

Sin Unto Death

What is a sin unto death? One of the most disturbing and difficult to understand verses in the Scripture is 1 John 5:16 where the Holy Spirit tells us “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 they sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death; I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin unto death.” What can this mean? John doesn’t tell us, but instead leaves us hanging with more questions than answers. We are to ask to pray to God for those whose sins are not unto death, but he doesn’t recommend praying for those who sin unto death. Then he drops it by simply stating again that there is a sin unto death but never tells us what it is. Clearly the Holy Spirit is here challenging us, if we care enough to search His word, to seek the answer so that we may become certain that we do not stumble unknowingly into this terrible predicament.

To the serious Christian reader of the Scriptures, this verse should evoke a heavy concern and a vital need for a solid, satisfactory explanation. The first thought that might enter the mind is that this verse seeks to negate, or somewhat limit the meaning of Ephesians 2:8, 9 and thereby seem to confirm the contention that, indeed, under certain conditions, salvation can be lost. But the context of 1 John makes it clear that he is writing to born again Christians, as is Paul when he speaks of them as “brethren”. So here is a clear indication that there is, or are, sins that can cause death. Yet again, from Ephesians 2:8, 9, John 10:28, 29 etc., we know how we have been saved and have certainty of our irrevocable salvation. Therefore, this “sin unto death” cannot be addressing the death of a soul, but the death of a body.

So with a great sigh of relief from having resolved that point, we still find ourselves confused, and rightfully very concerned as to what kind of sin can it be which can cause physical death. Could one stumble into such a sin and not know it? We know that once we are of the faith, when we acknowledge our sins, confess them, repent, and pray for forgiveness with a contrite heart, the sins are forgiven. Scriptures assures us that when we do this, all sins are forgiven, not just some but all sins. But what is this sin unto death? Is it a sin for which we are forgiven but for which we are nevertheless punished

by physical death? Scripture tells us that that is exactly what can and does happen, and in fact a prayerful search of the Word of God finds several examples of such punishment and also reveals the types of conditions we must avoid in order to not suffer this fate. Please know that this is no abstract, remote or academic issue. It is a very real and serious situation relevant to all born again Christians who seek to live in faith, and hope to continue living in health throughout a full measure of life.

Scripture gives us several specific examples, which appear to be of these types of sins. While Scripture does not actually and individually call them “sins unto death,” the message is clear that that is exactly what they are. The first one noticed, which seems to fit the definition, is found in Leviticus 10 regarding Nadah and Abihu. These were brothers and priests, two of the sons of Aaron. Here the Scripture tells us that they willfully disobeyed the Lord’s specific and well-understood instructions regarding the burning of incense. This was a deliberate sin, surely a sin unto death in that our Lord struck them dead for this disobedience. Then in Joshua 6, 7 there was Achan. Here was another intended and direct act of disobedience, where God tells Joshua and the people to destroy, and take no spoils from their battle with the Amorites. But Achan, one of the soldiers, couldn’t resist keeping some captured silver and a garment. For this sin against God, Achan and his whole family were killed and Israel was caused by God to lose a battle. God says what He means, and means what He says, including punishment for “sins unto death.” A third example is Uzzeh in 2 Samuel 6. This sin unto death was for the touching of the Arc of the Covenant by any of the “chosen people,” except authorized Levitical priests. It did not apply to pagans. Everyone knew that this was forbidden and even though Uzzeh acted instinctively to steady the Arc as the wagon carrying it swayed to where he must have thought it would fall off. Nevertheless, he knew better and died instantly for that one unfortunate act. A fourth example is the story of Ananias and Sapphira found in Acts 5:1-11, a story we all know well. They had promised to sell all their goods and give everything to the Christian community, which they had joined. Instead, they secretly held back some of their wealth. For this they were struck dead. Their sin unto death was not holding back, but lying about it both to the church and to God.

