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## **ARE THERE PEOPLE FOR WHOM WE SHOULD NOT PRAY?**

We are familiar with Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:1.

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men;** (1 Timothy 2:1)

There you are, some people will tell you, right here the Apostle Paul instructs Christians to pray for "all men". So does God want us to pray for every single person on earth? Would God want us to pray for the false prophet and for the man who will head "the beast power" of Revelation? Would God want us to pray for the Pope or for a Buddhist priest? **Why** would God want us to do that? And if that is what God wants, that we pray for all people, **what are such prayers supposed to achieve?** And exactly what are we supposed to ask God to do for "all people", knowing that most people will not be called by God in this life?

Paul used the Greek expression "panton anthropon", and this expression does mean "all men", or better still, "all people", thereby theoretically including everybody. But that does not necessarily mean that Paul literally meant "every single human being".

Let's understand what Paul was talking about.

Originally there were no chapter breaks in any of the books of the Bible. The breaks were added much later. One problem that was sometimes created when the books of the Bible were divided into chapters (ignoring a few short books with only one chapter) is that in quite a number of cases the chapter breaks very artificially divide an otherwise unified context into two distinct sections. Such artificial chapter divisions can obscure the connection between what is discussed at the end of one chapter and what is discussed at the beginning of the next chapter.

That is the case here in 1 Timothy. So let's notice the context of this statement, which context starts towards the end of the previous chapter.

Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck; Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; **whom I have delivered unto Satan**, that they may learn **not to blaspheme**. (1 Timothy 1:19-20)

Paul was speaking about certain people who had left the Church. Amongst those who had left the Church at least two particular individuals were guilty of blasphemy, and Paul mentioned those two by name. Blasphemy is always directed against God Himself. So these two individuals were guilty of blasphemy against the God who had called them into His Church.

"To deliver them to Satan" means that Paul put those two individuals out of the Church. In practical terms, being put out of God's Church also removes all of God's "protective hedges or fences" (see Job 1:10) which are normally around those who are members of God's Church. With that removal of protection people are then "delivered to Satan".

Now when Paul said "I have delivered them to Satan", did Paul really mean "**but I still want you to pray for them**"? **No, of course not!**

For a church member blasphemy is not a sin of ignorance or of poor understanding. Blasphemy, when committed by a member of God's Church, is a very deliberate action. It is quite different from blasphemy committed by people who have never understood God's truth ... their blasphemies are typically based on ignorance of God's truth and of God's dealings with mankind. And their blasphemies are forgiven by God when those individuals come to a real repentance.

But blasphemies against God by individuals who are, or who in the past were members of God's Church are far more serious. Recall what Paul told the Hebrews:

For if we sin wilfully **after** that we have received the knowledge of the truth, **there remains no more sacrifice for sins**, (Hebrews 10:26)

Notice that Paul used the expression "after we have received the knowledge of the truth" rather than the expression "after we have received God's spirit". It is "the knowledge of the truth" that makes us accountable, whether we are baptized or not. And many people come to the knowledge of the truth even before they are baptized and before they receive God's spirit. And from then onwards they are accountable for that knowledge. Notice also the very important qualifying word "wilfully".

In this article when I refer to "after we have received God's spirit", I am including those people who may not yet be baptized, but who have already come to "the knowledge of the truth", because that is what counts.

Blaspheming God after we have received God's spirit is a sin that will not be forgiven by God. Blasphemies against God are not sins of weakness. We are not pressured to blaspheme. And for anyone who has in the past had God's spirit, blasphemies against God are not sins of ignorance either. If someone who has had God's spirit in the past can actually blaspheme against God without even the tiniest twinge of conscience, then that person's conscience is totally dead and beyond rehabilitation.

Does God want us to pray for people who have committed the unpardonable sin? No, of course not! We can pray for them **before** they commit the unpardonable sin, while they are being tempted to sin. But once they have committed the unpardonable sin, then it is too late to pray for them.

When people provoke God with sins, then God does not want us to pray for those people.

## **DON'T PRAY FOR THESE PEOPLE**

Notice what God told the Prophet Jeremiah.

Therefore **pray not you for this people**, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear you. (Jeremiah 7:16)

The context here was that the people of the Kingdom of Judah went into idolatry and took up various pagan customs. So God told Jeremiah: don't pray for these people. The principle involved here is: it is useless to pray for people who are knowingly breaking some of God's laws.

God repeated this instruction. After describing the people's involvement with various pagan practices, God in chapter 11 said once again:

Therefore **pray not you for this people**, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear *them* in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble. (Jeremiah 11:14)

God continued to spell out the sins of the people. The people were not about to repent and to change, and to once again obey God and all of His laws. They thought that by claiming "we are called by Your name" (see Jeremiah 14:9), they would be assured of God's help in times of need. And so God instructed Jeremiah a third time to not pray for them.

Then said the LORD unto me, **Pray not for this people** for *their* good. (Jeremiah 14:11)

The point is that in the time of Jeremiah the people had simply gone too far in their rebellion against God. And so God told Jeremiah three times: don't pray for these people. The lesson for us is that there are some situations or circumstances where God will no longer listen to prayers for certain people.

This applied to people who knew better. The Jews in the days of Jeremiah really knew that all those pagan customs and rituals were wrong. They knew that the Temple in Jerusalem stood for the God of Israel. But the pagan customs were attractive and appealing, and so they chose paganism over worship of the true God.

This applies today in principle to situations where people really know better because of their exposure to God's truth, but they make no attempt to live by God's laws.

The God who dealt with Jeremiah was Jesus Christ. So let's notice something Jesus Christ said during His ministry.

### **PEOPLE JESUS CHRIST DID NOT PRAY FOR**

Jesus Christ Himself prayed for members of God's Church. And then Jesus Christ made a very specific point of saying that He did not pray for people outside of God's Church; He did not pray for the world. Notice:

I pray for them: **I pray not for the world, but for them which You have given Me**; for they are Yours. (John 17:9)

**Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word; (John 17:20)**

The question we should ask is: **why** did Jesus Christ not pray for the world? And if Jesus Christ very deliberately did not pray for the world, should those who have been called into God's Church pray for the world? Should we be praying "for the world" or not?

