

Answered Prayers and Sin Leading to Death (1 John 5:14-21)

Expository Lessons from First Letter of John

I. Background and Review

- a. In this series we have looked at John's teaching on a range of subjects; especially on what it means to love others, and what it means to love God.
- b. In the previous lesson we focused on John's statement that loving God means that *we keep His commands*. Furthermore, these commands are not burdensome.

II. On Prayer

- a. Read **1 John 5:14-17**.
 - i. John here turns to the topic of prayer, addressing two things:
 1. How we should ask God for things; and
 2. Praying for our brothers, regarding their sins.
 - b. First: regarding how we request things from God.
 - i. **Question:** Why doesn't God answer our prayers, and give us the things we ask for?
 1. Here John says *if* we ask for anything *according to His will*, then He will hear us, and we will have what we asked of Him.
 2. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, in 'the Lord's Prayer' of **Matthew 6** and **Luke 11**. Read **Luke 11:1-13**.
 - a. Note that Jesus says here (similar to what John said in the passage we started with) that we should be praying that *God's will* be done here on the earth.
 - i. "...*Your will be done* on earth as it is in heaven." (**Luke 11:2**, NKJV)
 - b. Growing up in the Roman Catholic church as a child, I was taught to say the words of this prayer exactly as Jesus presented it here (word-for-word, not just as a template for prayer).
 - i. Notice that Jesus *did say*, "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name...." (**Luke 11:2**, NKJV)

- ii. Actually, the early Christians did say the words of this prayer regularly, as a daily prayer (but certainly did not *limit* their prayers to this).
 - 1. For more on this, I encourage you to listen to an audio message by David Bercot, "*What the Early Christians Believed About the Lord's Prayer*", available through Scroll Publishing.
- iii. It is good not only to pray these words, but also *to seriously reflect on what these words mean* as we are praying.
- c. In this prayer, the only things we are asking from God are:
 - i. The coming of His kingdom;
 - ii. That *His will be done* here on the earth (as it is done in heaven);
 - iii. Our daily bread (what we need to live on, today);
 - iv. Forgiving our sins (as we have forgiven the sins of others);
 - v. Lead us away from temptation; deliver us from Satan; and also
 - vi. The Holy Spirit.
- d. Jesus encouraged us to pray *with persistence*, like the man who was relentlessly banging on the door of his neighbor's house at night, requesting bread for a visitor.
- 3. Things Jesus *did not* tell us to pray most of the things many Christians tend to pray for, such as:
 - a. Any wealth beyond meeting our basic needs
 - b. Health, popularity, comfort, houses, spouses
- 4. He tells us to pray to God that, "Your will be done"; just as John had said God will hear us if we ask according to His will.
 - a. Does that just mean asking for whatever we want and tacking the words, "But...*Your will be done*", at the end of our prayers?
 - b. Or does it mean wrestling through our own desires and being willing to lay them down before God and say that if He has something better, to accomplish some greater purpose, *then that is totally acceptable with us.*

- ii. The better we know what God's will is, the more effective we will be in our prayers. We see the *character of God* revealed in the Scriptures through how He has worked in the lives of men and women in the past. From the Bible, some of the things we know about God and His will include:
 1. We know that God wants all men to be saved. We also know that His will is that people follow Him of their own free choice, in love. As much as we want friends and family ones to be saved, He does even more. He will not compel anyone nor override anyone's free will to either choose or reject Him.
 2. We know that God wants the message of the kingdom to be spread to all nations and all people. The apostles prayed for boldness, rather than for 'open people'.
 - a. We know from Paul that we should be praying for government rulers, that we may live in a time of peace, that the gospel may spread unhindered.
 3. We know that Jesus prayed for, and God desires, the unity of all Christians (**John 17:20-23**).
 4. We know that God in His sovereignty can and does use the effects of evil and sin to allow good to triumph in the end.
 - a. For example, He used David's horrible sin with Bathsheba (adultery, then murder of her husband) to teach David and all who came after a terrible lesson. Yet, Jesus ultimately *came from* that union of David and Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 11, 1 Kings 1, Matthew 1:6**).
 - b. God used the sin of Judas and the Jewish religious leaders to bring about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and the deliverance of many from enslavement to sin, Satan and death.
 5. We know that God used suffering to make Jesus complete (to make Him perfect). It should be no surprise, therefore, that God will bring suffering *into our own lives* to refine our faith, to test and prove it genuine, as well.
 - a. "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, *to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings*. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren," (**Hebrews 2:10-11, NKJV**)

