

Module 23: 1 John 5:14-17 (Part 2)

Group Exercise 1

1 John 5:16-17 is a difficult passage to interpret. List as many observational questions as you can that would help us Bible students zero in on John's intended meaning. English translations vary and sometimes include translator interpretations. Here is one translation that is a pretty good rendering from the Greek (from NAS Strong's Version interlinear Bible at crosswalk.com):

1 John 5:16

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not to death, he shall ask and will for him give life to those who commit sin not to death. There is a sin to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

1 John 5:17

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

You do not need to supply answers to these questions for this exercise. We may address some of your questions when all small groups reconvene.

Group Exercise 2

Is "death" in verses 16-17 physical or eternal? What is your reasoning? Should context or cross-references take precedence? Specifically, death is used six times in 1 John 3:14; 5:16, 17. Compare the following verses: John 5:24; 8:51; Revelation 2:11; 20:6; Acts 2:24; Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 3:22.

Group Exercise 3

Is "life" (in contrast to "death") in the surrounding verses physical or eternal? What is your reasoning? Should context or cross-references take precedence? Specifically, life is used in 1 John 1:1, 2; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12, 13, 16, 20. Compare the following verses: John 1:4; 3:16; 5:24; 10:28; 20:31; Philippians 1:20; Hebrews 7:3.

1) Observations and Observational Questions that guide Interpretation

- a) Read 1 John 5:13-21 for context.
- b) What words do you see as important, either because they are repeated often or they are part of a key teaching in verses 5:14-17? **Confidence, synonyms for prayer (ask, request), sin.**
- c) What title do you suggest for the paragraph starting in verse 5:14? **Confidence and Compassion in Prayer.**
- d) Transition – links to previous verses
 - i) Immediate context:
 - (1) "ask" (cf. 3:22; 5:14, 15 twice, 16)
 - (2) "request" (noun, 15), (verb, 16)
 - ii) Book context:

- (1) “ask” (cf. 3:22; 5:14, 15, 16)
 - (2) “sin” as a noun (cf. 1:7, 8, 9; 2:2, 12; 3:4, 5, 8, 9; 4:10; 5:16, 17)
 - (3) “death” (cf. 3:14; 5:16, 17)
 - (4) “life” (cf. 1:1, 2; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12, 13, 16, 20)
 - (5) “unrighteousness” (cf. 1:9; 5:17)
 - (6) “brother” (cf. 2:9, 10, 11; 3:10, 12 twice, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17; 4:20 twice, 21; 5:16)
- iii) Assurances (Stott)
 - (1) Eternal life (13)
 - (2) Answered prayer (14-17)
 - iv) Assurance of eternal life leads to confident prayer and intercession for others. This assurance “which the Christian should enjoy (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 in need...” (Stott)
- e) “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death” (16a)
 - i) “anyone” – opens this intercessory function to any member of the church.
 - ii) “sees” – aorist tense, indicates it is not a matter of suspicion, but an observed fact. Not merely a matter of a sinful state, but an actual sinful deed.
 - iii) “brother” – someone in the church
 - iv) “committing a sin”
 - (1) Literally, “sinning a sin”
 - (2) Present tense, ongoing
 - (3) An argument for this person being an unbeliever.
 - v) What is this “death”?
 - (1) Some say this is physical death.
 - (a) Examples are Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira) and 1 Corinthians 5:5 (immoral man); 11:30 (abusing the Lord’s Table).
 - (b) These examples of physical death do not preempt the context of 1 John where spiritual or eternal death is the subject matter.
 - (2) Some say this is spiritual or eternal death.
 - (a) The life with which it is contrasted is spiritual or eternal life. Refer to Group Exercise 3.
 - (b) All four occurrences of death in 1 John fit better being translated spiritual or eternal death, not physical death. Refer to Group Exercise 2.
- f) “he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death.” (16b)
 - i) “he shall ask”
 - (1) Future tense
 - (2) Not John’s command, “but the Christian’s inevitable and spontaneous reaction. This is the way to deal with sin in the congregation. And God hears such prayer.” (Stott)
 - ii) “God” is not in the Greek
 - (1) Survey of translations
 - (a) “he” – KJV
 - (b) “He” – NKJV