The implied reason in Jesus Christ's statement "I pray not for the world" is that Christ didn't pray for them **because "they are not Yours"**, i.e. they don't belong to God the Father in the same way that church members belong to God the Father.

So in deliberately not praying for the world, was Jesus Christ setting us an example or not? In praying, **why did Jesus Christ even spell this point out** to God the Father, or did Jesus Christ include this as a lesson for us?

Would Jesus Christ ever want us to do something that He Himself had **deliberately** not done?

What priorities must we apply in this situation of seemingly conflicting approaches?

Do we understand the Apostle Paul's statement (making prayers for all men) in terms of Jesus Christ's statement (I pray not for the world)? Or do we interpret Jesus Christ's statement in terms of the Apostle Paul's statement? **Who is the higher authority** whenever there seems to be some kind of clash: Jesus Christ or the Apostle Paul? Whose statements are more authoritative?

The answer here is obvious, isn't it?

The words of Jesus Christ are always, without exception, more important, more significant, and more binding than the words of any apostle or prophet. Our only option is to understand the words of the Apostle Paul on the foundation of the words of Jesus Christ. That foundation is that **Christ was not concerned about praying for the world.**

We should never attempt to use something Paul (or Peter or John or James, etc.) said in an attempt to minimize or to contradict something Jesus Christ said. It must always be the other way around ... that we understand the words of all other people on the foundation of clear statements by Jesus Christ (i.e. in those cases where there seem to be conflicting views).

So when Jesus Christ specifically said that He did not pray for the world, then we likewise, **in general terms**, should not be praying for the world. We are supposed to follow Jesus Christ's examples. Please note that I said "in general terms". As far as certain "**specific situations**" are concerned, the general guideline may not necessarily apply. More on this later.

So let's look again at Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:1.

The preceding two verses (i.e. delivering two individuals to Satan) make clear that Paul also did not really mean "all men" in absolute terms. This is also conveyed by the word "therefore" (in "I exhort **therefore** ..."). This word "therefore" provides the reason for Paul's "prayers for all men" statement. "**Therefore**" **introduces a conclusion** that has been reached based on what was said before. "Therefore" is not just an empty filler-word.

In other words: Paul's "prayers for all men" statement was **Paul's solution to the problem** he had just discussed in the previous two verses.

The problem was that some people had left God's Church. And some of those who had left the Church went so far as to "blaspheme" God. **To avoid this problem recurring**, or to at least minimize it in future, Paul said: **therefore** I exhort you to pray ...".

Here is the point we should understand:

**Paul's "prayers for all men" statement was not motivated by a concern for those in the world!**

Paul's real concern with this instruction was: to make life easier for God's people! Paul's concern was to minimize for God's people the potential of problems, and even persecution, from people in power and in positions of authority. The implication is that some had left God's Church because they had not managed to cope with pressures from civil rulers.

So Paul tells us to beseech God to give us favor with those rulers, you know, like Daniel and Nehemiah had favor with secular worldly rulers. Paul's request that we offer "prayers for all men" was aimed at helping more members of God's Church to not suffer "shipwreck" (see 1 Timothy 1:19).

**But Paul was not telling us to "pray for the world" in a general way! And so now in the next verse Paul spells out what he meant by "all men" and also what we should be praying for.**

**For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. (1 Timothy 2:2)**

Paul's "all men" statement was intended to apply to "all" that are in authority. That is what Paul spells out in this verse. Paul really used a qualified "all" statement in verse 1, meaning all people in a certain category. The category Paul had in mind was "all people in positions of authority over us", because those people might have the power to make our lives easier or more difficult.

People in positions of worldly authority, but who have no authority over or influence on any of God's people (e.g. rulers in remote countries where there aren't any members of God's Church), are not included in Paul's statements here. It is only those rulers who have the potential to make life less peaceful for any of God's people that are included in Paul's request.

So what are we to pray for? That those "in authority" would prosper or even come into God's Church? Or that they be in good health? That they would make the best possible decisions for running the country? That they would do a great job as leaders?

No, these things were not really Paul's priority in making this request.

Paul's focus for these "prayers for all men" was "**that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty**". That's the real motivation for praying for certain people in the world. Now in practice, if our rulers do a good job for the country, if they are at least tolerant of those who wish to keep all of God's laws, then those things are likely to translate into making our lives "quiet and peaceable", free of secular persecution.

It is not a matter of in any way being against leaders ruling wisely and doing a good job. It is a matter of priorities. We ask God to influence the authorities in our country in such a way that we are not exposed to persecution for our commitments to God, so that we can peacefully practice the Christian way of life. In practice this may mean that God in an unseen way guides our leaders into at least making some decisions that are better for God's people, than the alternative decisions other people in positions of authority might be inclined to make.

But the focus is: whatever is good for God's people to be free to live by God's laws and commandments, **that comes first**; and what's good for the country comes second, almost like a consequence to the primary focus. That's the focus of Paul's exhortation here. So there is really no contradiction between what Jesus Christ said during His ministry, and what Paul said at a later date. Paul's statement is aimed at making life easier for God's people, not necessarily at making things better for people in the world.

Can you see that?

There is nothing in Paul's statement that implies that God's people should be focusing on praying for people in the world in general. That is not what Paul had in mind.

There is also another focus we can have in praying for the world. And that focus is presented in Ezekiel chapter 9. Notice:

And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and **set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry** for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. (Ezekiel 9:4)

The focus here is: the people "sighing and crying" are not necessarily praying for specific individuals in

the world. They are praying about the awful mess, the crimes and the immorality, and the cruelty and the gross selfishness, and the perversity and the depravity that are so rampant in our world today. These people with their "sighing and crying" are praying "please, Lord, let Your Kingdom come speedily". Their focus is on Jesus Christ returning to set up His rule over humanity, when all of these evils will be removed. But their focus is not on "praying for all men".

## **THE REAL PURPOSE OF PRAYING FOR PEOPLE**

When we say to someone "I am praying for you", all too often that is aimed purely at making that person feel good, making that person realize that we are in fact concerned for them.

