

1 John 5:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

Analysis

All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. John clarifies that while he's discussed sin leading to death, all unrighteousness qualifies as sin. "All unrighteousness is sin" (pasa adikia hamartia estin)—adikia (ἀδικία) means unrighteousness, injustice, or wrongdoing. Any violation of God's righteous standards constitutes sin. There are no innocent wrongs or acceptable unrighteousness. This guards against minimizing sin or creating categories of acceptable wrongs.

This statement prevents misunderstanding verse 16. The distinction between sin unto death and sin not unto death doesn't imply some sins aren't really sins or don't matter. All unrighteousness is sin, all sin is serious, and all sin grieves God and requires Christ's atoning blood. However, not all sin results in the temporal judgment of physical death. God's discipline varies in severity based on the sin's nature and the sinner's heart.

"And there is a sin not unto death" (kai estin hamartia ou pros thanaton) reassures believers. While some sin leads to death (v. 16), not all sin does. Christians struggle with sin (1:8), but this doesn't mean every sin results in death. God's discipline is measured and purposeful—chastening for growth (Hebrews 12:5-11), not always ultimate judgment. This balance guards against both presumption (treating sin lightly) and despair (assuming every failure brings death). We should take all sin seriously while trusting God's grace and measured discipline.

Historical Context

The distinction between mortal and venial sins developed in medieval Catholic theology—mortal sins killed grace requiring penance, venial sins were minor requiring less serious response. The Reformation rejected this categorization, insisting all sin is serious and all sin is covered by Christ's blood. John's teaching differs from medieval categories—he's not ranking sins by inherent severity but distinguishing God's temporal discipline (some sins lead to physical death, others don't).

Reformed theology maintains that all sins are equally violations of God's law and equally require Christ's atonement, yet acknowledges that sins differ in consequences and God's discipline. Some sins have more severe earthly consequences and invite harsher divine discipline, including possible death, but all are forgiven through Christ. This prevents both legalistic categorization of sins and antinomian dismissal of sin's seriousness.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does understanding that 'all unrighteousness is sin' prevent you from minimizing certain wrongs as acceptable or minor?
2. What's the difference between recognizing that all sin is serious and fearing that every sin will result in God's judgment of death?
3. How should you respond to your own sin given that it's all serious (requiring confession and repentance) but not all leads to death (God's discipline is measured)?

Interlinear Text

πᾶσα	ἀδικία	ἁμαρτία	ἔστιν	καὶ	ἔστιν	ἁμαρτία	οὐ
All	unrighteousness	a sin	is	and	is	a sin	not
G3956	G93	G266	G2076	G2532	G2076	G266	G3756
πρὸς	θάνατον						
unto	death						
G4314	G2288						

Additional Cross-References

1 John 3:4 (Sin): Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.

James 1:15 (Sin): Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

1 John 5:16 (Sin): 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.

Isaiah 1:18 (Sin): Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

1 John 2:1 (Righteousness): My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:

Deuteronomy 12:32 (Parallel theme): What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.