Perhaps these four examples seem pretty remote and totally irrelevant to present day circumstances. Maybe you even believe that God has mellowed and is no longer the same God, that harsh God of older times. Scripture assures us that there is but one same God yesterday, today and forever. In these latter times, He may be speaking in a little different tone of voice, but He is the same never changing God. This, and what comes next is relevant, very current and very disturbing. If you don't find it so before you reach the end of this paper, then you have missed the point, or what is more likely I have failed to clearly articulate the importance of this issue.

While the purpose of John's epistle is to assure believers that they are in fact possessors of eternal life, it is also evident that the purpose of 1John 5:16, 17 is to warn believers that there are specific sins which cause dire consequences expressed as severe chastiment and which can lead to "premature" death, just as in older times, even though not always as dramatically or with such finality. If the believer becomes guilty of the sin of presuming upon the grace of God to justify some sinful act, God, even today, may set in motion, through His grace, a whole series of corrective measures of various degrees of severity which as noted, can even lead to physical death!

There is no reason to believe that the people in the four examples listed above were not saved. But their sins were particularly reprehensible to God because they were in each case, a leaven that would, if not quickly purged, pollute the whole body of God's people, whether they are an Old Testament Hebrew tribe or a modern day Christian body. It would seem that perhaps God is especially concerned with sins, which can contaminate the church body, as compared with more private sins, which have little effect beyond the individual. Could this be the criterion, which defines "sin unto death"?

In terms of Old Testament vs New Testament nothing has changed. There is sin unto death, and God holds the Christian body responsible for its own policing, that is, "correcting, rebuking and encouraging" our brothers and sisters in the body, (2Timothy 4:2). We don't know how much each of these exemplified ancients knew when they so

sinned. However, we must believe that our loving merciful God must have given them fair warning so that they could have known what they were doing. But perhaps, today, through the teachings of Jesus Himself and the Holy Spirit through John and Paul, and the universal availability of His written word, we must be held even more accountable for our actions and their consequences. Ignorance of His Word thus can be extremely dangerous, even for the redeemed.

There are two very explicit and compelling New Testament examples of what seems to illustrate a sin unto death. The first is found in 1Corinthians 11:27-30 having to do with partaking in communion unworthily. Here we read in the NIV, *“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthily manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats the bread or drinks the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick and many of you have fallen asleep.”* In the eyes of our Lord, communion is a serious and sacred matter. It is public testimony by the believer that he or she has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and is saved. He or she is also attesting to the fact there is no unconfessed sin in his or her heart. Thus, anyone living in sin, or one who has not forsaken his sinful condition prior to communion, and knows he or she will continue in that state after communion, will be committing the sin unto death by partaking of the bread and wine. Verse 30 describes this death as what might be considered a slow - motion death, wherein “many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep.” This tells us that there is a deliberate act of punishment, which God extracts from those who commit the “sin unto death!”

Is there any reason to believe that there aren't brothers and sisters in the Christian body today who are suffering afflictions precisely because they maintain an on-going sin as they partake in communion? Barnhouse sharpens the point where he offers two otherwise seemingly innocuous examples of this form of sin. He tells of a man juggling his books as he prepares his tax returns, stopping his work to attend church and take communion, after which he goes back to continue what is a sinful act. He also cites the

neighborhood gossipier who stops her phone conversation in order to attend church and receive communion, with every intention of going back to the sinful conversation. When conditions such as these exist, when the believer may be living a willful act not to God's liking and intends to continue it after taking communion, he or she is engaging in a public lie and must be dealt with by God, first because it is blasphemous, and second because it undermines the integrity and image of the Christian body. One might say here in regards to 1 Corinthians 11:27-30, "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the sinner."

The second New Testament example of a sin unto death which is obviously of relevance to us today is found in 1 Corinthians 5 where the Holy Spirit tells us of a Christian who was guilty of fornication, and the church was directed to expel the wicked man from among them, to hand this man over to Satan, so that his sinful nature might be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. This they finally did because of Paul's insistence. However, prior to his epistle, they had done nothing. Perhaps it is best here to let the eloquence and spiritual insight of Dr. Barnhouse explain:

"Unfortunately, the church had adopted an easy tolerance of its members and had not disciplined this man when he publicly sinned in such a way that dishonor was brought on the name of Christ through his actions. In his letter to the church, Paul empathetically pointed out that the church must take official action in the matter. The man had committed a sin that was a sin unto death and the church should have prayed to God to remove this man from their midst, by death, if necessary. This is the significance of delivering the man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5).