That's okay, **provided we don't forget the primary purpose** of our prayers for other people. Even worldly politicians and radio commentators, etc. will freely use the expression "we are all praying for ... (the victims of some crime or some disaster, etc.)", when those public figures don't really get on their knees and pray. They are saying those words purely for the effect those words are supposed to have. And all too often that is a farce!

The primary purpose of our prayers for other people must always be **a desire to influence God** to in some way intervene in the lives of the people we are praying for. Whether or not the people we are praying for know that we are praying for them is really a secondary point. The focus in such prayers should always be: okay, when we pray for person X or for a group of people, exactly **what is it that we would like God to do?**

Spell it out to God. Let God know what you hope that God will do for the people about whom you are praying. Think of God responding to you with: so tell Me, what exactly is it that you want Me to do for them? So don't in flowery poetic terms waffle around about endless generalities, which in practice don't really mean anything. Be specific.

Both Abraham and Moses presented specific requests to God, and God answered their requests (to not destroy Sodom if there were at least 10 righteous men in it, and to not blot out the whole nation of Israel). Now obviously, God most likely will not do something **the way** we would like to see it done. But **the outcome**, the end-result wished for, is what we are requesting from God, leaving it in God's hands as to exactly how that outcome will be achieved.

Getting back to "prayers for all men": if you do pray for people in the world, exactly what are you asking God to do? We are basically restricted to asking only for those things "that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22), right? That limitation mostly cuts out our own personal wishes for specific individuals "in the world". For example, it is not really appropriate for us to ask God "please call person X into Your Church". Such a request amounts to seeking our will, rather than seeking God's will.

In this situation (i.e. wishing that God would call a very specific person) the only thing we can do is this: we can strive to set the best possible example of a God-centered life to this person we would like God to call into His Church. If our example makes true Christianity look attractive to this person, then they have the opportunity to respond with repentance towards God. If they know us, then the chances are that they have already been exposed to "the seed", and our good example could be influential in converting their "by the wayside soil" into "good ground". But we ourselves are unqualified to decide who should be called by God in this present age. And so that is not a request we should make.

## **1 JOHN 5:16**

Let's now look at something the Apostle John said.

If any man see 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 John 5:16)

All unrighteousness is sin: and **there is a sin not unto death.** (1 John 5:17)

This is focused on dealing with fellow church members, i.e. "a brother". This is not speaking about dealing with people in the world.

First of all, John makes quite clear that **not all sins are equal!** Sins which are "not unto death" are viewed as less serious than sins which are "unto death". And these two categories of sins are treated differently by God. Paul's statement "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) applies specifically to those sins that are "unto death". But Paul's statement "the wages of sin is death" **does not apply** to sins which are "not unto death".

Now ultimately, when we come to the end of our lives, then the statement "the wages of sin is death" will apply to any sins that remain because the individuals involved are at that point in time unrepentant, even if their earlier sins had originally only been "sins not unto death".

The initial distinction between these two categories of sins is one of opportunities!

For those sins which are "**unto death**" there is no longer the opportunity to repent. Those sins have in one way or another simply gone too far, beyond the point of return, beyond the point of the possibility of repentance. This category of sins has ensured that the people involved (mostly former members of God's Church) will receive the death penalty from God. That judgment can no longer be reversed.

Therefore there is also no point in praying for people who have committed "sins unto death". And that is what the Apostle John points out. The fact that the Apostle John points this out implies that John expected God's people to be able to **identify** those people who have committed "sins unto death", otherwise we would not know who not to pray for.

But for those sins which are "**not unto death**" there is still the opportunity to repent. With these sins people can **potentially** still change. Their minds have not yet been irreversibly set in opposition to God. We can pray for people with this category of sins, and God will respond to our prayers for people in this group. It is **how** God will respond in this situation that many people do not understand.

But we should also understand that if the people involved never do anything to deal with the "sins not unto death" in their lives, then eventually those sins "not unto death" will be converted into "sins unto death". This is the situation Paul warned us against, where we simply "neglect" to deal with these sins "not unto death".

How shall we escape, **if we neglect so great salvation**; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard *him*; (Hebrews 2:3)

One way of "neglecting salvation" is to not deal with "sins that are not unto death" in our lives.

So these two categories of sins are distinguished by an opportunity to change being attached to one category, and no opportunity to change being the main feature of the other category.

With "**sins unto death**" God's judgment is final. And therefore we should not pray for people who are guilty of sins in this category, even as God instructed Jeremiah not to pray for people at that time. And if we do pray for people who are guilty of sins in this category, then we also need to understand that God will not hear those prayers.

Consider how the Prophet Samuel responded when God had rejected Saul from being king (see 1 Samuel 15:26). Samuel "mourned for Saul" (1 Samuel 15:35), meaning that Samuel prayed that Saul could somehow recover from the judgment God had passed on him. God then told Samuel:

And the LORD said unto Samuel, **How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel?** fill your horn with oil, and go, I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons. (1 Samuel 16:1)

God's message to Samuel was: no matter how much you pray for Saul, **I will not hear those prayers**, because My mind is made up. So if after this communication from God Samuel had continued to pray for Saul, then Samuel himself would also have known in advance that God was not going to listen to such prayers. And with that knowledge I doubt that after this statement from God Samuel ever again prayed for Saul.

It is with "**sins which are not unto death**" that we can pray for people. With these sins there is still hope for these people. So when we pray for someone who is involved in "sins not unto death", exactly what do we expect God to do? Do you know?

One thing God will not do in response to such intercessory prayers from us is this: **God will not forgive "sins not unto death" simply because we asked God to forgive those people.** That's not how it works. God does not ever forgive one person's "sins not unto death" based solely on someone else having asked God to forgive that person those sins.

The one and only way that God forgives "sins not unto death" is for that person himself or herself to actually repent. If the people we pray for do not choose to repent, then our prayers for them will not achieve anything positive for them, though those prayers will achieve something positive for us, as I will explain.

So when we pray for someone who is involved in "sins not unto death", exactly what do we expect God to do? What are we asking God to do, since our prayers by themselves are not enough to have God forgive their sins?