- (c) “God” – NAS, NIV, ESV
- (2) Why “he” may refer to the intercessor
 - (a) The verbs “shall ask” and “shall give” are “so simply and closely coupled in the Greek” that a giving them different subjects would be forced. (Stott)
 - (b) “Under God, he who asks life for a man may be said not just to gain it for him but to give it to him.” (Stott)
 - (c) Cf. James 5:15, 20
- (3) Why “he” may refer to God
 - (a) “Asking is man’s part and giving God’s” (Plummer)
 - (b) In this context, God is the giver of eternal life. (11)
- g) “There is a sin leading to death” (16c)
 - i) John’s readers probably knew what this sin was, but it is not specified for us.
 - ii) What is this sin?
 - (1) A specific sin?
 - (a) In Mosaic Law certain sins were capital offences punishable by death (e.g. Leviticus 20:1-27; Numbers 18:22; cf. Romans 1:32).
 - (b) Distinction in OT between sins of ignorance and presumptuous sins (Psalm 19:13), by Rabbinic writers, and by early Christian Fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian).
 - (c) However, no such NT classification of sins.
 - (d) On the contrary, John refers not to a specific sin, but to “a state or habit of sin willfully chosen and persisted in”. (Plummer)
 - (2) Apostasy?
 - (a) Brooke, Law, Dodd
 - (b) Not a specific sin, nor a backsliding, but a total apostasy, the denial of Christ and the renunciation of the faith.
 - (c) Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26 ff.; 12:16, 17 applied to false teachers (1 John 2:19).
 - (d) However, a Christian can’t fall away from the faith (3:19; 5:12, 13, 18)
 - (e) “He who sins unto death is not a Christian. If so, the sin cannot be apostasy.” (Stott)
 - (3) The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?
 - (a) This sin was committed by the Pharisees. It is a deliberate, open-eyed rejection of known truth, ascribing the works of Jesus (Matthew 12:22-28) to Beelzebub. The one who sins this way would never be forgiven (Mark 3:29; cf. Matthew 12:22-32).
 - (b) How can John call this person a “brother”? He does not. He whose sin is “unto death” is neither named nor described.
 - (c) “Brother” sometimes includes “neighbor” or a church member who professes to be a “brother”, such as the false teachers (2:9, 11).
 - (d) Though the sin leading to death in verse 16 is not identified, it may be this.
- h) “I do not say that he should make request for this.”
 - i) Neither commanded nor prohibited.
 - ii) John does not forbid prayer, as God did in Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11.

- iii) It is impossible to know who these people are who sin unto death. As such John does not forbid prayer for them. John simply stated that the prayer for them will not be answered. (MacArthur)
- iv) John does not advise prayer. “He clearly doubts its efficacy in this case.” (Stott)
- v) “make request”
 - (1) *erotao*: to question, ask, request, entreat, beg, beseech
 - (2) One time only in 1 John.
 - (3) Different from “ask” (*aiteo*: to ask, beg, call for, crave, desire, require) used in 14, 15, and 16.
- i) “All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.”
 - i) John does not want to minimize the gravity of sin when he says there is a sin not leading to death, previously in verse 16. That’s why he reminds us that all righteousness is sin.
 - ii) Repeating here in verse 17 that there is a sin not leading to death, John encourages us to pray for these people who sin in this way.
- j) What other observations do you see? (Words, grammar, construction, history, content, etc.)

2) Interpretation

If anyone in the church sees his fellow church colleague continually sinning a sin not leading to eternal death, he will ask and God will give eternal life to the ones who commit sin not leading to eternal death. On the contrary, there is a sin leading to eternal death. I do not command intercessors to make request to God for this, nor do I prohibit intercession either.

As a reminder, all unrighteousness, even sin not leading to eternal death, is gravely contrary to God. And regarding the sin not leading to eternal death, pray for those committing this sin.

3) Applications

- a) The assurance of eternal life “which the Christian should enjoy (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 in need....” (Stott) Do you find a growing desire to intercede in prayer for others in the church as a natural expression of your own life in Christ? What are practical ways you can remember to pray regularly for them?
- b) How do you respond to the truth that your prayer can lead to eternal life for someone?
- c) Verse 16 refers to praying for someone in the church. Are we to pray for those who are not in the church?
- d) Take the time now to intercede for a brother in the faith.
- e) What other application do you have?