveness can be known, restoration can be had, but irreversible consequences such as Samson’s losing his vision may come as a result of that sin. But, as we read the complete story of Samson, we find something wonderful happened after he had been taken captive by the Philistines. The wonderful thing is that while he was grinding in the prison house, his hair began to grow although his sight did not return. (**Judges 16 esp. verses 21-22**) His supernatural strength returned and, by the grace of God, Samson wrought one of his greatest judgments against one of Israel’s greatest enemies at his death, the Philistines.

As **verse 16** continues, we learn about a sin which is unto death. In fact, John says: “There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.” Now let’s be honest. There are some scripture that are both surprising and somewhat difficult to understand. When I first became a student of the Bible, this is one of those verses that was just that for me; surprising and difficult to understand. But, by the grace of God and a lot of study time, the surprise has gone and the difficulty in understanding what the Holy Spirit was saying has gone as well.

I suppose we all may have several questions about what John has written. Questions like: “What is the sin a believer can commit that will result in premature death?” “Will God actually arbitrarily take one of His children out of this life because of some sin?” “How does God decide to do that?” “What are we not supposed to pray about in reference to a sin unto death?” I’m sure there are other questions we could ask, but let’s take these one at a time and see if we can find some answers.

Allow me to say one more thing before we look at the questions. We read in **verse 17** that “all unrighteousness is sin.” We also know some sins are worse than other

sins. All sin is hateful to God and should be hateful to the believer as well. But we are learning there are some sins which may be punished by a premature death. This is what the Bible teaches.

Question # 1:

“What is the sin a believer can commit that will result in premature death?”
That is a great question! It is a question for which we cannot find a specific answer. By that I mean God knows what it is, but we do not. In fact, I personally believe it differs from person to person. We will learn this to be true by considering the next question.

I don't believe the “sin unto death” is a specific sin as much as it is a kind of sin or an attitude about sin, if you will. For instance, as we examine this, to a degree, we will learn the examples we have from both the Old and New Testament have disobeyed God in different ways and yet, they are taken in a premature death as the result of God's judgment. I believe I am correct in saying it is more a heart issue than anything else.

I will not spend much time on trying to explain any of the particulars of the examples I lift up for your consideration. But, please allow the Holy Spirit to do that. That way, I am sure you will come away from this study with an enlightened understanding on something which, as I've said, seems strange.

EXAMPLES:

Our first example from the Old Testament is a man by the name of Achan. His story is found in **Joshua 7**. The sin he committed was the sin of covetousness. He was a part of those who had come out of Egypt under the blood of a lamb. He was a part of God's chosen. The fact God dealt with him in this manner proves this to be true. Don't forget, a Father will not punish children which do not belong to Him. (**Hebrews 12:5-11**)

Leviticus 10 records the story of the death of two of Aaron's son Nadab and Abihu. They were priests which had been consecrated in the priesthood. The reason they died is that they deliberately disobeyed God. They may have been excited and motivated by a great desire, **but** they put their will above the will of God and paid the ultimate price.

In **2 Samuel 6** we find a man by the name of Uzzah suffering premature death as the result of putting his hand on the ark to keep it from falling off the Philistine type cart. There were a lot of things wrong in what David and the others were doing in bringing the ark to the city of Jerusalem. But, in the eyes and mind of God they were all wrong. In fact, the ways and means David and the others had chosen to transport the ark were the ways of the world. Although a mystery to us, it is clear that to God the breach of Uzzah was a sin unto death. He dropped dead beside the ark he decided to touch. I can't help but wonder if the God of Israel was attempting to restore a sense of holiness and reverence for the things of God at this time which, in some ways, marks a new beginning for this nation under the leadership of David and which God had chosen as His own.

In the New Testament, in the early days of a young Church, we find the record of the Holy Spirit judging a man by the name of Ananias and his wife by the name of Sapphira who conspired to lie to the Holy Spirit. I am sure John knew about this situation. In fact, I would be surprised if he was not an eyewitness to that series of events. **Acts 5** provides the record of how these two believers died prematurely because of their decision and actions to deceive.