[Note! A reminder that here we are not talking about people in the world, who don't know their right hand from their left. The sins of people in the world will only be forgiven when they come up in the second resurrection. To people like that applies Jesus Christ's statement "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). No, in our context here we are talking about people in God's Church, people who do know what they are doing.]

To be clear: we are also not talking about prayers in which we ask God to heal people, or to help them through trials, or to provide for their needs, or to give them favor with employers, or to protect them, etc. That's a totally different subject. Here we are examining the matter of praying for people in God's Church who are involved in "sins not unto death". We are praying for them because they are in danger of missing out on salvation.

When we pray for people in this "sins not unto death" category, then **we are in effect asking God to bring specific trials on those people**, trials which at least have the potential of motivating them to repent of their "sins not unto death". God "scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6). And



in most cases nothing short of some form of scourging or chastising will motivate church people with these sins to repent, and to turn away from those sins.

That's the reality.

If you have anything else in mind when you ask God to help someone (e.g. a family member or a close friend in the Church, etc.) who is actively involved in "sins not unto death", then you are fooling yourself. To motivate people involved in "sins not unto death" to repent is not a walk in the park! As long as no penalties come along for such people, in most cases their minds will continue to be "fully set to do evil" (see Ecclesiastes 8:11). That's how human nature works.

In those few cases where some few people do seem to change on their own, as you and I may perhaps have done in the past (?), a closer examination will often reveal that the people involved changed because something shocked them (or us) into changing. It may be a shocking realization that we could have died or been seriously harmed in something that took place, somewhat like Nabal having a heart attack the morning after David and his men had nearly killed all of Nabal's entire household (see 1 Samuel 25:37). Of course, Nabal died in that particular situation. But that type of shock can at times provide the motivation to overcome "sins not unto death". And thus even in those situations where people seem to stop certain "sins not unto death" on their own, a closer examination often shows that it did take some trial to motivate them (or us) to change.

At any rate, when we pray for people involved in "sins not unto death", then we are asking God to bring about circumstances that will result in very specific and focused tests or trials, focused on influencing the minds of these people to repent and to change. In an indirect way we are asking God to bring about **trials that have the greatest chance of success in motivating these people to repent.**

You have probably never thought of it in these terms, have you? But most people involved in "sins not unto death" just don't change without some trial that will motivate them to change. That was also the case with "the prodigal son" in the parable in Luke 15; that son only changed after serious trials had come his way (see Luke 15:14-18).

In praying we are asking God for "the best". We are focused on the outcome we desire, which is to see these people repent. We are asking God to do for these people whatever has "the best" chance of producing repentance and "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (see Hebrews 12:11).

When we pray along those lines, then we are asking according to "the will of God" (see Romans 12:2). It is God Himself who desires to lead to salvation all those who have been called, and God does not want anyone "to perish" (see 2 Peter 3:9). And God wants those members of His Church involved in "sins not unto death" to repent.

So what about John's statement "... he (the man) shall ask, and He (God) shall give **him** life **for them** that sin not unto death ..."? Doesn't this mean that God will forgive the person **based on nothing more than our request** to God for that person? No, that's not really what this means.

Question: Who is referred to as "him" in this statement? And who is referred to as "for them"?

The Greek expression here is "dousei auto zoen tois hamartanousin me".

"Dousei" means: "he shall give"; it is the third person singular.

"Auto" is the third person **singular** pronoun, and it means: "him".

"Zoen" means: "life".

"Tois" is the dative **plural** masculine, and it means: "for them".

"Hamartanousin" is also the dative **plural** masculine, and it means: "(that) sin", linking it to the word "tois".

"Me" means: "not".

Now the expression "He shall give" is obviously a reference to God. God is the One who gives life.

Next, the people referred to as "**for them**" are identified as "for them that sin not unto death". So the expression "for them" refers to **the people we are praying for**. Can you see that?

The question now is this:

Why does it use the singular "**him**", and then use the plural "**for them**"? The dative plural does mean "for them" and not just "them". Note that this verse does **not** say "God gives life to them that sin not unto death". **The people who commit "sins not unto death" are not really the ones to whom God "gives life"**, as far as this particular verse is concerned.

Can you see that?

Most people don't really understand this verse correctly.

Even the biblical scholar Adam Clarke opens his commentary on this verse with the statement "**This is an extremely difficult passage, and has been variously interpreted.**" Now I am not interested in Adam Clarke's opinions. I merely present this quote to show that even some of the greatest biblical scholars have struggled to make sense out of this verse.

And yet it isn't really all that difficult. It means exactly what it says.

"Him" refers to the person who is praying to God. And "for them" refers to the people for whom that person is praying. Let's apply this verse to our own circumstances. Then we have:

"Him" refers to us, who are praying for someone else. And "for them" refers to the people for whom we are praying. Now in this verse the Apostle John tells us that **God gives life to us when we pray for other people!** And the people we should pray for (in our context here) are those who are only involved in "sins not unto death". We should not really be praying for those who have committed "sins unto death".

Note!

When we pray for other people in God's Church who are involved in "sins not unto death", then we are expressing a genuine concern for those people; we are expressing love for those people, people who really need help to avoid dropping out of God's Church and missing out on salvation. And the Apostle Peter tells us that **"love shall cover the multitude of sins"** (see 1 Peter 4:8). In other words, God forgives us when we express genuine love for other people.

This is precisely how God dealt with the man Job.

And **the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends**: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. (Job 42:10)

That's the perfect illustration for what John was speaking about. God in effect "gave life" to Job when Job prayed for his friends.

Here is an amplified paraphrase of the first part of John's statement.

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, the man shall ask God in prayer for that brother, and God shall give the praying man life because he prayed for other people who had committed sins that are not unto death. ... (1 John 5:16, paraphrased)

This is a way that we can receive God's forgiveness for our own sins. Forgiving "our debtors" (see Matthew 6:12) is a way of expressing love for those people. And when we do that, then God gives us life (meaning that God forgives our sins). Praying for those who are involved in "sins not unto death" is one way of expressing love for other people.

Job 42:10 is an illustration of the point John was making in 1 John 5:16.

