

# When the Bible Gets Confusing

1 John 5:13-21

June 10, 2018

Do you ever get confused by something you read in the Bible? 1 John 5:16 says, “If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that.” What could John possibly be writing about here? What is this sin that leads to death? Why wouldn’t we pray about it? Before we try to answer these questions, I invite you to back up just a little and consider an equally important question: When the Bible Gets Confusing, what should we do?

## **I suggest 4 things, When the Bible Gets Confusing...**

**1) Don’t panic! Pray.** Don’t let a tricky passage or a tough question throw you for a loop. Before we dig into any passage of Scripture, whether it seems “easy” or difficult, we need to ask God to help us by His Spirit. Consider 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, “...The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.”<sup>1</sup> Ok, once we’ve prayed, what’s next?

**2) Read/Re-read the text, then consider the context.** Begin by carefully/prayerfully reading and re-reading the text.<sup>2</sup> It’s often helpful to read it in more than one translation. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 encourages us that, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” God’s Word is intended to be generally understandable. He wrote it, not to confuse us or trick us or to test our detective skills. He wrote it so we could understand His truth and know Him better. The intention of those who wrote down God’s Word was to communicate a useful and understandable message for God’s people, at a certain time in history. God’s broader intention was for believers today to grow as disciples through our access to a reliably preserved copy of the Bible. However, finding the meaning of Scripture doesn’t mean we can ignore context, writing styles/genres, the distance of time, and the limits of language translation. When we read God’s Word, we are reading it from a distance of 2,000 years or more. We are looking through the lenses of time, culture, language, etc. The original readers had none of these challenges but with a prayerful attitude, you and I need to be mindful of them.

**3) AFTER considering the above, THEN consult the “experts.”** God’s Word tells us in Ephesians 4:11-13, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” We should be cautious of “wild hare” websites. As great as the Internet is, there are a lot of crazy ideas and false teachings posted all over the web. Try to only use websites that are vetted and backed by reliable resources.<sup>3</sup> We should also be cautious of “wild hair” pastors and Bible teachers. These might be on the web or TV or radio or a podcast. Make sure they are biblically grounded.<sup>4</sup> Not everyone who calls themselves an apostle/prophet/pastor/etc. is legit. Those who teach God’s Word should be properly vetted in some way.<sup>5</sup> That’s why I’m a strong proponent for our pastoral staff being licensed with the Evangelical Free Church of America.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider also Ephesians 1:17-18, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...”

<sup>2</sup> If you want to dig even a little deeper in your reading of the main text, make a sentence diagram which outlines the flow of thought. See Pastor Jerry to learn more.

<sup>3</sup> Here is one key to a good Bible commentary, “does it keep its finger in the text?” If it starts to go way off into outlandish theories and guesswork or an emotional tirade with a persona agenda behind it, then you probably want to find a different commentary.

<sup>4</sup> Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:11.

<sup>5</sup> Consider James 3:1.

Licensing with a denomination keeps pastors and Bible teachers from wandering too far from sound doctrine, which frankly is what was happening in the communities that 1 John was written to.<sup>6</sup> When you consult a particular Bible teacher, be sure they are accountable to a higher body of spiritual mentors. This won't remove every danger of false teaching, but it sure is a good start. Once you've prayed, read the text/context, and consulted the "experts," the final step is to...

**4) Press on in the things you are sure about.** I find great personal encouragement from Philippians 3:14-16, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." Press on in the things you are sure about.<sup>7 8</sup> Even if we don't understand every little detail and every single verse yet, we can be confident in God's Word. Peter writes about Paul's writings in 2 Peter 3:16, "[Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand...." I really appreciate this affirmation that it's not always easy to understand the Bible. We don't ignore or skip past anything. From time to time though, we may just need to humbly admit, that we just aren't sure about a particular verse yet. And that's really ok.

Well, now that we have a snapshot of what to do when the Bible gets confusing, let's get back to 1 John 5:13-21.

