

# 1 John 5:16-19 Sin that leads to death

June 14, 2009

Unless otherwise stated, all scripture references are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Let's pray.

Page | 1

Well, we are nearing the end of our series on 1 John and this morning we face an interesting portion of scripture.

## 1 John 5:16-19

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.

17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

This is an interesting portion of scripture as the phrase “sin that leads to death” is a phrase that we could quickly gloss over, but I believe that we need grapple with the scriptures and do our best to interpret difficult passages in a way that honours Jesus and his word - even if after our best efforts we still cannot determine a text's exact meaning.

The commentators that I have read all differ on what the exact meaning of the phrase “sin that leads to death” is also, but I would like to take a look at some of the possible meanings and then present to you what I believe it means and why.

When the meaning of a particular text is uncertain, the best course to take is not to neglect it, but to study it with an aim of arriving at a conviction, but at the same time never becoming dogmatic that your conviction is “THE” only interpretation.

So, let's take a look two of the most popular interpretations that bible commentators have arrived at over the years.

1. Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit or what's also known as the unforgivable sin
2. Apostasy or complete rejection of the faith

## Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

If you are like me the first thing that comes to your mind when you come across the phrase sin that leads to death is that this is the unforgivable sin or blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

I once had a good Christian mate at work many years ago who was concerned about committing the unforgivable sin and was asking me what I thought it was and whether I thought he had committed it.

We discussed it for a bit and my advice to him was something that I had heard said before and it was this, that if you are concerned that you have committed the unforgivable sin the very fact that your conscience is sensitive to this, is a sure sign that in fact you haven't committed it.

So, what is this unforgivable sin.

**Matthew 12:22-32**

22 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

25 Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?

27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

If you were to read the whole of this chapter you see the Pharisees were continually resisting the works that Jesus was doing by the Holy Spirit, to the point that they were verbally attributing this work to the devil and also actively seeking to kill him.

Why I don't believe that the sin that leads to death in 1 John is that the unforgivable sin or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is that blasphemy is a verbal sin against God and when it is done against the Holy Spirit by verbally and continually attributing the works of Jesus to Satan - it is unforgivable.

I personally haven't met anyone in this category, but if I did I wouldn't be spending a whole lot of time with them and I would bother praying for them.

Whereas in 1 John when referring to sin that leads to death John says that *I do not say that one should pray for that*. He is not recommending prayer but at the same time he is not saying that we cannot pray. If Jesus said that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable then there is no need to pray.

Also there is no mention that the people that John is writing about have been blaspheming the Holy Spirit - they were no doubt denying the Jesus was God in the flesh but they were not verbally attributing the works of Jesus to Satan.

### **Sin leading to death is apostasy**

The dictionary's definition of apostasy is a total desertion of or departure from one's religion, principles, party or cause.

We see this sin mentioned most notably in Hebrews.

#### **Hebrews 10:26-39**

26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

30 For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people."

31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,

33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

37 For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay;

38 but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

As I have said over the last number of weeks, I personally don't believe that God will let a genuine believer fall away and lose the gift he has given to them of salvation.

I believe there are many exhortations in the scriptures for us to persevere in the faith and so prove that our faith is genuine, but there are also many encouragements that God preserves or keeps us in the faith and the combination of these two evidences in our lives shows that we belong to God and not the world.

### **1 John 5:18**

18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God **protects** him, and the evil one does not touch him.

I believe that Hebrews is addressing a group of people who belong to this particular congregation and have tasted the knowledge of truth but are continuing to sin thereby showing that they are in fact non-genuine believers - as it says in 1 John that those born of God do not keep on sinning.

They are reaping the benefits of being around Christians and are experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit and the truth of the word - but there is no genuine repentance and when the novelty of all these experiences wears off - then off they go.

Also if this person who keeps on purposefully, habitually sinning hypothetically was a genuine believer (and we know that the scriptures say they are not), then when they fall away and attempt to come back they would be trying to do the impossible - that is crucifying Jesus all over again.

Hebrews 6:4-6 this would be impossible.

### **Hebrews 6:4-6**

4 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit,  
5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,  
6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

If a genuine believer falls away, according to this passage there is no hope for them to be restored again to repentance.

As I said these are probably the two most popular interpretations, but the one that I want to present this morning is this:

The sin that leads to death is the determined & continued unbelief that Jesus came to earth as God in the flesh and the constant refusal to submit to him as Lord.

As someone has said:

“If Jesus is not Lord of all - then he is not Lord at all”?

This interpretation is mentioned in the ESV study bible and personally it is the interpretation that I find fits in best with those who John was writing to.

Why do I believe that this interpretation is the most accurate?

### **Reason 1**

I believe that this interpretation does justice to the context of the passage and the context of the letter.

When we interpret the bible it is helpful to think in terms of concentric circles. The inner circle or first circle being the word or phrase to be interpreted, then the second circle being the immediate context of the passage, both before and after, then the third circle being the book of the bible the word or phrase is found and in particular the historical context that the writer had in mind when writing the letter and the fourth and final circle being the context that the whole bible presents.

If we keep ourselves operating within these parameters when we do our interpretation then it will be very difficult to come up with wrong understandings of the word.

### **Reason 2**

Therefore, based upon reason one I believe that this passage is speaking of unbelievers that may have been one of the so called “brothers” within the church.

That is a non-genuine believer. They may have looked okay on the surface but deep down there was something wrong - wrong belief that led to a wrong understanding of who Jesus was and what it meant to be born of God.

This eventually led to them severing themselves from the genuine fellowship of this church.

We see this in 1 John 2:18-19

### **1 John 2:18-19**

18 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.  
19 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 it might become plain that they all are not of us.

### Reason 3

The reason I believe that these people were unbelievers is that John writes throughout this letter making distinctions between those who belong to God and those who belong to the world.

#### 1 John 3:9-10

9 No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

#### 1 John 4:2-5

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

In summing up these people were unbelievers in the congregation who continually refused to acknowledge Jesus for who he truly was, they also did not love the brothers otherwise they would have stayed in the fellowship with them and finally because of these sins showed that they did not and possibly never were prepared to obey God's commands.

All of this shows that there was no genuine saving faith within them. They were counterfeit and unbelieving and as Jesus said

#### John 3:36

36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

So what we take and apply to our lives from this passage in 1 John?

1. Pray for a believer who has committed a sin that does not lead to death and God will give them life. There is no need to meddle in the affairs of other believers - God promises us that as we pray he will give them life.
2. We need to learn how to discern the true from the false both in doctrine and life and leave those people who are determined to continue in unbelief by refusing to submit to Jesus as Lord - to the Lord himself to deal with.

We can waste a lot of time on people who will never believe. It doesn't mean we shouldn't love them and should not pray for them, but at the same time we shouldn't spend great amounts of energy and time on them.

3. We should continue to cultivate in our own lives a passion for Jesus as the God Man, a love for our brothers and sisters and a heart that is ever willing to obey his commands. As we do this we increase our assurance that we genuinely belong to him
4. And finally we need to rest in the mercy of Jesus in that he protects us and does not allow the evil to touch us.

God looks out for his children and we are those children.

Let's pray.