In **1 Corinthians 11** we find Paul instructing the Church in Corinth on how to properly partake of the Lord's Supper. In reading the passage we quickly come to understand there were a number of problems in this young congregation that needed addressed by the Apostle. In **verses 23-34** Paul instructed the young Church as to how to properly celebrate the memorial our Lord established on the night before His crucifixion. But we should pay close attention to what Paul said in **verses 30-32** and specifically in the latter part of **verse 30**. It is there we find Paul telling us that "and many sleep." He was referring to members of the Church of Corinth which had, obviously, participated in the Lord's Supper in an inappropriate way. We must remember the word sleep, as used in the Scripture, is a reference to death as we find in **John 11:11-14**. A premature death was a divine judgment levied by God on some of those in Corinth. Therefore, we find Paul saying that "many sleep" or, to say it as plainly as can be said, many suffered the ultimate judgment, a premature death.

To try and quickly illustrate this allow me to ask you a question. As a child, was there ever a time when you were out in the yard playing and you were warned by your parent if you continued to do whatever it was you may have been doing (wrong) you would be made to come in before dark or even before your friends

had to go home? I have! I have clear memories of the fact my Father or Mother **NEVER** punished any child they could not list on their income tax form as a dependent. If my parents could differentiate between who was and was not their child, I'm sure God has no problem doing the same with me and you.

Question # 2:

“Will God actually arbitrarily take one of His children out of this life because of some sin?” We can rest assured He can, has, and will, if necessary, for Him to be gloried. Such an action may seem arbitrary to us, but it is not to Him. Remember His ways are true and righteous and past finding out.

Question # 3:

“How does God decide to do that?” Remembering God is omniscient is a helpful thing for me to remember here on an issue like this. There are many things we can never, at least in this life, comprehend about God. This is one of the things that make God, God. Hopefully the verse we find in **Psalm 19:9** “...the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” will help us with our lack of insight and understanding of the ways of God. Although when we cannot understand God's ways and works we can understand we can trust Him to do what is right and righteous, every time.

Question # 4:

“What are we not supposed to pray about in reference to a sin unto death?” By the way, in my opinion, this is the *key* question. What John is telling us here is that if a person sins a sin unto death, there is no reason for us to pray and ask God to forgive and restore the one who has sinned a sin unto death. We cannot change God's mind about His decision to chasten His child and take them home prematurely if that is His will. We can and should continue to pray for that person but not with the expectation of changing God's mind about judging that person.

In hope of providing a note of clarity, in **James 5:19- 20** where we find the Lord's half brother writing about being part of “converting the sinner from the error of his way” resulting in the saving of “a soul from death.” In making this reference, we must understand James was not referring to a “sin unto death” as was John in his letter. Rather, James was referring to a sin manifesting itself in the life of a believer that was sure to cause a break in fellowship for the person

committing the sin with his Heavenly Father. The father of the prodigal son understood a break in fellowship to be as death. (see **Luke 15:11-24** esp. **24**)

This great truth is clearly illustrated in **Hebrews 12:16-17**. There we find the record of Esau trying but failing to change his father Isaac's mind about the blessing he had spoken on Jacob although he begged him to do so with tears. As the firstborn, the blessing he spoke to Jacob was rightly his. But Esau learned that what Isaac had spoken to his brother Jacob could not be changed. Isaac would not change his mind about the blessings he bestowed on Jacob. Even though Esau was his father's favorite son, he could not get Isaac to change his mind about the blessing he had spoken on Jacob even though Esau begged him to do so with many tears.

Hopefully, these questions and illustrations will prove helpful, to some degree, in our coming to a better understanding of this surprising and difficult truth we find in **verse 16** of **1 John**.