When the epistle was read to the church at its Sunday morning service, quite possibly the sinning member was there and was shocked to hear himself referred to. Realizing the enormity of this sin, he cried out to God in true repentance, and forsook his sin at once putting away the woman he unlawfully held. Thus, in the second letter to the Corinthians, we see that Paul urged the church to forgive the man. He had repented and

had submitted to their discipline. “For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2Corinthians 2:5-8). Therefore, if one has committed a sin that is worthy of the strongest chastisement from God, he can always flee to God’s grace and the chastisement will be removed through the same grace.

Again we are indebted to Barnhouse for the third example which is an astute observation regarding the “sin unto death,” this time in James 5:20. Here we read in the King James version “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he which converteth the sinner from error of his ways shall save a soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins.” Where the Scripture says “save a soul from death” Barnhouse said, “save him from chastisement of an early death.” As James says, “shall save a soul from death”, it sounds like bringing someone to salvation. Strangely, many noted expositors and teachers have erroneously, I believe, made the assumption that that is what James is saying. Yet it is evident that James is speaking to the saved about one who is already saved unto eternal life, for he is speaking to brethren about a brother. Therefore it can’t be a soul that is to be saved as we think of eternal salvation, because the soul of the saved cannot be unsaved in order for brethren to re-save it. For this to be otherwise would be a renunciation of eternal security, one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith. Furthermore, neither a brother nor anyone else can “save” a soul, only God can do this. It’s also been suggested that James doesn’t mean brother in Christ when he is speaking to the “brethren”. This is doubtful. The Holy Spirit does not engage and inspire His scribes to write sloppy or erroneous Scripture. Also, note that the error from which the brother is being saved is an error from the truth, not from any failing or lack of faith. While seeking truth is an important goal, it is only by grace through faith in the truth of the Gospel, which saves an immortal soul.

Finally, the confusion ends when one discovers the double definition of the word soul. According to Strong’s concordance the Greek word for soul, “psyche”, can have different meanings. It can mean “mere vitality, even of plants”. It can also mean the “rational and

immortal soul.” The Greek word “pneuma” also means “rational and immortal soul” as well as “spirit.” Thus it is evident once more, that context and translation must be examined carefully whenever there seems to be a question of meaning of any particular Scripture verse. Therefore in summary, because a “brethren” cannot “save” a rational and immortal soul, it is evident that James is referring to the “mere vitality” of physical life of a man who has departed from the truth and is thereby living in a manner, which includes a sin unto death. In that case a brother can save him through Scriptural truth, if he or she is willing to hear it and repent.

There is yet, I believe, one more allusion to the sin unto death. It is found in the Gospel John 15:2 “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit He taketh away..” Verse 6 also alludes to a similar fate. There are various opinions as to the meaning of these verses. However, a careful reading indicates that these are saved persons who have not been fruitful, so God takes them away as with sin unto death. This is yet so, “--- as by fire”. (1 Corinthians 3:15) Here is another example of the redeemed who loses his rewards but not his salvation. If the above interpretation of these verses is correct, and I believe it is, we each have another and very disturbing way to qualify for the sin unto death punishment simply by being unfruitful. I am persuaded that this does not apply to all unfruitful believers, but perhaps only to those who are given much, from whom much is expected, yet they chose to ignore opportunities to be fruitful. Everyone who receives eternal life also is blessed with some spiritual gift by means of which they can, in gratitude, glorify God. If they choose to waste these gifts, that is, not apply them to His service, to His greater Glory, then they are like fruitless vines, to be cut off and burned. Clearly, it is not the soul that is cut off, for that being, a living branch of Christ is saved. But the body, being deliberately fruitless, having forsaken its divine calling is cut off early because it has committed the sin unto death.