When we understand 1 John 5:16 correctly, then it doesn't actually tell us anything about what happens to the people we pray for.

What is not stated in this verse, but is certainly applicable, is that God will also give them "life" if they repent of their sins. And if they don't repent, then God will not give them "life". But in praying for them, **our outgoing concern** for these people who commit "sins not unto death" **reveals our character to God**. And so God will as a result "give us life", because we have the outgoing concern for others that God desires to see in us.

Now let's ask ourselves: what is actually the distinction between "sins unto death" and "sins not unto death"?

## **THE DECIDING FACTOR**

God is first and foremost testing the minds of human beings. At the resurrection it is the spirit in man that is placed into a new spirit body. That mind must be unquestioningly submissive to God. It must have developed the same standards and ways of thinking that God employs, if that mind is to be resurrected and placed within a spirit body.

Now one difference between "sins unto death" and "sins not unto death" is **the involvement of the mind in those sins**. It is how the human mind thinks and reasons when it sins that holds the key as to whether those sins are "unto death" or "not unto death".

Ignoring people in the world, let's just focus on us, the people who have repented and become a part of God's Church.

All **sins of ignorance** are "sins **not** unto death". The reason is that these sins do not involve any hostility of the mind towards God. A mind that is informed responds differently than a mind that is ignorant of certain vital information. And so when that uninformed mind becomes informed and is no longer ignorant, then that mind also has the opportunity to respond differently from the way it responded when it was ignorant of certain information.

**Sins committed on impulse and sins committed due to weakness are in most cases also "sins not unto death". Having committed a sin on impulse has in most cases not firmly set that mind to**

**repeat those impulsive sins. Sins committed on impulse frequently bring spontaneous penalties. Having to deal with those spontaneous penalties typically gives the mind the opportunity to resolutely turn away from those sins. The same goes for sins committed due to weakness in dealing with temptations. The weak can change and become strong, at least potentially.**

None of these things automatically set the human mind to repeat those sins. And **all of them include the possibility to repent** and to turn away from those sins. None of these in any way express a hostility towards God.

## **SINS UNTO DEATH**

Picture the following situation:

Let's consider a man who repented and came into God's Church. And God gave the man His holy spirit. So the man is in God's Church for a decade or two. During that time he comes to understand all of the teachings that the Church currently understands. From the Bible he has confidently proved these teachings to himself to his own satisfaction.

Then there is a change in the leadership of the Church, and gradually heretical teachings are introduced into the Church's teachings. It is easy to prove that these new teachings are heresies. The heretical teachings are clearly at odds with what this man had proved to himself many years earlier. But the heresies are also very appealing, especially to those people who have "itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3).

**If this member of God's Church now abandons any true teachings, which he has understood and which he can prove to be true from the Bible, in favor of any heresies that have been introduced by the new leadership, then he will be committing "sins unto death".**

**A major source of "sins unto death" is rejecting truth in favor of error!**

Now you may say: that seems pretty harsh to me. Can't the person just repent and return to accepting the true teaching he used to believe? Why should this be "a sin unto death"?

The key in this whole process is the role of **the man's mind**.

Yes, God winks at the times of ignorance (Acts 17:30). But once our minds have been opened to understand the truth of God, then we become much more accountable to God. And then we don't really get second chances to respond correctly to God (i.e. in dealing with situations where we are not ignorant and also not deceived).

**It is one thing for the mind to accept truth and to reject error. And that is a process that must continue throughout our lives. God is testing our minds. When proof is presented to us, can we recognize errors we had accepted / believed in the past? Can we recognize that we need to reject those errors and come to a new understanding? (Example: Rejecting a Monday-Pentecost observance, and accepting a Sunday-Pentecost observance in its place.)**

That's something we had to do when we first came into God's Church ... reject false teachings like Christmas, Easter, immortal soul, the trinity, going to heaven, etc. And, after proving things to ourselves, we accepted a new understanding about these things, like accepting the Sabbath and the annual Holy Days, the spirit in man, understanding the second resurrection, etc.

This process should not stop after we have learned all the basic teachings of the Bible, though that is what actually happens to many people. This process should really continue for the rest of our lives, that, as proof comes to our attention, we continue to reject error and replace it with truth. This process was referenced by Peter in the closing statement of his second letter.

But **grow** in grace, and *in* the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him *be* glory both now and for ever. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

Growth in knowledge and in understanding commonly involves replacing wrong understanding with correct understanding. During this life this is an endless process. And at no point in this process does the mind have to compromise or deceive itself. At no stage of this endless process does the mind experience any conscience problems for rejecting what's wrong and for accepting what's right.

**But it is another thing altogether for the mind to reject truth and to replace it with error. In this process the mind shows itself to be unreliable. Such a mind cannot be trusted by God. If a mind cannot discern that truth is truth, when it previously had understood that truth for years or even for decades, and that mind then rejects that truth in favor of false beliefs, then that mind cannot possibly be trusted for all future eternity.**

God will not accept people who jump around from error to truth and back to error. That type of mind is "**double minded in all its ways**" (see James 1:8).

Understand that rejecting truth and accepting error is not an impulsive action. No, this is a very deliberate decision. And such a deliberate decision shows that the mind that is involved in making this decision does not function logically. **It is never logical to reject truth and to replace it with error.** And if this mind cannot function logically now in this life, while having access to God's spirit, then this mind would also not function logically if it was placed in an immortal spirit body in God's kingdom.

When we have the truth, then in the words of the Apostle Paul we have been "enlightened" (see Hebrews 6:4). And if we reject truth, then we have fallen away from that truth (see Hebrews 6:6). And according to the Apostle Paul, in such a situation "**it is impossible ... to renew them again unto repentance**" (Hebrews 6:4-6). And I agree with the Apostle Paul. And if someone cannot be renewed again unto repentance, then that is because we are dealing with "a sin unto death".

The Apostle Paul described this process quite clearly in Hebrews chapter 6. But **we are reluctant to apply this understanding in real-life situations**, like the Apostle John applied it. This is not a matter of finding fault with anyone. It is simply a case of honestly and realistically applying the principle of Hebrews 6:4-6 to our present circumstances.