- b. “though He was a Son, yet *He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected*, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him,” (**Hebrews 5:8–9**, NKJV)
 - c. “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, *that he may sift you as wheat.*” (**Luke 22:31**, NKJV)
 - i. Satan will try to use trials and suffering to sift us out of the kingdom even while God is using the same trials to test, prove and refine our faith.
 - d. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” (**1 Peter 1:6–7**, NKJV)
 - e. “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:” (**1 Peter 2:21**, NKJV)
 - f. Also consider **Zechariah 13:7-9**.
 - i. God says He will use the fires of suffering to refine His people, just as silver and gold are refined and purified through fire.
6. We know that God works all things for the good of those who love Him.
- a. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (**Romans 8:28**, NKJV)
7. We know that God wants us to persevere in the faith and in holiness; and Satan does not.
- a. Satan wants us to give up in the spiritual battle, to give into temptation and sin.
- iii. If we want our prayers to be answered, we need to be living righteous lives.
- 1. Read **2 Samuel 22:4-7 & 22:14-28** (designated **2 Kingdoms 22** in Bibles with the Old Testament based on the Septuagint).
 - a. This passage is very similar to **Psalms 18**.

- b. God heard David's requests and answered David, according to David's righteousness and according to the cleanness of his hands. Clearly this was prior to his sin with Bathsheba.
 - i. If we want to have God answering our prayers, we should imitate the example of David early in his life, leading righteous lives (loving God and obeying His commands).
 - c. David certainly *did not* believe that all men were totally depraved, nor that all his righteousness was like offensive, filthy rags before God!
2. David's confidence that his prayers would be answered because of his righteousness reminds me of what James said in the New Testament.
 - a. "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (**James 5:16**, NKJV)
 - b. It is not just a matter of being passionate and fervent when we pray. We must first look inward and examine our own lives, if there is sin and unrighteousness that may be blocking our access to God!
 3. Peter addresses righteousness on the part of husbands toward their wives.
 - a. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (**1 Peter 3:7**, NKJV)
 - b. If a husband is sinning against his wife by being harsh or insensitive, it will hinder or block the prayers of the husband.
 4. Tertullian, Christian writer from Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 198:
 - a. "...We may not be as far from the *ears* of God as we are from *His precepts*,
 - b. "...His precepts paves for our prayers a way unto heaven...unto God's altar..."
 - c. (Source: Tertullian, *On Prayer*, chapter 17; found in ANF vol. 3, p. 685)
- iv. God will hear and answer our prayers:
 1. *If* we are righteous toward God and in our relationships with others;

2. *If we understand the will of God and pray according to His will;*
 3. *If we pray with perseverance; and*
 4. *If we lay our requests before God knowing that **God has the best end in mind**; if He declines to do what we have asked, He will do something better, *if we pray according to His will.**
- c. Second subject of this passage: *praying for our brothers regarding their sins.*
- i. We are to pray "*forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us*" (as opposed to saying, "*forgive me my sins*").
 1. I think of how Daniel confessed the sins of the people when he prayed in **Daniel 9:1-19**.
 - ii. **Question:** If our sins are forgiven at baptism, do we still need to ask God to forgive sins that we commit *later* in our Christian lives?
 1. Yes; we must walk in the light, confess our sins and ask for the forgiveness of our own sins and the sins of others (see also **1 John 1:7-9**).
 - iii. **Question:** What is this about sins leading to death, versus sins *not* leading to death?
 1. **Question:** Isn't all sin the same? Doesn't *all sin* separate us from God? Some of us may have been taught that there is "no difference" between sins, based on what Paul says in **Romans 3**.
 - a. (Paul writes) "...there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (**Romans 3:22-23**, NKJV)
 - i. **Question:** In this passage, is Paul saying there is no difference between *different sins*, or is he saying that there is no difference *between two groups of people*?
 - ii. Here, in context, the point Paul is making here is that there *is no difference between Jews and Gentiles*, since both groups (those under the Law of Moses as well as those without the Law) *have sinned*.
 - iii. Therefore, Paul continues from that point to state that *all* (the circumcised as well as the uncircumcised) need the redemption that comes through Jesus' sacrifice.
 2. While all sin separates us from God, it also is true (according to John) that for Christians, some sins lead to death while others do not. He seems to

be saying that some sins are a lot more serious than others. Some will kill us spiritually, and lead to eternal death, disqualifying us from eternal life.

