

## 1 John 5:16-21 | Sunday May 10, 2026

We can come to know something through experience. For instance, I have come to know through experience that my dog will chew any dog bed that I give her. This has become valuable information and changed what I give her to lay on. Then we can know something as a fact. This has tremendous value as well, because these truths do not change even when our circumstances or emotions do. As we have been studying 1 John 5, we have seen that we can know as a fact we are saved because of the testimony God has given concerning Jesus. We can know as a fact that when we believe in Jesus, we have eternal life. We can also know as a fact that God hears our prayers and answers them when we pray according to His will. These truths are important to anchor to when our emotions are trying to tell us something different. As John finishes his letter, he mentions 3 more truths we can know as a fact and one truth we can know experientially. The very last “know” in verse 20 is to know by experience. This is an entirely different word in the Greek than the rest of the “knows” that mean to know as a fact.

### 1 John 5:13-21 ESV

(13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **that you may know that you have eternal life.**

(14) And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us.

(15) And if **we know that He hears us** in whatever we ask, **we know that we have the requests** that we have asked of Him.

(16) If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

(17) All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

(18) **We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning,** but He who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

(19) **We know that we are from God,** and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

(20) **And we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

(21) Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

John desires for us to have stability in our relationship with Christ. He wants us to know these truths and live based on them. As He brought up prayer, John then applies these truths to how we are to pray for each other. Since we know God hears our prayers and answers when we pray according to His will, **it is important to know how to pray for one another when we see a believer in sin.**

This section is famously debated and can be hard to understand. It caused one commentator to say, *“The present writer confesses his utter inability to understand this verse [it] is an enigma to him, and he will not attempt to offer even a suggestion as to its possible interpretation.”* One principle that is really important when we study the Bible is **to let clear truth help guide us in understanding the confusing passages.** Using scripture like this can help create guardrails so that we stay on the path of truth. **The main point of the passage is to pray for a believer**

**who is sinning.** We cannot lose sight of this. It is the clarification that there are sins that lead to death and some sins that do not that makes it easy to lose the main point. Yet we have a clear truth we need to keep balanced with.

### **Romans 5:12 ESV**

(12) Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and **so death spread to all men because all sinned—**

### **Romans 6:23 ESV**

(23) **For the wages of sin is death,** but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The payment for sin is death. Death has spread to all humanity because we are all sinners. This death involves our spiritual separation from God and also the physical death that plagues these bodies. **We are dead in our sin nature and in a body that is in the process of dying.** This is why the great news of Jesus giving us life is so incredible. Even though the wages of all sin is death, **all sins are not the same.** Sin definitely has different earthly consequences. The Old Testament law is very clear about the different punishments that sin can receive.

### **Numbers 18:21-22 ESV**

(21) “To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting,  
(22) so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, **lest they bear sin and die.**

If Israel came into the tabernacle the wrong way, then God would punish them quickly by killing them. We saw this in Leviticus 10 with the immediate deaths of **Nadab and Abihu.** When verse 22 was translated into Greek, they used the same phrase as in 1 John 5. This passage refers to sins that cause immediate death.

### **1 John 5:16-17 Young’s Literal Translation**

(16) If any one may see his brother **sinning a sin not unto death,** he shall ask, and He shall give to him life to those sinning not unto death; **there is sin to death,** not concerning it do I speak that he may beseech;  
(17) **all unrighteousness is sin,** and there **is sin not unto death.**

All sin is unrighteousness. John wants to be clear that He is not minimizing sin in any way. **Yet not all sin incurs this immediate judgment of physical death.** Some do not think this passage is about physical life and physical death. It is true that John has spent so much of the book describing how to walk in eternal life. Yet, in this passage He does not use the word eternal. Also if the death described meant a break of fellowship, then it would be hard to explain what sin did not lead to a break of fellowship. This idea would violate 1 John 1:5-6, which teaches that to have fellowship with God, we must be in the light without darkness. **John is making the distinction between sins that lead to immediate physical death and sins that do not.** God will discipline a believer with physical death in response to their sin.

### **1 Corinthians 11:29-30 ESV**

(29) For anyone who eats and drinks **without discerning the body** eats and drinks judgment on himself.

(30) That is why many of you **are weak and ill, and some have died.**

The Corinthians were taking the Lord's Supper in a flippant, careless manner. It was not that they had some unconfessed sin they forgot about, **but they were actively sinning in how they took the Lord's Supper.** They had made it into a giant party, with drinking. One table had plenty and then made fun of those who didn't have anything. God held these believers accountable. Some were weak and sick, as a discipline. Others had serious ailments, and some had even died over this. **Not every sickness or illness is a result of discipline.** Paul's thorn in the flesh is a great example of this. Yet, it is clear that some illnesses and even death are the result of God disciplining His children. **Ananias** and his wife **Sapphira** are another example of committing a sin unto death. They went from standing in front of Peter lying to dying and then giving an account of their lie in front of God.