As we continue, **verse 17** tells us: "All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death." John reminds us sin is never a good choice for a believer. In fact, all sin is against the new nature all believers become a partaker of as the result of being born again. (**2 Peter 1:4**)

In **verse 18** John once again declares a truth that often needs repeating. He says: "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not:" It is a fact that those who have been born from above or again *do not make sin a life-style, a habit of life, or a practice*. Believer's sin on occasion, but they do not sin as a regular habit of life. If they do, then they would be wise to revisit their profession of faith. If they do, they may find all they have is a profession and are, actually, in need of a new birth experience.

The verse continues with: "but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." Now, when we first look at this verse we may find it somewhat confusing especially in light of what Peter says in **1 Peter 1:5**. There he says a believer is "kept by the power of God through faith." Every believer knows, in their heart, of their inability to keep themselves. They do understand they are both able and commanded to "keep (themselves) yourselves in the love of God" or in a place where the blessing of God can be experienced (**Jude 21**). But, somehow, they intuitively understand they are not able to keep themselves saved.

They understand this great truth even if they do not know what the Word of God says about the assurance of salvation. A believer has assurance because of what God has done on their behalf and continues to do as it relates to salvation.

Please take note of the word “keepeth” in this verse. The word refers to watchful care. The idea contained in this word is that of carefully guarding something. A believer realizes they are incapable of keeping themselves especially in light of the fact they know they cannot save themselves. But, thank the Lord, they don’t have to. God has taken care of that. In fact, He has provided someone that can not only save the sinner, but also keep the saint!

Although **verse 18** *seems* to be saying the believer is to keep himself, when we dig a little deeper into this verse, we find that is not what John is saying. Allow me to borrow from John Phillips. He states: “The expression ‘he that was begotten of God’ is generally taken to be a reference to the Lord Jesus. Vine says, “Whereas the perfect tense ‘he that hath been begotten’ refers to the believer as a child of God, in contrast with those who have not become so, the aorist or point tense (referring to an action that happens at a particular **point** in time) ‘was begotten’ points to a fact in the past and refers to the Son of God, ‘the only-begotten from the Father’ (**John 1:11**).”

So, “the true believer is kept by the power of God, “and that wicked one toucheth him not.” The born-again child of God is in the charge of the Son of God Himself, and the Wicked One cannot “touch” that child. The word used for “toucheth” here comes from *haptomai*, meaning “to lay hold of.” So, “no child of God can be seized by Satan and snatched out of the Lord’s almighty hand and the hand of His Father (**John 10:28-29**).”

Verse 19 tells us there are two groups of people in this world. There are those who belong to God the Father as the result of a new birth and those who belong to the “wicked one” which is a reference to the soul’s great enemy, Satan. So, actually, we see in this verse a great contrast. We see there are those, as I just stated, that are from God which implies a new birth and a change of state. The change of state takes place as the Holy Spirit removes believing sinners out of the kingdom of darkness and places them into the kingdom of light. (**Colossians 1:13**) Everyone who is not “of God” lies in the hand of “that wicked one” or the world system over which Satan stands as the “god of this world.” (**2 Corinthians 4:4**)

KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS:

This great epistle of **1 John** comes to a close with both a statement and a warning from the aged Apostle. **Verse 20-21**, on initial consideration, may not seem to be connected, but they are! In fact, they are, in my opinion, inseparable.

In order to understand why John wrote what he has written, we need to remember this letter was probably written with the City of Ephesus in mind. After all, according to history, Ephesus is the place where the great Apostle was Pastor. Knowing this will help us understand why he brings this letter to a close in the manner in which he has.

