

I JOHN: A STUDY IN SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT
XVII. Discerning Correct Intercessions For Sinning Believers
(1 John 5:16-17)

I. Introduction

- A. 1 John was written to counter heretical views (B. K. C., N. T., p. 881), so the epistle provides discernment.
- B. Having discussed true, effective prayer in 1 John 5:14-15 et al. where a Christian meets his own needs by prayer, John shifted to discussing a believer's prayer for the spiritual needs of other believers, *Ibid.*, p. 902.
- C. A believer who loves his brother cannot be uncaring about that brother's needs, so 1 John 5:14-16 addresses it:

II. Discerning Correct Intercessions For Sinning Believers, 1 John 5:16-17.

- A. When praying for the spiritual needs fellow believers, the subject of sin in a fellow believer as it affects one's intercessory prayer for him automatically creates a problem. After all, "(a)ll sin ultimately leads to death," so praying for a sinful believer causes one to wonder how or even **IF** he should intercede for the believer since it may be God's intent eventually to shorten his life span because of his act or acts of sin. (*Ibid.*)
- B. Thus, 1 John 5:16a KJV mentions a situation where a believer sees a brother commit a sin "which is not unto death," and by that statement, John referred to a case where the sin is "not punished by death" as "a rapid consequence" of the commitment of that sin, *Ibid.* "The distinction is between sins for which death is a rapid consequence" as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 "and sins for which it is not," *Ibid.*
- C. Accordingly, if a believer who fellowships with the Lord sees his brother in Christ commit a sin which is not met with God's punishment of death as a rapid consequence of that sin, he should ask God in intercessory prayer to give that brother life in gracious provision and the opportunity to see the brother confess that sin for restoration of his fellowship with the Lord, 1 John 5:16b.
- D. Conversely, John wrote that there is sin that is punished by the Lord by means of an early physical death due to its "flagrant violation of the sanctity of the Christian community," 1 John 5:16c; *Ibid.*, p. 903. John's comment about praying for such a fatal sin is simply, "I am not saying that he should pray about that," 1 John 5:16d NIV; *Ibid.* "But this clearly does not forbid prayer even in the most serious cases. But naturally in such cases believers will submit their prayers to the will of God," *Ibid.* John's statement demonstrates that the motive, and the only motive in choosing not to intercede for a sin that appears to be a fatal one for the believer, is respect for the will of God that may will for the death penalty to be applied. Certainly, no personal animosity should cause a believer to refuse to intercede for a sinful believer as that would be hatred, a sin!
- E. 1 John 5:17 simply "affirms that there is genuine scope for the kind of prayer John enjoined in verse 16. All wrongdoing (*adikia*, "unrighteousness") is sin, but out of this broad spectrum there is sin that does not lead (swiftly) to death." (*Ibid.*)
- F. Many commentators have tried to fathom from this passage "what kind of sin is directly punished by death," but John's focus in this context "is on sin *not* thus punished. It is for this that a believer should pray. When he does so, he is demonstrating his love for his brother and is thus obeying the frequently repeated command of this letter to do so. At the same time, he is exercising faith in the name of God's Son, in Jesus' name. Prayer for one's sinning brother is therefore in obedience to the single two-pronged command of (1 John) 3:23," *Ibid.*

Lesson: *If we fellowship with God and thus love our brothers in Christ, we are to consider their spiritual welfare and intercede for their spiritual needs if we see them sin a sin that is not rapidly met with God's punishment of physical death. We must realize that some sins deserve God's rapid punishment by physical death, and if we seek to honor God's will in a case we believe may involve a sin in another believer that must end in a rapid death, God does not hold us responsible to intercede in that case out of respect for God's will. However, in all other cases, our love for the brethren should drive us to intercede for the spiritual welfare and longevity of other believers.*

Application: *(1) If we fellowship with the Lord, may we intercede for believers who sin where their sins are not met with God's punishment of rapid physical death. (2) However, if we see a believer sin so greatly that we believe that God may want to punish that believer with a rapid death, we are not responsible before the Lord to intercede for that case out of respect for God's will. (3) On questionable cases where it seems that God is granting time for the sinner to repent, we do well out of love for the believer to intercede for his spiritual welfare and longevity. (4) If we are leading a group of believers, and we have been asked to lead the group in prayer for a believer who we ourselves think has committed a sin that God will punish by rapid death, we can still intercede out of respect for the consciences and love of the group for the wrongdoer. There is no sin in praying such a prayer in that case.*