

# Overcoming Sin Through Prayer and Perseverance

A sermon in the series  
Life in the Son

A sermon delivered Sunday Evening, March 24, 2013  
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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I John 5:16-19

***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. <sup>17</sup> All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death. <sup>18</sup> We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.***

This “whole world lays under the sway of the wicked one.” We ought not to kid ourselves; this world is not going to get better. We pray for a move of God, we pray for an awakening, we pray for many souls to be ushered into the kingdom of God, but even if that happens the world will continue to progressively reject God because it is under the sway of the evil one. But when Christ who is the King shall return and put down every foe, subdue them under His feet and establish His kingdom on this earth, then the earth will be free from the sway of the devil. It will be released at last, free and at liberty to serve and worship the living God who made it.

How do we survive this wicked world until then? By the community of faith and prayer. This is John’s answer. And John cannot think of prayer without thinking about praying for his brethren. If you were here last week, we shared verses 14 and 15 on answered prayer. We know that He hears us and if He hears us, we know we have the petitions that we ask for. So with that confidence John continues his discussion of prayer by stating if anyone sees a brother sinning he should pray. Prayer is linked with brotherhood. Oh, that our prayer lives would develop to the degree that we pray much for one another. Your prayer life needs to mature and develop so that you don’t consume most of your prayer time, so you are not the only subject for which you pray but rather you find increasingly more time devoted to praying for others. This is the way of the church.

Christianity is not as individualistic as we Americans think it is. We have botched the Christian life here in this country by trying to make it fit within the culture, this present evil age, in which we now live, where people are more individualistic rather than community oriented. Life in the first century was more interdependent than independent, more communal than personal, because

survival required that. You needed your neighbor in order to get by and your neighbor needed you. There was interdependency in the community of the first century that is gone in this nation today. I'm not saying Christianity can't thrive in our nation because of that or that there cannot be community among the saints of God, I'm simply saying we will have to work much more at it than the first century church because it was a way of life for them.

Just because our culture inhibits community and participation in each other's lives, doesn't mean it has to dictate that to us. Let's recognize tonight that our prayer lives ought to extend beyond our own families into the lives of one another and not just our prayer life but also our activities. Our very lives ought to extend beyond the four walls of our own homes. We ought to be depending upon one another and being there for one another.

## **I. FAMILY CONCERN FOR EACH OTHER**

*"If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin" (1 John 5:17)*

Our Christianity should go beyond the concerns of our own cares, even our own spiritual welfare. I don't need to tell you to examine and to keep guard over your own hearts; we know we need to do that. But do you watch over the heart of your brother or your sister? Do you stand as a sentry at their hearts, protecting them as you do your own self? We usually don't think of spiritual protection in this way do we? We think about being prayed up and being in the Word of God for ourselves but have you thought about being in the Word of God for your brother? Let me suggest this to you: before you find yourself with another believer, get alone with God for a few moments with a Bible open and a prayer on your lips and say, "Lord, show me how I can be a help to my brother or sister. Give me something to share. Speak to me, do something in my own soul so that my cup is full and I just spill over onto them."

There is to be a family concern especially for our brothers and sisters spiritual wellbeing. So John says if you are looking out for your brother and you see your brother sin then pray for him. Many of us are so busy we don't have time to notice our brother or sister's life, much less their sin. And if we see their sins we're all too quick to point the finger and condemn. If Jesus gave us the opportunity He did the religious leaders, who brought Him a woman caught in adultery, I feel there would be many in the Christian world who would certainly throw the first stone. We surely hurl the first words, don't we? Oh, God, help us to be genuinely concerned for one another.

## **II. IS ALL SIN THE SAME?**

*"All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death." (1 John 5:17)*

### **A. Sin in Essence is the Same.**

All unrighteousness is sin. When you break sin down to its core and nature you find it's all one thing. John has said earlier in this epistle that all sin is transgression of God's law. The Apostle Paul

said in Romans 3:23 that all sin is coming short of the glory of God. So sin, in one sense of the word, is still sin. The sin of a good person is just as evil as the sin of an evil person.

There is no perfection. This comes hard for me, to be quite frank. It's really difficult for me to say that in this world I will never achieve perfection. It's especially hard because that's what God commands of us. To know that in my effort tonight, I'll never be able to achieve that is humbling and hard to swallow. Although God says I am to be perfect, He had to supply a perfect Substitute in order for me to be able to fulfill that command. I can't do it by myself. However, because we know that we will not be perfect, even on our best days, we should not cease to strive to be perfect, because we want to be like our Lord. It's not about an idea of status, or an "I've arrived" mentality, it's about being like Jesus.

