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Difficult Scriptures

I. Scripture: I John 5:16

II. How This Verse Is Misused By Some

Some say this verse proves there are some sins one can commit and not incur the penalty of eternal death.

III. True Explanation

- A. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23) -- there are no exceptions. God does not categorize sin, but Hebrews 10:26-27 shows that it is a willful sin that brings "fiery indignation" -- eternal death. Of course, any sin can be forgiven if it is repented of -- if it is "confessed" (I John 1:9), and any sin can lead to eternal death if it is allowed to continue in the Christian's life.
- B. A sin "not unto death," then, is one that does not involve a willful violation of God's will.
- C. If any of us sees a brother who is striving to obey God "sin a sin which is not unto death" -- sin out of ignorance or weakness -- we ought to ask God to help the brother recognize his error and repent of it. When we do so God will "give him life" -- God will hear our prayers for him. This is the kind of concern we ought to have for one another. This is one way that we can bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
- D. On the other hand, a brother has sinned "unto death" if he has willfully turned from God's way. This, by the way, would not include all disfellowshipped people -- only those who have willfully rejected God's way so that they could not be brought again to repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Obviously, this is difficult to determine. In fact, it is probably because of the extreme difficulty of discerning when this is the case that John says, "I do not say he shall pray for it" rather than "He shall not pray about it." His statement allows for our natural desire to hope the person has not gone too far -- to hope that he will repent -- and does not prohibit prayer, even in such a case.

We would all probably rather err on the side of praying than not praying. Hence John says our prayer may be futile, but does not say it is a sin to pray even for a seemingly hopeless case, as long as we don't know for sure it is hopeless.