At Ephesus there stood the Temple of Diana. The Temple Diana was an impressive building which had taken between one hundred and one hundred and fifty years to complete (one source claims it was two hundred years). It was roughly 400 feet long and 200 feet wide. According to historians, it was quite a majestic structure with pillars 60 feet high. The Temple of Diana was accompanied by surrounding gardens and filled with sculptures by Greek artisans, trophies of war, and covered with paintings. It was attended by priests and magicians, temple prostitutes of both genders, and sellers of “take home” idols or images and the demon(s) behind the idol. People came from “the ends of the earth” to worship a dead, deaf, and dumb piece of stone which was thought to have fallen from the heavens.

Verse 20 begins by saying: “And we know that the Son of God is come.” Let us never forget the battle John has been waging throughout this epistle against the false teachings of the Gnostics (remember the Gnostics purported they had a knowledge superior to that of everyone else). But we ought also to never forget John was himself an eyewitness of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. The words “is come” in this verse, is a definite reference to a personal appearance of God on planet Earth manifest in the flesh and known as Jesus Christ. To repeat intentionally, John is saying emphatically Jesus Christ is, in reality, truly the Son of God incarnate, thereby fleshing God out or manifesting God in the flesh in the presence of all humanity.

A scholar of the Scriptures by the name of Smith states the following in relation to **verse 20**: “The assurance and guarantee of it all—the incarnation, an overwhelming demonstration of God’s interest in us and His concern for our highest good. Not simply a historic fact but an abiding operation—not ‘came’ (*ēlthe*) but ‘hath come

and hath given us.’ Our faith is not a matter of intellectual theory but of personal and growing acquaintance with God through the enlightenment of Christ’s Spirit.”

John continues by saying: “and hath given (which is in the perfect tense) us an understanding” which refers to a gift which is the permanent possession of those who trust Him as Savior. What this means is although Jesus has ascended back to the Father in His gloried body, yet He is here in the Church He has purchased with His blood. He lives in and through those who are His followers.

Look closely at the words of assurance: “that we may *know* (emphasis mine) him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ.” This is written in opposition of those “idols” referred to in **verse 21**. Those who worship idols, worship something false and dead. Idols have eyes, but see not; ears, but hear not; a mouth, but speaks not. The only thing real about an idol is the demon which is associated with the idol.

John is telling the followers of Christ they have the “real thing.” What this means is He is the original. He is authentic. There is nothing imitation about Jesus Christ. He is the true light, the true bread, the true vine, and truth itself. A Christian does not choose between good and bad, but rather between real and false. Look how the verse is completed: “This is the true God and eternal life.” What a great declaration!

If anyone needs witnesses to the fact Jesus in the Christ, God “manifest in the flesh” (**1 Timothy 3:16**) there are a number of angels and men who stand willing to testify of this fact. If necessary we could summons the angels that heralded His birth and bore witness to the shepherds of Bethlehem. We could ask the wise men from the East what they personally thought about the Christ child. We could call on the virgin Mary and her husband Joseph about this seed of the woman. We could even ask the aged Anna and Simeon what they knew about Christ. I imagine John the Baptist would be willing to proclaim Him once again as “the Lamb of God.” And what about the men He chose Himself after a night of prayer to be His witnesses. If necessary, we could also call on God the Father and God the Holy Spirit to repeat the witness they gave of Jesus the Christ as He walked among men.

Rest assured, those of us who follow Christ as Savior follow the One True God as opposed to an idol crafted by man that is both deaf and dumb.

I think we would all be wise to take the admonition of **verse 21** seriously. There are many in this age which worship idols such as the Buddhists, Hindus, Shintoists, and others. The danger of our day is to falsely believe here in the United States no one worships idols. Yet, here in the United States men invest great amounts of time and money in amusements, self promotion, pleasure, and the pursuit of things providing only temporary value.

John closes his letter with a serious admonition we all would be wise to take to heart!

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” And to bring the whole letter to an appropriate end, he simply says: “Amen” or so be it.

Our position in the family of God is not to be taken lightly. It is quite a privilege to be a child of God. Let us all strive to do as a great contemporary of John admonished us all to do in **Ephesians 4:1** and that is to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye (we) are called.”

Tom Price, 2020