All sin is transgression and we all sin. In fact, John is very concerned that Christians do not think that they can attain to some sinless perfection.

Remember what he said in chapter one verse eight?

*"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)*

There were people who were actually teaching that they had come to the point where they no longer sinned. In fact, in verse 10 the apostle clearly comes against those who said had not had sinned.

*"If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." (1 John 1:10)*

Imagine the audacity to stand up in front of the church and say: *I want to thank God I haven't sinned, that I don't sin and I'll never sin again.* That was the testimony of these Gnostic heretics. They had infiltrated the church, so John, once again, brings it up and says, "We will see our brothers sin from time to time. And one person's sin is no different than another person's sin. All sin is the same in that it disrupts fellowship with God." That's the point of exhortation to pray. "If you see your brother in sin, I'm asking you to pray for him because there are serious consequences to even a believer's sin."

This is the counter balance to this morning's message. I am justified by faith not by my performance, not my works, but by the work of Jesus Christ. The law might wag its finger and say you must 'do', but the Gospel of grace says it has already been done. It's done! I'm not saved by my works and therefore when I sin God does not put my sin on my record, He has already put it on the record of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ has paid my sin debt in full.

But friend, that doesn't mean there are not consequences for God's children when we sin. The most serious consequence is the loss of His presence. I hate that more than I hate anything else. To walk without the sense of God's presence and I cannot have the sense of God's presence if I am not owning my sin and dealing with it and confessing it as he says in 1 John 1:9.

*“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)*

So as long as I’m in obedience I have fellowship. But the moment I disobey that fellowship is disrupted in some form or fashion.

## **B. Sin is Different in Consequences.**

*“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.” (1 John 5:16)*

While all sin is the same in essence, there is a difference when it comes to categories and consequences. There are some sins that even God says are abominations to Him. There are some sins God takes a greater affront to than others. The greatest of all sins, I believe, is to not believe what God has said. In its essence it says to God, “You are untrustworthy.” It’s calls God a liar. To me, I cannot think of anything worse. But there is a sin John talks about here that is completely different in its consequence—it leads to death.

### **III. WHAT IS THE SIN UNTO DEATH?**

#### **A. John Has Already Told Us.**

After a lot of study and prayer it dawned on me that John already told us what it is in this epistle. On Wednesday night I shared that I wasn’t for sure what this sin was. I’ve bounced all over the place on this one over the years, but I’m thankful tonight that I think I have an idea. I’ll give you some humility—I’m not going to say dogmatically this is the sin, but I’m pretty sure it is. I’m pretty sure because John tells us within this book. You see, that’s how you have to learn to read the Bible. The Bible will interpret itself. It is its best commentary. Especially in the frame of one book. In this case, John is the only one who uses the terminology “sin unto death.” Look at 1 John 4:1-3.

*“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”*

What is he dealing with here? Several months ago we said this is the sin of the Gnostics, the heretics who taught that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh as a man, but that He took on the appearance of man or that the Spirit of the eternal Son of God came on Him at His baptism and left before the crucifixion. Either way they are saying Jesus the Son of God is not the substitutionary sacrifice for sin. It’s this demonic lie that is the sin unto death. Go back to chapter two of 1 John, he speaks of it again but with a little bit more clarity.

*“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come,”*

He’s talking about these false teachers. He calls them, and anyone who would believe their teaching, antichrists.

*“and they have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.”*

Verse nineteen is the clarity we need in order to understand this sin unto death.

*“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” (1 John 2:18-19)*

What does he mean? These people had professed faith in God. They claimed to be Christians but no longer remained within the body of believers because what they actually believed was different from the faithful flock of God, and so they departed. John said by their departing they proved who they were. This was God’s way of exposing that they were not really a part of the church to begin with.

Since we don’t have Gnostics it would be easy to say there is no longer a sin that leads unto death, but friends, that would be wrong. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees one day and said the sins committed against the Son were forgivable but the sins against the Holy Spirit were not. We know this as the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. That, too, is the sin unto death.

What does it mean to blaspheme the Holy Spirit? Well, we must first ask, what is the ministry of the Holy Spirit? It is His ministry to convince of sin and of righteousness and judgment. It is His job and function as the third person of the Godhead to glorify Christ and give illumination to the fact that Jesus is the only way of salvation. He convinces a sinner that he is lost and that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life.” It is the Holy Spirit that persuades a sinner of this. So that day when those religious leaders were ascribing the works of Jesus, which were done by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the devil, Jesus said that was a sin unto death, for which there is no repentance or forgiveness.

In Hebrews 6 we read of the sin unto death.

*“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”*

I’m going to read one more passage before I make any comments.