We are living at a time when very many people have rejected one biblical teaching here, and another biblical teaching there. That has in fact been the history of God's Church throughout the past two millennia. God raises up a leader, and the Church grows and spreads ... and eventually there follows a falling away from the true teachings that had been established. And then this cycle repeats itself 50 or 100 or 200 years later. The last cycle started when God raised up Mr. Herbert Armstrong, and we are now in the falling away phase. But we are not experiencing something that hasn't happened before.

Typically people who reject truth in favor of errors will try to discredit those Scriptures that prove the old teaching to be true, and their new teaching to be wrong. It is not a case of people like that having come to understand "new truth", because **they avoid the Scriptures that disprove their position** like those Scriptures were the plague.

A principle we should keep in mind is this:

New truth and new understanding can never be based on **seeking to discredit Scriptures** that had previously been used to support the old understanding.

So whenever we see an attempt to claim that "this verse doesn't actually mean what we used to think it means", **without an accompanying explanation that clearly explains what "this verse" does mean**, then in many cases, though not always, we are dealing with a weak attempt to discredit something that doesn't fit into the new understanding someone wishes to promote. A sole focus on what some verse supposedly does **not** mean is always a sign that **someone is avoiding facing the truth**.

Understand that, as far as members of God's Church are concerned, a mind that is bent on proving what some verse supposedly does not mean, without the slightest interest in what that verse does mean, is a **very devious mind!** And dealing deviously with the Scriptures is a telltale sign of "sins unto death".

That's the reality we need to grasp. And in the past three decades a lot of people have dealt deviously with the Scriptures.

New understanding is identified by reasoning that says: here is what this Scripture means; and it is not identified by reasoning that says: here is what all these Scriptures don't mean. **Arguing against specific Scriptures is almost always a give-away that some heresy is being pushed on us.**

We should also understand that people who turn away from a true teaching to a false teaching **will never again accept the true teaching** they have abandoned. It doesn't matter what the particular teaching they rejected happens to be; once they reject it, then they will never return to the true teaching. That rejection has done something to their minds.

Thus: people who reject the truth in favor of error will never come back to the truth. That is just the way the human mind works. What this point highlights is the enormous, mind-staggering consequences of someone rejecting a truth, any truth, that they had previously understood. That's what Paul was talking about in Hebrews chapter 6.

**And it is pointless to pray for people who have rejected a true teaching and replaced it with a false teaching.**

No amount of praying and wishful thinking can change the free will of such people. Prayers can never achieve repentance in other people. Their own free minds must always make the decisions regarding what they will believe and what they will do.

## **PEOPLE WHO ARE DISFELLOWSHIPED**

There is also a distinction amongst people who are put out of God's Church. Some people are put out of the Church because they have broken certain laws of God (e.g. committed adultery, become alcoholics, etc.) And other people are put out of God's Church because they have rejected a true teaching and instead accepted a false teaching (e.g. they reject that Jesus Christ has always existed with God the Father, etc.). And then there are those people who are put out of the Church for false reasons by the heretics who have taken control. That was the case when Diotrefes cast true believers out of the Church (see 2 John 1:9-10).

Regarding the first two groups of people put out of the Church:

1) Those who were put out of the Church for **breaking certain laws** of God are in most cases guilty of

"sins **not** unto death".

2) Those who are put out of God's Church for **rejecting true teachings** and accepting false teachings in their place are guilty of "**sins unto death**".

A not-uncommon situation is that sometimes those who break certain laws of God at the same time also reject certain true teachings and accept false teachings in their place. That's the worst possible scenario.

**Those who have broken certain laws of God can repent of their sinful conduct, and they can continue to be a part of God's Church, (or be reinstated). When they sinned, their minds had not rejected any truth of God. They had been ignorant or weak or selfish, etc., but in the process of sinning their minds had not expressed any hostility towards God.**

**Those who have rejected some truth, invariably based on very flawed and shallow reasoning, in order to justify some false teaching, can never again become a part of God's Church. When they sinned, their minds rejected a truth they had understood up till then, and rejecting that truth is an expression of hostility towards God. Their minds can never be rehabilitated. Now if such people decide to attend with a church that teaches the truth which they have rejected, then they will take their wrong ideas with them to that church, and then they will end up being "tares" in that church.**

Coming into God's Church is not a game! When we come to understand one truth after another, then we also become accountable for those truths. And if we of our own free will later reject any truth we had previously understood, then that tells God that our minds are unreliable.

That action of rejecting truth we had understood gives God information about us that God is looking for. God wants to know and to test how our minds function. And rejecting a previously understood truth provides God with an answer to that question.

Let's understand one thing quite clearly:

When we reject a truth we had previously understood, then **there is no way that God will plead with us** and say: won't you please reconsider? Look, I'll spell it out to you more clearly. I'll give you more proof. I really need you to get back to the truth you have abandoned.

That just isn't going to happen.

Jesus Christ didn't plead with a single one of the thousands of His disciples who "walked no more with Him" (John 6:66). Instead, the only thing Christ did was turn to His twelve apostles and ask: "well, are you guys also leaving?" (John 6:67, paraphrased).

Mentally speaking, people who are disfellowshipped for committing certain sins are actually in a less serious condition than other people who are disfellowshipped for rejecting God's truth and replacing it with heresies. Those who are guilty of certain sins can change and repent. But those who reject truth and accept error are not able to change back to accepting the truth they rejected. That makes it more serious.

## **BLASPHEMIES AGAINST GOD**

For any member of God's Church blasphemies against God are "sins unto death". For people in the world whose minds are not open to the truth blasphemies are in most cases "sins **not** unto death", i.e. sins not reaping the second death.

In the days of Moses God gave this commandment:

And **he that blasphemes the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death**, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemes the name of *the LORD*, shall be put to death. (Leviticus 24:16)

The basic point about blasphemies is that they are offensive, that they are an insult. So with blasphemies against "the name of the Eternal" we are speaking about offensive and insulting statements about God. And **insulting God warrants the death penalty**. Blasphemies against God's name break the third commandment (Exodus 20:7).