**John ends his letter by reassuring believers about eternal life.** One of the primary reasons that John wrote the letter of 1 John is articulated in 1 John 2:26, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." John's readers were likely becoming a little confused by these Cerinthian false teachers who had formerly been a part of their fellowship. Apparently, their confidence was a little shook up and they were feeling a little less than sure about their faith. John didn't write his letter to confront or persuade the false teachers. He wrote it to strengthen and encourage these dear bros/sis in the Lord.<sup>9</sup> This is why 1 John 5:13 declares, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." John wrote "to you who BELIEVE." Believing "in the name of the Son of God" means they believed in Jesus Christ's identity and His entire being, including the power and authority of His position as God's Son. John reminds them that "To believe in 'the name of the Son' is to enjoy a relationship with Christ that grants true believers special privileges, specifically 'eternal life.'"<sup>10 11</sup> Another privilege is mentioned when...

**1) John reassures believers that God answers prayer.** 1 John 5:14 says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Contextually, it's important to note that, "the reference to God's will at verse 14 directs the reader's attention to the main point of this section in verse 16. John is not [just addressing] a general principle about prayer but rather is urging believers to pray for sinning [brothers/sisters in Christ]."<sup>12</sup> 1 John 5:16 goes on to say, "If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that." There is where we run into a rather distracting question: What is the "sin that leads to death." This is actually a fairly small point in John's overall argument. But, we still need to address it, for reasons of curiosity but more

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<sup>6</sup> Licensing is good for us as individual pastors and teachers but also good for our churches and the ministries we lead. It was hard work, but I'm glad to have my ordination with the EFCA because it increases not only my level of training but also my level of accountability. I'm also glad Pastor Eric Nygren is licensed with the EFCA. And, I'm proud of Pastor Albin for signing up to begin his licensing process in July.

<sup>7</sup> Some people credit Mark Twain with saying, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." My research couldn't find a conclusive original source for this quote.

<sup>8</sup> Consider Matthew 7:24 and James 1:22-25.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 243, quoted in Akin, D. L. (2001). *1, 2, 3 John (Vol. 38)*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> Thatcher, Tom, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed., Vol. 13*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 497.

<sup>11</sup> Consider also John 1:12 and 3:18.

<sup>12</sup> Thatcher, p. 502.

importantly because of the potential confusion it causes.<sup>13</sup> So, here we go on a pretty long “bunny trail.”

**What is the “sin that leads to death?”** Remember now, our first step is “Don’t panic! Pray.” My first step in writing any sermon is to pray, to literally get down on my knees and call out to God to help me say what He would have me say. And, I made sure to do that this week. Back in January, many of you read through the entire book of 1 John as we were preparing to go through this sermon series together. Several of you mentioned that you noticed 1 John 5:16 and you said to me, “good luck on that one Jerry!” But, we don’t need luck. We just need to pray and then dig in. What is most helpful in our quest here is to consider the context. Last week we talked about people living among John’s readers, who were actively rejecting God’s testimony. In fact, they were teaching others to do the same. These people used to be part of the church but now they were out promoting false teachings. The group was known as the Cerinthians. John refers to them in 1 John 5:10, “Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.”

John then goes on to say in 1 John 5:12, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” They do not have life because they do not have Jesus. In fact, they have rejected God’s own testimony about Jesus. And rejecting Jesus is a sin that leads to death. It can be helpful to put this verse alongside of 1 John 5:16, “...There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that.” It seems to me that the “sin that leads to death” in verse 16 is likely connected to those who do not have the life, mentioned in verse 12. In other words, we can’t have eternal life if we don’t have Jesus. And if we continue in the sin of rejecting Jesus, of not accepting God’s testimony about Him, it will lead us to death, eternal separation from God. In the broader context of John’s letter, this sin goes even further than rejecting Christ though. Not only are the Cerinthians rejecting Christ, but they are teaching others to do the same by spreading their heretical teachings. Thus, they are leading others in a sin that leads them to death. This makes us think of the sobering warning in Luke 17:1-2, “Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.’”

Remember, earlier in his letter, John actually calls these false teachers antichrists. 1 John 4:1-3 says, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” Therefore, it probably shouldn’t surprise us that, 1 chapter later, John writes in 1 John 5:16, “...There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that.”