Other than the quotes from Barnhouse, I have yet to find anywhere in my studies a serious discussion or concern for this issue of the sin unto death. Yet the Holy Spirit has provided ample evidence that this is a very serious issue, which may be affecting the health and longevity of many Christian lives, perhaps even some of us, and those around

us. This is no trivial matter, even though the Holy Spirit has chosen to present it in this most subtle manner, rather than hitting us over the head with a very explicit doctrinal statement. I pray that whoever reads this paper, will not treat its message lightly, but will be very serious in examining Scripture to see if it be so, and then using it for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ as the Holy Spirit leads you.

Since writing this two years ago, I have observed three instances of what I believe to be examples of “sin unto death.” The first two are brethren who each in his or her own and different way appear to be living an on-going sin. Each partakes in communion “religiously.” In each of these dear persons it can be seen that he or she is slowly growing “weak and sick” just as it was foretold to be in 1Corinthians 11:27-30. Certainly neither I nor any other individual is qualified to conclude that this is an absolute example of such a cause and effect. It is the obligation of the church body to attempt such a determination and to save them from further pain. However, in these days of the “lukewarm” church this will never happen. Someone’s sensitivities might be offended.

The third example is an extreme case of which I have no doubt was a “sin unto death.” I knew this incredible disciple of our Lord for over 4 years. I loved and respected her more than anyone I have ever known. Just to be with her for a few minutes was enough to realize that in her precious heart the Holy Spirit reigned supreme and actually radiated from her very being. She was an extremely prolific and fruitful disciple of the Lord, bringing a great many souls to the foot of the cross. I saw for myself on many occasions, and with great awe, how the Holy Spirit, through her, drew to Jesus nearly every one to whom she directed her discipleship. I also personally witnessed how intensely and mercilessly Satan continually attacked her, as one would expect, given her incredible fruitfulness. A detailed narrative of this incessant attack as I witnessed it would probably be of value as a demonstration of his many assorted evil powers. I may write this one day if so directed by the Holy Spirit, when and if my grief ever wanes sufficiently to allow me to deal with those awful memories.

She withstood these attacks valiantly up to the last 18 months of her life. As I look back I can see more clearly the cracks that were forming in her defenses. But at the time, because of my youthfulness in the faith and the esteem in which I held her, I could not then see what was coming. At first there was a trickling element of pride, then a tiny measure of hypocrisy, combined with a weakened intensity of purpose, and a growing interest in the things of the world, which had not been previously in evidence. When I finally could see what was happening inside her, I strove to express my concerns, but it was too late. Satan had finally surrounded her with false and apostate teachers and “friends,” and had torn away her resistance to worldly ways. Around then, I wrote for her the paper entitled “Spiritual Stumbling”, but she refused to read it, even though she had always valued my papers. She had always been in great physical health, being able to climb mountains and jog for miles. As a Naturopathic Doctor, she also knew how to eat and live healthy. In her practice, she cured hundreds of “incurables” and had lectured as well as taught in England, India, New Zealand and other parts of the world on these matters. Then she became sick, sick unto death and died just two months before her fifty-first birthday. In her 12 short years as a redeemed Christian, I believe that she earned more crowns than I or 10 more like me could ever earn in many lifetimes. As her fruitfulness waned and apostasy took over, however, I am certain that our dear Lord simply chose to take her home before she lost them all.

Finally, when I say here with great conviction, that this was a “sin unto death” and that He took her lovingly and with compassion lest she lose any more of her crowns, I say it with just reason. I say it after nearly two years of almost unbearable grief and tearful prayers of petition to the Father to give me the wisdom and assurance to understand why He would take her home, this exquisite fruitful disciple in the very prime of her life. What’s written here is the result of those prayers. The boundless gratitude I feel for this understanding cannot be described in words. It has allowed me to deal with the grief and to actually thank Him for taking away the most precious person to have ever entered my life, other than my own family.

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I pray that this paper may serve as a source of Scriptural insight from which one can learn and be of benefit to others when the potential seems to exist, that is, when there is a recognizable “sin unto death” taking place.