The Apostle Paul explained his own background as follows:

Who was before a **blasphemer**, and a persecutor, and injurious: but **I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief**. (1 Timothy 1:13)

The root words for the Greek word "blasphemia" literally mean: **to hurt the reputation of someone**.

Paul's statement shows that blasphemies and other sins of commission are "sins not unto death" when they are committed ignorantly by people in the world (i.e. the expression "in unbelief" represents people in the world). And with sins committed "ignorantly" the human mind is not acting out of a deliberate hostility towards God.

However, blasphemies that are committed knowingly, and thus clearly not done ignorantly, will not obtain mercy; they are "sins unto death". Blasphemies committed "knowingly" are those committed by anyone who is or has been a part of God's Church.

Now consider this:

Blasphemies against God are anything that is said or done to hurt the reputation of either God the Father or of Jesus Christ.

So when people accept a teaching that "**diminishes the reputation of Jesus Christ**", then they become guilty of blasphemy! That has very regrettably become very common in our recent history, that some people find ways to diminish Christ's reputation.

We need to understand that accepting such teachings which diminish Christ's reputation are in fact "sins unto death". And once accepted by someone, the person will never reject those blasphemous teachings. The damage done will be irreversible.

Since the time of Mr. Armstrong's death there have been a number of movements amongst God's people that are very specifically aimed at "diminishing the reputation of Jesus Christ". And we need to recognize those movements for what they are ... assaults on Jesus Christ's reputation.

This applies, for example, to heretical teachings that claim that Jesus Christ was supposedly created by God the Father, teachings that deny that Jesus Christ has always existed with God the Father, teachings that claim that originally Jesus Christ was only one of the angels.



**If you accept any of these derogatory teachings about Jesus Christ, then you will be guilty of blasphemies that will not be forgiven, blasphemies that are "sins unto death". BE WARNED!**

And when people offend and insult Jesus Christ with such defamatory teachings, then God the Father and Jesus Christ most assuredly do not want God's people to pray for such people! Jesus Christ would say to you:

**"why on earth are you praying for people who are knowingly insulting Me?** Don't you have any kind of understanding at all? How many different ways do I have to tell you, that I will not forgive people who deliberately insult Me?

As Jesus Christ said:

Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but **the blasphemy against the holy spirit shall not be forgiven unto men.** (Matthew 12:31)

The holy spirit is the power that belongs to both God the Father and to Jesus Christ. And "blasphemy against the holy spirit" is speaking disparagingly and offensively about the power of God.

In the context of Matthew 12:31 the Pharisees had attributed the power of Jesus Christ to Satan (see Matthew 12:24). That type of insult "shall not be forgiven unto men", neither in this world (age), neither in the world (age) to come (see verse 32). The Pharisees in that situation were not speaking ignorantly, because they understood that Jesus Christ was performing miracles by the power of God. They had no excuse for making such contemptuous and highly offensive statements.

And we should obviously not be praying for people who deliberately insult Jesus Christ. We need to be very careful to never entertain any belief or teaching that diminishes the power and the position of Jesus Christ.

## **WHO NOT TO PRAY FOR**

Let's try to summarize the situation.

1) **We really should not be praying for people who are guilty of "sins unto death".** We also refer to this category of sins as "unpardonable sins". The Apostle John's statement "I do not say that he shall pray for it" means that John expected God's people to be able to identify when "sins unto death" were being committed by someone in the Church, or else we wouldn't even know who we should not pray for. With his statement John was clearly thinking of people who attend God's Church, and he was not making this statement in reference to people "in the world".

2) Jesus Christ's statement that "the blasphemy against the holy spirit shall not be forgiven ... neither in this age, neither in the age to come" (see Matthew 12:31-32) means that **we also should not pray for people who have a vile attitude towards God and towards Jesus Christ.** And in this case it makes no difference whether such people are in the Church or whether they are just a part of "the world". If people in any way malign any manifestations of God's power (e.g. attribute God's healing power to Satan, etc.), then we certainly should not pray for such people.

3) The Apostle Paul said "if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that which you have received, let him be accursed" (see Galatians 1:9). Paul's statement "let him be accursed" means: let him die in the lake of fire. So the principle of Paul's statement applies in the sense that **we also should**

**not pray for people who actively teach heresies to God's people.** By "actively teach" I mean that by devious and hypocritical reasoning they deliberately seek to discredit true teachings, to lead unsuspecting church members away from God's truth, thereby making them, in the words of Jesus Christ, "twofold more the child of the lake of fire than themselves" (see Matthew 23:15 for this principle).

The reason we should not pray for these three categories of people is because **we need to recognize God's judgment on the people in these three categories.** We need to see how God feels about the people in these three categories. Prayers for people are aimed at influencing God in some way, regarding how God will deal with people. And regarding people who are in these three categories it is not for us to attempt to change God's mind. If we did pray for people in these three categories, God would say to us: how long will you mourn for the people in these three categories, seeing I have rejected them? (the principle of 1 Samuel 16:1).

Then there is one more category.

4) And **in general terms we should not be praying for the world,** for which approach Jesus Christ Himself set us an example.

The reason we should not pray for the world is because God is not dealing with the world in general at this time. They will have their time in the second resurrection. And to a large degree, and for good reason, God does not get involved in the lives of people in the world.

We need to understand that **there is always a cost attached to God intervening in anyone's life.** That cost is in the form of accountability. The more God intervenes in beneficial ways in the lives of people, the more accountable to God they become. The more that is given to people, the more will be required of them.

When Jesus Christ healed a crippled man "in the world", then afterwards Jesus Christ told him: **sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you** (see John 5:14). God's divine intervention had made the man more accountable to God. So people in the world are less accountable to God when God does not intervene in their lives, and their chances of being in the second resurrection are greater. But if God were to intervene in helpful ways in the lives of people in the world, some of them might end up too accountable to God to still be eligible for the second resurrection.

That would force the issue for them to be either in the first or in the third resurrection ... not a very desirable option for the majority of the people in the world. They are more likely to be "on stony ground" or "amongst thorns" than those people that God is hand-picking. And therefore they will be far better off not becoming too accountable to God in this life.

This is the principle of John 9:41.