*“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:*

*“For yet a little while,  
And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.  
Now the just shall live by faith;  
But if anyone draws back,  
My soul has no pleasure in him.”*

*But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.” (Hebrews 10:25-31, 35-36)*

What does all this mean? Look back in verse 26,

*“if we sin willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.”*

He means this sin unto death that John is also talking about. Here it was not gnostic teaching, it was Jewish people who had heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, having heard it, were moved upon and professed faith. They appeared to follow Christ for a while but having done so by joining themselves to a community of faith they came under persecution. Family members, friends, employers, attacked them, criticized them. Some of them had been arrested and put into prison. The major argument used against them by the unconverted Jews were, *how can you say you have a better savior, a better faith when you have no temple in which to worship? There are no sacrifices and no priests who can intercede on your behalf. Who do you have as a mediator?* The so-called Christians began to think about it and realized they hadn’t thought of it like that. *I have nothing tangible. I have no security, no hope because I can’t see what Jesus has done.* Many of these folks went back to their Judaism and recanted Jesus. In order to go back to Judaism what did they have to do? In order to be allowed back in the synagogue they had to publicly deny the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me assure you the writer of Hebrews isn’t saying the first time you sin after you get saved there is no hope for you. We dealt with that thoroughly this morning—we are justified and that is irrevocable. Our justification is eternal. What he is talking about is what he says clearly in chapter six and here in the tenth chapter, the sin unto death is to take the Son of God and trample Him under foot and do despite to the Spirit of Grace. It is to willfully reject the Spirit’s testimony that

Jesus Christ is the Messiah.

## **B. Sin Unto Death is a Renouncement of Jesus' Messiahship.**

Having tasted and experienced Jesus and then to stand up and say, "He is not the way, the truth, and the life, He is an impostor," and know what you're saying is the sin unto death. We're not talking about a denial to protect yourself from persecution like Peter, but a literal rejection of Christ as the only way of hope. If He is the only way and you reject that, the only way for you to come to repentance is for Him to be re-crucified because you've rejected His first death. So what is this sin unto death? It's the renouncing of Jesus as the Messiah.

That can take many forms. One doesn't have to stand up and say, "I know longer believe Jesus is the way, the truth and the life." You can renounce Jesus not just with your lips but also with your life. We're not talking just about backsliding; we're talking about turning your back upon God and wanting nothing to do with Him forever. It is a sin unto death because at that point, unless God is merciful and gracious to you, the Spirit of God no longer strives with you.

Those who are usually concerned and feeling somewhat distraught and worried they have committed this sin, I can tell you they are not the ones guilty of it. Only those who are guilty of it don't have a concern or care about Christ at all. They have rejected Him and want nothing to do with Him. So, my friend, if you're concerned you've ever blasphemed against the Holy Spirit that in itself proves you haven't. So praise the Lord, you haven't sinned unto death.

I believe John is dealing with a knowing, willful rejection of Christ as Messiah. It happens. It happens a lot today. It's just not as dramatic as it perhaps was then with all the false teaching and other errors prevalent in the first century. But it happens now with false teaching as well as with people turning their back completely and wholeheartedly from Christ.

Let us not stop there, but move on. There is hope.

## **IV. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAYER**

*"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." (1 John 5:16)*

Do you see this? God is making a very certain promise to us today. If you see a brother sin a sin that is not unto death, he hasn't recanted and said Jesus isn't the way or the truth, John says if you pray for him God will give him life. God will restore him. Now listen to me, this is hopeful. Anytime a genuine believer is stumbling into sin, we, the church, can pray for him or her and they will be recovered. They will be. Why? Because they are really His and God has made a pledge, "I will answer that prayer." Now the question is what if they continue in their rebellion and there is nothing of any change? That's a different matter altogether. That is probably evidence that there sinning a sin unto death and John doesn't tell us to pray for that. However, he doesn't tell you

not to pray either. So how do we deal with this? Let me share with you where I am. I never really know what's in a man or a woman's heart. A man can stand up and publicly recant "his faith in Christ" and can even blaspheme Him, but we don't know why he's doing it.

As long as there is life and breath let us maintain hope, unless God shows us otherwise. I'm not contradicting John, I'm simply saying he doesn't say we should pray for them but he also doesn't say that we shouldn't. Why do I have hope that God will answer? Well, number one, He says it. "He will ask and He (God) will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death." So for our brother or sister who has entered into spiritual decline, I can pray, and I've seen this so many times during the years—God recovers His own. Why? Because He said He would, but there's also another reason.

