

## Sin unto Death

“If any man sees his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.’ (1 John5:16.)

If one is to judge of the difficulty of interpretation of a passage by the number of conflicting expositions thereon, it is not likely that there are many passages in the Scriptures more difficult than this. The ‘sin unto death,’ or, as it is sometimes called, ‘the unpardonable sin,’ is in the view of the expositors, a variety of things. The commentaries are, therefore, of little help in expounding this passage. Macknight, for example, ordinarily a judicious and helpful expositor, is of the opinion that the ‘sin unto death’ was a fatal, physical malady, peculiar to the apostolic age—a presumption, we think, utterly destitute of proof. Others similarly associate it in some way with the sickness mentioned in James 5. These ‘interpretations’ are so speculative and so utterly devoid of any semblance of proof that it seems a waste of effort to attempt their refutation.

It seems certain that the ‘sin’ of this passage is simply ‘sin’—sin in its ordinary import, sin which involves the transgression of the law of God, or a failure to measure up to the standard of New Testament teaching. If this be not its significance here, we can never know what it means; and the passage, instead of edifying, hopelessly confuses us.

The Catholic writers attempt to find here some support for their *venial and mortal* sins. A venial sin is, in their view, a sin of little gravity, a mere fault which the Lord will overlook; whereas a mortal sin leads, as the term indicates, to death. This distinction is fanciful, for any sin, un-repented of, is mortal in its nature; while every sin (as we shall hereafter show) may, on certain conditions, be forgiven.

John Wesley subscribed to the view that the sin herein mentioned is one of an unusually aggravated type, a sin above and beyond those committed by average individuals, a sin particularly heinous in its nature. This, too, while carrying with it some plausibility, will not stand the test of investigation. Numerous instances occur in the Scriptures where individuals sought and obtained forgiveness after leading lives characterized by sins unusually odious and flagrant.

Some have assumed that the sin consists of persistent rejection of the gospel unto, and until death. This view is sufficiently refuted by the obvious fact that John is here contemplating sin, not in relation to alien sinners, but as it affects those who are children of God. ‘If any man sees his brother sin a sin’ is the keynote of the passage. The passage, therefore, is not a consideration of sin in general nor of the alien sin in particular, but as it relates to those who are in the family of God. Others, with more reason, identify the ‘sin unto death’ of this passage with the

‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ of Matthew 12:31, 32. This view, admittedly far more plausible than any of the foregoing, is, nevertheless, clearly erroneous, proof of which will be offered hereunder. True, all sin is against the Holy Spirit; and the ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ is, indeed, unpardonable; however, ‘the sin against the Holy Spirit’ of Matthew 12:31, 32 is not, in our view, the ‘sin unto death’ of 1 John 5:16. In our opinion, the sins mentioned in each of these passages are specific sins, involving definite characters, not to be confused. The context of Matthew 12:31, 32 indicates that both saint and sinner might commit the sin there designated as against the Holy Spirit; whereas John’s statement contemplates only those who are children of God, This, were there no other reasons, is sufficient to show the diverse character of the sin of the two passages.

What, then, is the unpardonable sin, the ‘sin unto death,’ of this passage? The answer to this question is, we think, easily discoverable, and, indeed, lies clearly on the surface of the book of 1 John. This writer has much to say about sin. He defines it both positively (1 John 3:4) and negatively (1 John 5:17); shows its universality (1 John 1:8,10); reveals the relationship Christ sustains to us with reference to our sins (1 John 2:1); and sets forth the conditions whereupon children of God may be forgiven (1 John 1:7,9): ‘But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin ... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ Those who ‘walk in the light’ and ‘confess’ their sins are promised present cleansing in the blood of the Lamb. This pardon is extended to embrace ‘all sin’ (1 John 1:7), ‘all unrighteousness’ (v. 9.) Note, please, that no exceptions are mentioned; the term is embracive of the sum of our sins, conditioned on our confession thereof. It follows, hence, that every sin confessed will be forgiven. The duty of children of God to confess their sins is frequently taught in God’s word. ‘Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed’ (James 5:16), is representative of a whole class of such passages.

Is not the conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing premises obvious and irresistible? The Lord will forgive his children freely and fully if they ‘walk in the light’ and ‘confess’ their sins. There is, however, a sin which the Lord will not forgive a *brother*. Does it not follow as clearly as night follows day that the sin which the Lord will not forgive is simply a sin which the brother will not confess? To make, if possible, the matter plainer, we reduce it to syllogistic form: (1) The Lord will forgive every sin a penitent brother confesses; (2) there is a sin (the ‘sin unto death’ of 1 John 5:16) which the Lord will not forgive; therefore, (3) the sin which the Lord will not forgive is a sin which a brother will not confess. If this conclusion is false, it is because the major premise is false— viz., the Lord will not forgive every sin a brother repents of and confesses. But our major premise is virtually in the words of 1 John 1:7, 9, which asserts that the Lord will forgive ‘all sin,’ ‘all unrighteousness,’ on the condition named. Our conclusion is, therefore, irresistible! Sin, all sin, any sin will be forgiven a brother who, in penitence,

confesses it. Hence, if I 'see' my brother 'sin a sin which is not unto death'—i.e., I observe in his attitude following the commission thereof penitence and contrition—I not only may, I am instructed to pray with and for him, with the assurance that the Lord will hear and answer my prayer. If, however, my erring brother manifests stub-born impenitence and rebellion, it is useless for me to approach the Lord in his behalf; he has himself shut the door of heaven in his face. John, the apostle of love, recognized the hopelessness of such a brother and said: 'There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.'" Guy N. Wood, GOSPEL ADVOCATE, May 1985 p.1.