It seems that John is trying to make sure that his readers recognize the fact that God is not going to give eternal life to an antichrist who rejects the real Jesus.<sup>14</sup> What John seems to be saying in 1 John 5:16 is “I wouldn’t advise praying for God’s help and blessing on an antichrist. Their sin is one that leads themselves and others to death. You could pray for their repentance, but don’t be confused into thinking that they are fellow believers. They may claim to be fellow believers, but they are not.” This seems especially applicable for John’s readers, because some of these Cerinthian false teachers were formerly part of the church and possibly still their friends and neighbors. The temptation may have been to lovingly disregard their heresy and rejection of Christ, praying God’s blessing on them anyway. John wants them to soberly understand the distinction of the sin of rejecting Christ and promoting this false teaching to others.

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<sup>13</sup> Therefore, I steer around teaching on the broader subject of “prayer” and get to the question on most people’s minds.

<sup>14</sup> Here’s something else to consider. Stretching our context way back to Dt. 18:20 we learn, “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.” This verse could be applied to the Cerinthian false teachers of John’s day. Not that John was suggesting these Christians put anyone to death, but rather that they recognize that by denying the one true God (v. 20) and teaching others to do the same, those who were once thought to be fellow believers were committing a sin that would lead them to death (v. 16).

One of the Bible commentators I consulted this week is named Colin G. Kruse. If you've read the NIV Zondervan Study Bible<sup>15</sup>, Colin did all the study notes for 1-3 John. Colin notes that these false teachers, "deny that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh, and also deny the significance of his atoning death. This would mean that they place themselves outside the sphere of forgiveness, and their sins become sins unto death."<sup>16</sup> Now, to keep this in perspective, let's remember that Peter denied Christ 3 times. But, he didn't continue in that denial nor did he promote it to others. Rather, he came to his senses and fully committed the rest of his life to Christ. There is hope. But an adamant and persistent denial of God's truth can only lead to one final destination, and that is the death that John is referring to in chapter 5.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, we can pray for non-Christians to repent. And we should pray that they'll turn to the one true God.<sup>18</sup> But for those who have openly rejected Christ by embracing and promoting false teachings, our prayers are wasted unless they somehow come back to the one true God.<sup>19</sup> There's not much point in praying for all of the other sins of the unredeemed until they first deal with this sin that leads to death.<sup>20</sup> Well, this is where my prayer and study led me. I'll admit that I'm not as sure about my conclusions as I'd like to be. But the good news is that we can press on in the many things from 1 John that we are sure about. John now closes his letter with 3 things we can be sure about.

**2) John reassures believers with 3 things they can know.**<sup>21</sup> 1 John 5:18-19 say,

"We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." This gives us our first two assurances:

**1. God's children are kept safe from sin.**

**2. God's children are safe from Satan's control.**

John's 3<sup>rd</sup> and final reassurance brings us full circle with his opening theme of eternal life.

**3. God's children understand Him who is true.**<sup>22</sup> John ends his letter with these words in 1 John 5:20-21, "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> These final words in v. 21, "keep yourselves from idols, serve as a final and fitting "exhortation not to accept the false teaching [of those around them]."<sup>25</sup> **As God's children, we understand who the one true God is and we have the guarantee of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Of this, we can be sure!**

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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<sup>15</sup> Grand Rapids, MI, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 192). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

<sup>17</sup> The NIV 2011 Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 2131, says "...it is probable that the 'sin that leads to death' refers to the Gnostic's adamant and persistent denial of the truth..."

<sup>18</sup> Consider 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, "...They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

<sup>19</sup> Putting faith in this gnostic heresy is no faith at all because it is a false teaching that doesn't save us from our sins; it doesn't bring life in God's Son. In other words, anyone who puts their faith in the Christ that the Cerinthians were proclaiming wouldn't be saved; they were in danger of death.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 7:6 comes to my mind, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."

<sup>21</sup> All of these things give believers the assurance of eternal life.

<sup>22</sup> Consider John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

<sup>23</sup> Scholars have been a bit stumped as to why John ends with a warning about idols. The mention of idolatry seems really random because John hasn't mentioned it until now, at the very end of his letter. Idolatry brings up ideas about praying to golden calves and eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods.

<sup>24</sup> Here "idolatry" most likely characterizes the teachings and practice of the Antichrists" that John has been talking about all along. Thatcher, p. 500.

<sup>25</sup> Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (p. 202). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.