## **V. THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE ELECT**

*"We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him." (1 John 5:18)*

### **A. The Elect of God Do Not Live in the Realm of Sin.**

This is what John means when he said "We know that whoever is born of God does not sin." Again, John has told us what he means here. He doesn't mean a Christian will never sin once they're saved, he told us in chapter one to not think that way. What he means is when a person has been born by the Spirit they've been transferred to a different realm. You no longer are under the authority and mastery of sin. You're no longer under its power and domain and have to do what sin tells you to do. "He who has died to sin is free" (Romans 7:7). That means I don't continually live in the realm of sin. If I sin it's because I'm choosing to do so, not because I'm forced to by my nature. The elect of God will never ever go back to the old realm of living. They may be guilty of the exact same sins, but they are doing so in the new realm where God has put them.

Paul to the Colossians said, "You have been translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son." That means there is a great divide between where you once lived with Satan owning and enslaving you and now your residence in the kingdom of Christ. Satan cannot come to the kingdom of Christ and make you do anything. He may entice and tempt but he can't make you sin. Why? Because you're in a different realm and under a different master. All he can do is shout to you from the old kingdom of darkness and entice you to come over and visit. But you can't live there.

Satan can only yell at you from over the way. He can't come to the kingdom of light and truthfully you can't go over there. All he can do is yell and scream and lure you to disobey the Lord, but when you disobey the Lord you do so in His kingdom. You never can go back to the realm from which you've been delivered. The elect of God don't live in the realm of sin. They don't continue in it, they're not enslaved by it. We can let sin reign from time to time, but God has made it absolutely clear that we can't live enslaved to it.



## **B. The Elect of God Are Kept by God.**

*“We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.” (1 John 5:18)*

That is misleading because it sounds like I’m keeping myself. He who has been born of God, the Christian, the believer, keeps himself, and therefore the wicked one does not touch him. But we know that’s not true. That doesn’t fit with other Scriptures. What does 1 Peter 1:5 say about us? We are “kept by the power of God through faith.” Jesus had to pray in John 17, “Father, I pray that You keep them.” Why would Christ have to pray that God keep us if we could keep ourselves? The literal translation of 1 John 5:18 is more akin to the New American Standard Bible.

*“We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.” (1 John 5:18 NASB)*

“He who was born of God.” This, in the Greek, is John’s beloved phrase, “He who was begotten of God.” He uses it in his gospel and in his epistle and we know who that is. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” It’s a term John mostly uses in reference to Christ. I think that is whom he is talking about here. He who has been begotten of God keeps the believer. Christ keeps us and that’s why the elect, the true children of God, will persevere. It’s not because we’ve learned to be good, because we have proved that even in our best days, in our best righteousness of good works, it comes short of the glory of God. The only righteousness He will accept is the righteousness of His dear Son that has been imputed to you and me. I don’t keep myself, He keeps me.

That is why perseverance has a great deal to do with salvation. It is wrong to say, although many good men say it, perseverance is only the proof of your salvation. It is a proof and evidence yes, but it is more. It has everything to do with your salvation, it is a part of God saving you. How is that? Because it is Christ who preserves and keeps you. It is the Savior that holds you in His hands and has promised that no man shall pluck you out. It is a part of His saving work. It is a part of His redeeming us that we are kept and by the power of God through faith He will get us home safely. That is the confidence we have tonight—He will not turn loose of us.

How do I know I’m His? How do I know I won’t turn my back on God and have been deluded all this time? The answer is to keep trusting. Keep clinging to Jesus and when you sin and fall into spiritual decline, be afraid. Much afraid. Say to yourself as did the prodigal, “What am I doing here? There is nothing to eat here, but in my Father’s house...” and go back to your Father who will receive you and welcome you with love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

How do you know that you’re not one who will in the end perish? Because God’s grace is given to all of His children and He keeps them so that when they sin they always repent. It’s not that we live perfectly or always obey, but a true child of God will always repent.

I was thinking of one of you yesterday, I won't say who because I don't want to embarrass them in front of everyone, but I thought of this person. They are like David, a man after God's heart, because they know how to repent. I've watched them over the years, they own their sin and they embrace it. They don't point fingers, they receive it and they say, "Yes, I am guilty" and they run to God and they receive God's forgiveness. That's how you know you are one of God's children; you repent because of the grace of God within you.

Overcoming sin through prayer and perseverance, here is again a place where we must fight the fight of faith. Let's begin to make a commitment to pray for one another, because it's one of the ways God keeps us—watching over each other through our prayers for each other. I am to watch over you as a good shepherd, but we are to watch over one another also. Not censorious, that means condemning and judgmental. But let us care for one another through prayer and diligence and perseverance. Amen.