Jesus said unto them, If you were blind, you should have no sin: but now you say, We see; **therefore your sin remains.** (John 9:41)

We should understand that it is really **for their own good** that Jesus Christ said "I pray not for the world". So likewise, we should not ask God to get involved in the lives of people in the world, because if God were to do so, that might put those people in the world into a more-accountable-to-God situation than those people are in fact able to handle.

So let's just leave the world in God's hands.

However, all of us in God's Church have relatives in the world. They may be parents or children or

grandchildren or uncles or nephews or cousins, etc., but they are clearly "in the world". And we are concerned for them. And so in many situations we would like to see God help them in some way. And so we pray for those relatives "in the world".

Is that wrong? No, not at all.

But when we do pray for such relatives "in the world", we need to recognize some limitations. Let me give you an example.

### **ASKING GOD TO HEAL ADULTS "IN THE WORLD"**

On a number of occasions during the past 40 years I have been asked by a church member to anoint his adult son or daughter who is not in the Church, or perhaps one of his parents who are also not in the Church.

When that happens, I usually respond as follows:

**"I will certainly pray privately** for your adult son (or daughter or father or mother, etc.) who is not in God's Church. But I cannot really anoint your son. And if I did anoint him, it wouldn't really do any more good than just praying privately for him. Here's why."

And then I explain the following things.

1) There's nothing magical about anointing. The actual act of anointing is probably the less important part of the whole procedure of seeking God's help with a health problem.

2) We cannot ask God to do what we want done; the things we can ask God to do must always be "according to God's will". We cannot impose our will on God.

3) Now we know that God hears our prayers because of two things:

A) Because we keep God's commandments.

B) Because we do things pleasing in God's sight (1 John 3:22).

4) For people who are **not** keeping God's laws, and who are **not** striving to do those things that are pleasing in God's sight, I cannot possibly have faith that God will hear my prayer. Nowhere in the Bible do I have a promise that God will hear the prayers for such people.

5) I cannot just make up my mind that I will "have faith in something". I can only have faith in those things that God has promised to do. So for adults who do not attempt to submit their lives to God I cannot possibly have faith that God will heal them. Therefore I cannot possibly pray "the prayer of faith" (James 5:15) for adults in the world.

6) Anointing is somewhat like taking the Passover. It follows that adults who are not eligible to take the Passover, are, generally speaking, also not eligible to be anointed when they are sick. Asking for anointing is a request not unlike partaking of the Passover. Both cases are asking for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

But it is always wrong to attempt to apply the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to unrepentant adults. Can you

understand that? Can you understand that we cannot apply "the broken body of Jesus Christ" to an unrepentant adult?

7) At the start I said that the actual anointing is the less important part of the whole procedure. You may have wondered why I said that? I said that because the most important part in this situation is that two very specific individuals have real faith: the minister who is doing the anointing, and the person who is being anointed. Either one of those two individuals lacking real faith could be a serious obstacle to God healing the sick person. (I said "could" because this may not apply in all cases.)

Real faith by these two individuals is the most important part of the whole procedure. Compared to real faith by these two individuals the actual anointing procedure is far less important. That procedure may in fact be modified in certain situations.

Thus, if a minister is not able to go in person to a sick church member to actually anoint that sick person, then the minister may anoint a piece of cloth and send that to the sick person. This modified procedure is based on the example set by the Apostle Paul. And we freely accept that anointing a piece of cloth is just as valid as anointing the sick individual in person. We know that it makes no difference whether the person is actually anointed, or whether the person only receives an "anointed cloth" from the minister.

But with an anointed cloth the original procedure, as presented by the Apostle James, has in fact been modified. That is what I mean by saying that the actual procedure is less important. It can be modified to accommodate difficult circumstances. But the need for faith by the two individuals is a requirement in both situations.

Anyway, I explain to people why I don't anoint adults who are not a part of God's Church.

**Now if any minister says that he has "real faith" that God will heal some unconverted adult, then that minister is deceived!**

There is no way that anyone can have real faith in something God has not promised to do. We can never impose our will on God.

These are some of the things I have explained to people in the past. And on some occasions the members were offended because I refused to anoint their adult son or daughter or parent, in spite of me saying that I would pray privately for the sick person. If people take offence in this type of situation, then that is their problem.

People who do not accept the above explanations obviously don't understand anointing correctly. They are just looking for a psychological tranquilizer, like the "I'm praying for you, brother" statement people throw around.

The lesson in this situation is this:

Privately praying for someone in the world with a need, be that need a health problem or be it any other problem, is going to achieve just as much as if that worldly individual was anointed (in the case of a health problem). But praying for such individuals can never be done in faith.

So how or why do we pray for such people in the world?

For such worldly people we pray wishful prayers. **We pray in hope, not in faith.** While we cannot pray in faith, we can certainly pray in hope! We can hope that God will have mercy on the sick relative of a church member, or that God will help that worldly person with other problems. That's the way David

prayed for Bathsheba's first child, conceived in adultery. **David didn't have faith** that God would spare the child's life. But David hoped God would have mercy and heal the child. As David said:

And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, **Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me**, that the child may live? (2 Samuel 12:22)

That is exactly the way we should pray for healing for adults who are in the world: who can tell whether God will be gracious and heal this person? Notice that David did not appeal to any promise of God to heal. David didn't appeal to Exodus 15:26 ("I am the God that heals you"). No, David was fasting and praying with a wishful and hopeful attitude.

We need to understand that anointing an unrepentant adult would not somehow increase the chances of God healing that unrepentant adult, when compared to simply praying privately for that unrepentant adult relative. And we need to understand that we cannot really apply Christ's sacrifice to unrepentant adults.

So here is a key if we do decide to pray for people in the world, typically relatives or close friends. **We can hope that God will heal or help such people!** We can appeal to God's mercy and compassion, but we cannot appeal to faith. We cannot appeal to God's promises to heal, or to God's promises of protection. We can pray for such people like David prayed for Bathsheba's first child; we can pray hoping that God will help the worldly people for whom we are praying.

But we cannot pray for people in the world with the same conviction and faith with which we can pray for God's people, individuals who have unconditionally submitted their lives to God.

Frank W Nelte