- a. Cyprian, bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 250 AD, made the point that this idea that all sins were the same was held by pagan philosophers, but not by Christians.
 - i. “The principle of the philosophers and stoics is different, dearest brother, who say that all sins are equal... But there is a wide difference between Christians and philosophers.”
 - ii. (Source: Cyprian, The Epistles of Cyprian., Epistle No. 51, chapter 16; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 331)
3. **Question:** Are there other Scriptures that point to some sins being more serious than others?
- a. Jesus said that the sin of Judas (who betrayed Jesus and handed Him over for money) was *greater than* the sin of Pilate (who would condemn Him to death).
 - i. Jesus told Pilate, “...the one who delivered Me to you has *the greater sin.*” (**John 19:11**, NKJV)
 - b. Jesus also indicated that the sins of the hypocritical Jewish religious leaders were even greater than those of the other people.
 - i. Jesus said of the Jewish leaders who opposed Him, “...these will receive *greater condemnation*” (**Luke 20:47**, NKJV).
4. **Question:** Is actual physical adultery a *greater sin* than lusting after someone; or are both of those sins the same in the eyes of God? What do you think?
- a. Recall that Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already *committed adultery with her in his heart.*” (**Matthew 5:28**, NKJV)
 - b. However, in the same discussion Jesus says that the only grounds for a man to divorce his wife *in the case where his wife commits adultery* (**Matthew 5:31-32**).
 - i. Obviously, that limited allowance for a man to divorce his wife would not apply if his wife only lusted after another man (but did not engage in the physical act of adultery).

- c. In **1 Corinthians 5:9-13** we are told to expel people from the church who commit certain specific sins, *including those who commit sexual immorality*.
 - i. It *does not* say that if someone lusts in their heart once, you expel that person from the church and refuse to eat with him or her!
 - d. Paul explains that sexual immorality, joining our body (which is a member of Christ) has an added dimension beyond other sins: we are sinning *against our body*, which is a *temple of the Holy Spirit*. Read **1 Corinthians 6:15-20**.
 - i. The sin of physical sexual immorality, sinning against our bodies as well as our spirits, is a more serious sin than a sin like lust (which involves our spirit but not our body).
5. Early Christian writer Origen (teacher in the church in Alexandria, Egypt writing c. 245 AD) addressed this:
- a. “I think that just as a man commits adultery in his heart only, though not proceeding altogether to the overt act, so he commits in his heart the rest of the things which are forbidden. As then he who has committed adultery in his heart will be punished proportionately to adultery of this kind, so also he who has done in his heart any one of the things forbidden, for example, who has stolen in his heart only...
 - b. “...I think, in this manner: adultery which takes place in the heart is a lesser sin, than if one were also to add to it the act.”
 - c. (Source: Origen, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, book 12, chapter 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 454).
6. **PLEASE NOTE:** I am *not* trying to minimize the seriousness of the sin of lust here, by any means! I am only saying that committing physical immorality is an *even worse sin*. I think we all know this in our hearts, anyway, but can get confused by things we may have heard in the past about all sin being the same.
- a. There is an old Christian saying regarding sin: “It is easier to kill the cub than the full-grown lion.” It is much easier to kill temptation and sin at the early stages before it grows up and becomes worse, overwhelming us and taking over our lives!
- iv. Growing up Catholic, I was taught that there were two types of sins: *mortal sins* and *venial sins*. Was that teaching correct?
1. *What I was told*, growing up in the Roman Catholic Church:

- a. Committing venial sins (the lesser sins) was analogous to putting spots on our soul (here imaging an innocent soul to be colorless or white); while committing mortal sins (the much more serious type sins) was analogous to covering the entire soul over with black paint.
 - b. Dying with mortal sins (like murder and adultery) on your soul would send you to hell.
 - c. Dying with venial sins (like telling a lie) on your soul presumably would send you to Purgatory (which is *not Biblical*) for a time, before you would be allowed to go to heaven.
2. What is the meaning of the word 'mortal' as used in the term 'mortal sin'?
 - a. If we say that someone was "*mortally* wounded", we mean that the wound they received *will ultimately result in their death*.
 - b. In the same sense, it strikes me as reasonable that "sins leading to death" as spoken of in **1 John 5:16-17** could also be called a "*mortal* sins".
- v. **Question:** *Which specific sins are the mortal sins, the sins leading to death?*
1. Consider sins that would result in being put out of the church, in **1 Corinthians 5:9-13**.
 2. Read **Galatians 5:19-21**. Paul says regarding those sins that those who practice such things will not enter the kingdom.
 - a. Note that this warning is addressed to the Christians.
 3. Origen said that the sins "bringing death" were the same ones that brought death to the Israelites in the **Book of Numbers**.
 - a. (Source: Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, volume 13, chapter 30; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 492)
 - b. Recall from what Paul said in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, the wandering in the Wilderness for 40 years corresponds to the Christian life. Those who fell in the Wilderness and never made it to the Promised Land are warnings for us: we must not fall into the same sins and thereby be disqualified from reaching the Promised Land.
 - i. Of the 600,000 adult men who crossed the Red Sea out of Egypt with Moses, only two (Joshua and Caleb) made it through the time of trials, all the way to the Promised Land. This is a sober warning for us Christians today, that we cannot be complacent!

