

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

What is the 'sin unto death' in I John 5:16

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

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First, let's try to understand the difference of what has been termed the "Unpardonable Sin"

Matthew 12:31-32

³¹ "Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.

³² Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come.

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The parallel teaching is also found in the gospel of Mark.

Mark 3:28-29

²⁸ "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter;

²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—

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Let's try to determine what this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" might be in this teaching:

1. Attributing the works of the Holy Spirit to the devil.
(Adam Clark – based on the preceding verses – 23-27)
2. Putting forth falsehood for truth, darkness for light, and evil for righteousness. (Grover Cleveland Brewer)
3. The final rejection of the will of God (H. Leo Boles)
4. Simply rejecting the gospel (James Burton Coffman)

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Some other similar NT teachings:

Hebrews 6:4-6

⁴ For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit,

⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

⁶ and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

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Some other similar NT teachings:

II Peter 2:20-21

20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.

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Some summary conclusions and observations:

1. All these teaching are a clearly of a different scope than that which is found in I John.
2. Each of these passages unmistakably deal more with the ultimate rejection of the gospel rather than dealing with the sins which each of us commit in our Christian walk.
3. But, will we find that "every day, ordinary, run of the mill" sin in itself can be just as lethal to our souls' salvation as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and rejection?

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¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and *God* will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

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Let's analyze the details of this passage:

1. A child of God can, and will, sin!
2. There is a sin "not unto death."
3. There is an admonishment to pray for those thus sinning and God will hear and answer our prayers.
4. There is a sin "unto death."
5. For those who are guilty of this, it is useless to pray.

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Now, what might be inferred from the passage:

1. No specific transgressions (sins) were given.
2. It appears to be something other Christians can see.
3. But reason and logic would dictate that most sins are not those committed in the presence of other Christians.
4. The "death" spoken of here is clearly not physical death, but rather spiritual death.
5. There would seem to be the ability for a clear differentiation by the sinner to as to what is "not unto death" and "unto death". But again, little detail is provided by the writer.

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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John earlier in this letter provided some detail
regarding sin in I John 1:8-10.

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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Sin originates from the devil in 3:8

⁸ the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

Jesus' blood cleanses our sins in 1:7

⁷ but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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But we must confess our sins in 1:8

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving our selves and the truth is not in us.

Jesus is our advocate in 2:1

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

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The teaching John gave in the letter culminating in "sin unto death" is abundantly and logically clear. Let's reduce it to its simplest form:

1. The Lord will forgive **any** sin, of whatever nature from which a Christian turns in penitence and confesses.

(1 John 1:8)

2. There is a sin, however, which the Lord will **not** forgive. (1 John 5:16)

3. Therefore, the inference being, the sin which the Lord will not forgive is a sin, any sin, all sin, which the Christian will not confess! This is "sin unto death!"

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Consider also the teaching from James 5:16

¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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By examining closely both the I John 5:16 passage, as well as the James 5:16 passage, there is another important teaching inferred for each of us (independent of the sinner in question) which will help both mature our faith and enhance our relationship with other Christians:

**I not only may, but it is my duty to, pray
on behalf of other Christians!**

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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Our conclusions:

1. Christ plainly teaches in Matthew 12 and in the parallel teaching found in Mark 3 that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit "shall not be forgiven!"
2. Further teachings by Peter and the Hebrew writer clarify that the ultimate rejection of the gospel, even if it was earlier accepted in one's life, will result in losing the promise of salvation!

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

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Our conclusions:

3. The "sin unto death" as taught in I John 5:16 is a disposition of heart, a perverseness of attitude, and an unwillingness of mind to acknowledge (confess) one's sin and turn from it. Clearly stated, this effectively closes heaven's door and removes our hope!

Remember the pattern given to us in the book of I John:

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Our conclusions:

- The Lord will forgive **any** sin, of whatever nature, from which a Christian turns in penitence and confesses. (1 John 1:8)
- There is a sin, however, which the Lord will **not** forgive. (1 John 5:16)
- Therefore, the inference being, the sin which the Lord will not forgive is a sin, any sin, all sin, which the Christian will not confess and turn away from!

This is "sin unto death!"

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Our conclusions:

4. The Lord, under no circumstances, forgives the sin of Christians who refuse to confess and express penitence!
5. As Christians, these passages, including the one found in James, teach that it appropriate and beneficial for us to pray for other Christians!
6. However, if a Christian is unwilling to confess (repent) of their sin, prayer by that sinner and other Christians is of no value!

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