We are not told to pray about this kind of sin. **"I do not say that one should pray for that."** This also means that we are not to try and identify them. **No sin list is given.** We are not to be the judge of this; only God knows the difference. **We are told enough to know a sin unto death exists, and that is all we need to know.** I also want to encourage you not to worry that you might have committed a sin like this. First, you are alive. Second, if you are concerned about a certain sin, ask yourself, have you confessed it? If you have, then **trust in the promise of 1 John 1:9.** If you haven't, then confess your sin. Being concerned shows a softheartedness. A sin unto death involves a hard heart that does not care what God says. **This passage is not how to identify a sin unto death but how to pray when we see a believer in sin.**

#### **1 John 5:16 ESV**

(16) **If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death.** There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

This is about seeing a brother, a fellow believer in sin. I was amazed at some commentators trying to say that a brother was not a believer. Just because it is a hard passage, we cannot twist words. We are called as believers to be concerned about our own obedience to God, and out of love we are to show this same concern for our brother and sister in Christ. **The most loving thing you can do for a fellow believer is to be concerned for their spiritual growth and help them in it.** We are not to be **judgmentally** hunting for sins in others' lives. Yet when we see sin, we are to pray hard for them.

#### **Colossians 4:12-13 ESV**

(12) Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, **always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.**

(13) For I bear him witness that **he has worked hard for you** and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Epaphras worked hard for the Colossians in prayer. **He was engaging in a spiritual battle, struggling on their behalf.** His main prayer was that they would grow and mature in God's will. He deeply desired their spiritual growth, and His prayers proved it. These prayers are so important because **God will give life to those we are praying for.** This does not mean eternal life, but He will discipline them and guide them back to life that is found in Him.

### Proverbs 10:27 ESV

(27) **The fear of the LORD prolongs life**, but the years of the wicked will be short.

### Proverbs 11:19 NAS95

(19) He who is steadfast in righteousness *will attain* to life, **And he who pursues evil will bring about his own death.**

These proverbs are pointing out the **practical** life blessings that are found walking with God. Living based on God's commandments keeps us from so much heartache, disease, and suffering. This is the life that the sinning brother is missing out on and God promises to give as we pray. One of the best prayers we can have for a believer who is in sin **is for God to work on their heart and lovingly discipline them as He needs to draw them back to Him.**

### Hebrews 12:5-6 ESV

(5) And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him.

(6) **For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives."**

(7) It is for discipline that you have to endure. **God is treating you as sons.** For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

God loves His children and is willing to discipline them when needed. He values the eternal in our lives. This is how we are to pray for each other. We are to see sin as a serious issue and pray for each other's growth.

### James 5:19-20 ESV

(19) My brothers, **if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,**

(20) let him know that **whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death** and will cover a multitude of sins.

We do not have the ability to save anyone's soul from hell; only the blood of Jesus can do that. **If we pray for our fellow believer, speak truth to them, and help bring them back from their sinful wandering, we are saving them from the consequences of their sin** and the death it brings. Praying for each other in this way is one of the most loving things we can do for each other. It also emphasizes the new nature each believer has.

### 1 John 5:18 NAS95

(18) **We know that no one who is born of God sins;** but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one **does not touch him.**

Some translations add words like keep on sinning, or make a practice of sinning yet this adds a lot that is not there and is a poor translation. **"Sins" is a present active indicative.** It is a simple statement. Such as **Kyle plays guitar.** I am not implying that He is constantly playing guitar at all times, but that He can play guitar or is currently playing guitar; the statement could mean either. In the same way, the new nature we are given the moment we are born again does not sin. We saw this same truth earlier in the letter 1 John 3:6. Our new inner man that is born of God does not have the capacity to sin. This means that we are kept in Jesus, and Satan cannot **lay hold of us or cling to us.** A believer cannot be demon-possessed, and no evil force can undo what Jesus has

done for us.

**It is so comforting to know that this world and any failure a believer might have in it cannot touch our core reality as being a child of God.**

We cannot let Satan use our sin and failures to discourage us into committing more sins. After each sin we are called to confess and walk in the light. We are to know that **our position before God never changed**. We were covered in Jesus' righteousness the entire time. Our fellowship changed, **but who we truly are as a child of God did not.**

#### **1 John 5:19-20 ESV**

(19) **We know that we are from God**, and the whole world **lies** in the power of the evil one.

(20) And **we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ. **He is the true God and eternal life.**

We can know as a fact that we are from God even as the entire world lies reclining and relaxed with the evil one. The world is not resisting Satan at all. All believers at one time were in this same lost state. Yet we can know as a fact that Jesus, the Son of God, has come. **He gave us understanding, the capacity for thought and reason, and the ability to comprehend Him.**

#### **Ephesians 4:17-18 ESV**

(17) Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the **futility of their minds.**

**(18) They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God** because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.

The world is darkened and alienated from the life of God. Yet as believers through Jesus, we have been given understanding. **We have life in Him.**

#### **1 John 5:20 ESV**

(20) And we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ. **He is the true God and eternal life.**

There is so much we can anchor into and know about Jesus **as a fact. These great truths lead us to know Him experientially, the God who is truth.** We can have a personal and vibrant walk with Jesus today. We can walk in His eternal life, in our new nature today, through Jesus. We are not darkened like the world. We can walk with Him, the true God who is eternal life!

#### **1 John 5:21 ESV**

(21) Little children, **keep yourselves from idols.**

"Keep" means to set up a watchtower and have guards protecting against. We are to put guards in our lives and not turn to any idol. An idol is anything we live for and value instead of walking in the eternal life found in Jesus.