- ii. The four sins that Paul mentions in **1 Corinthians 10** are:
 - 1. Idolatry,
 - 2. Sexual immorality,
 - 3. Testing the Lord, and
 - 4. Complaining.
 - a. Many of us may not think that complaining is a major sin. However, this kept many from entering the Promised Land.
 - b. Recall that they complained about their food (the manna), their leaders (Moses), and their mission (to enter Canaan, with its walled cities and fierce warriors).
4. **Question:** Can a Christian who commits one of these sins, if he or she later repents, be forgiven?
- a. Consider what Jesus said to the church in Thyatira, in **Revelation 2:18-21**. Even Jezebel, a member of the church who was involved in sexual immorality, was given time to repent (however, she did not repent of her sins).
 - b. On the other hand, let us also consider what it says in **Hebrews**. Regarding what will happen to us if we keep on sinning.
 - i. “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.” (**Hebrews 10:26-27**, NKJV)
5. Sobering thoughts on *mortal sins* from Bishop Challoner, a Roman Catholic bishop and Bible scholar from Britain (1691-1781), from a classic work entitled *Think Well on It*, consisting of 31 days of meditations on *death* (written in 1728).
- a. Some may ask, “Why should we have this ‘*negative*’ focus on death?”
 - i. As Irenaeus (c. 130-200 A.D., bishop of the church in Lyons, in modern-day France) said, “The business of the Christian is nothing else than to be ever preparing for death.”
 - 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Fragments*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 570)

- b. From Challoner's book, from chapter 19 (title of that chapter is *On Mortal Sin*):
- i. "Consider... what the soul loses by mortal sin and what she gains to recompense this loss. She loses the grace of God – sanctifying grace – the greatest of all treasures, and in losing this, she loses God himself; she loses the fatherly protection and favor of God; she loses the dignity of being a child of God and spouse of Christ; she loses her right and title to an eternal kingdom; she is stripped of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit; robbed of all the merits of her whole life; becomes a child of hell and a slave to the devil, spiritually possessed by him and with him liable to an eternal damnation.
 - ii. "And this is all she gains by sin, because 'the wages of sin is death' (**Romans 6:23**), the death of the soul here, and a second and eternal death hereafter.
 - iii. "Ah, Wretched Sinners, open your eyes to see and bewail your lamentable blindness in thus exchanging God for the devil, and exchanging heaven for hell." (Source: Challoner, Richard, *Think Well on It*, chapter 19)
 1. Here Challoner provides us with a disturbing but objective 'cost/benefit analysis' laying out what we gain versus what we lose, when we commit sins that lead to death: mortal sins.
 2. May we keep these things in mind whenever we face temptation to commit sins that *lead to death!*

III. Closing Remarks from John

- a. Read **1 John 5:18-21**.
- b. John closes by reminding us of several things "we know".
- c. One of the important things "we know": The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one (Satan).
 - i. It is important to see the world as it is in reality: under the oppressive domination of a wicked, oppressive ruler: Satan.
 1. This is the picture we are provided with in the **Exodus** story. The time in Egypt, before God's people are 'baptized' in the Red Sea (**1 Corinthians 10:2**) to escape bondage, represented life in the world, before we became Christians.

- a. Egypt, the land of physical slavery and bondage for the Israelites, foreshadowed our time of spiritual slavery in the world.
 - b. Pharaoh, the enslaver, oppressor, murderer and liar who refuses to let God's people go, foreshadowed Satan.
- 2. Jesus came to bring liberation, to free the captives. (**Luke 4:16-19**)
- ii. Paul saw his mission, personally delivered to him by Jesus, was to liberate people from this spiritual oppression under Satan.
 - 1. Paul recounted how Jesus had told him, "I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to *turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God*, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me." (**Acts 26:17-18**, NKJV)
- iii. In spreading the gospel to the world, let us recognize that we are on a rescue mission, to liberate those who have been taken captive by Satan.
 - 1. This is the goal of evangelism.
- d. Another thing "we know": that Jesus is the One who is true; He always tells us the truth.
 - i. In contrast, we know that Satan is the great liar, and the father of lies (**John 8:44**).
- e. We are seeking eternal life (not pleasures of this world)
- f. The letter closes with a final warning from John: *to keep ourselves from idols*.
 - i. **Question:** Do you think that idolatry was a problem faced in the early church but not a problem for us today, in the West?
 - ii. Consider what Paul said, equating covetousness to idolatry.
 - 1. "Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (**Colossians 3:5**, NKJV)
 - iii. Paul challenges us to be content with what we have, not to be coveting what others have. This certainly continues to be a great challenge for Christians in the West today.

1. “Now *godliness with contentment* is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” (**1 Timothy 6:6-8**, NKJV)
- iv. We may not struggle with bowing down to wooden or metal statues of “gods” like many did in the past (and is still a problem in large parts of Asia, Africa and South America). However, worshiping wealth (placing created things before God) and coveting the possessions of others is another form of idolatry.
 1. We must be vigilant about that kind of idolatry as well, here in the West today.