

## SESSION TEN

# Sin Unto Death

1 John 5:13-21

## PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** Participants arrive at the sentence this study is named for: "I write this to you... that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13), the Knowing thread's resolution and the letter's own purpose statement. Then they discover that Scripture itself distinguishes mortal from non-mortal sin (5:16-17), learn what the Church built on that distinction, and receive the letter's final line as a lifelong assignment: keep yourselves from idols.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Mortal and venial sin. The Catechism grounds the distinction in tonight's verses by name (CCC 1854): sin that kills charity in the heart versus sin that wounds it, with confession as the mortal wound's appointed remedy, and intercession as the family's daily work for its strugglers.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight the study says its own name, and the ceremony deserves planning. Since Session One the group has tracked the Knowing thread, thirty-plus occurrences of "we know" and "you know," with the promise that John would one day state in a single sentence why he wrote. Have them bring Take-Home 1; open with the memory of the first night; then let someone read 5:13 aloud: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." The study's title has been the letter's purpose statement all along. Set it beside the Gospel's purpose statement from the same pen: "these are written that you may believe" (John 20:31). The Gospel was written to produce faith; the letter was written to give believers *knowledge* of the life they possess. One author, two documents, two verbs: believe, then know.

Handle the assurance carefully, because 5:13 is the verse Protestant friends quote for absolute assurance, and it deserves better than a nervous Catholic dodge. John really does intend believers to *know* they have eternal life, present tense, and Catholic teaching agrees: the life is real, the possession is real, the knowledge is real. What the letter has spent five chapters defining is the shape of that knowledge: present-tense and moral, knowing by walking (2:3-6), by loving (3:14), by abiding (4:13), never a laminated card issued once regardless of subsequent walking. Trent's careful line from Session Three still holds, no absolute certitude of final perseverance without special revelation, but confident, joyful, tested knowledge of present possession: that is what John writes to give. Catholics who live in chronic

salvation-anxiety are refusing the very gift 5:13 was written to deliver, and where the anxiety is scrupulosity rather than choice, the remedy is pastoral care and Session Six's medicine, not self-reproach.

Verses 14-15 ground confidence in prayer "according to his will," and then verse 16 puts that confidence to work on the hardest case: a brother seen sinning. Read the RSV2CE closely, because its translation choice is the night's discovery: "If any one sees his brother committing what is not a *mortal* sin, he will ask, and God will give him life... There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal" (5:16-17). The Greek is *pros thanaton*, "unto death." Scripture itself, in the apostle of love, distinguishes degrees of sin: all wrongdoing is sin, and not all sin is deadly. The Catechism grounds the mortal/venial distinction in these exact verses (CCC 1854), and the distinction was never an invention to let Catholics off lightly; it is pastoral triage, present already in the Torah's difference between unwitting sin (which sacrifice covered) and high-handed sin (Numbers 15:27-31), and in David's own prayer distinguishing hidden faults from presumptuous sins (Psalm 19:12-13), tonight's live discoveries.

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What is the "sin unto death" in John's context? Be honest that John does not define it, and the best contextual reading points at the letter's whole crisis: the secessionists' deliberate, settled repudiation of the Son, apostasy with eyes open, kin to the blasphemy against the Spirit (Matthew 12:31) and the warnings of Hebrews 6 and 10. The Church's mature doctrine names the general anatomy: mortal sin requires grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent (CCC 1857), and it kills charity in the soul, which is why its remedy is not merely private sorrow but the sacrament of Reconciliation (Session Two's ground, now bearing its full weight). Venial sin wounds and weakens; mortal sin kills; the vocabulary is from tonight's text.

The delicate clause: "I do not say that one is to pray for that." Note precisely what John does and does not say: he commands intercession for the non-deadly case and declines to command it for the deadly one; he does not forbid it, and the Church has never stopped praying for any living soul, since while a person lives, repentance remains possible and God's arm is not shortened. The likely sense: John will not promise the automatic "God will give him life" outcome where a person has set themselves, with open eyes, against the Giver; life cannot be delivered over a will barricaded against it. Even then: Monica prayed for many years, well over a decade, for Augustine. Tell that story if the group needs it.

Verses 18-20 sound the letter's final chord: three great "we know" statements, the thread's closing cadence: we know that any one born of God does not sin, and that "He who was born of God," Christ himself, keeps him, so the evil one does not touch him; we know we are of God while the whole world lies in the power of the evil one; we know the Son of God has come and given us understanding. Sober about the world, serene about the children: John's realism and John's assurance in one breath. And then the abrupt, unsentimental last line of the epistle: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21). After five chapters of light, love, and life, the final warning is against counterfeits of the "true God and eternal life" just named (5:20). Every generation's idols dress differently; the group should leave able to name their own.

## **OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT**

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**Numbers 15:27-31.** The Torah's own two categories: sin done unwittingly, for which sacrifice atones, and sin "with a high hand," defiant, reviling the LORD, for which the person is cut off. Degrees of sin are not a medieval invention; they are Sinai's pastoral law. Tonight's key live discovery.

**Psalms 19:12-13.** David prays the same distinction from the inside: "Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" Hidden faults cleared; presumptuous sins prevented from dominion: the seed of the venial/mortal distinction, already in Israel's own prayer book.

**1 Samuel 2:25 and Exodus 32:30-32.** Eli's dark question, "if a man sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?", and Moses' answer in action: climbing the mountain after the golden calf to stand between a high-handed people and destruction, offering himself. Intercession for grave sinners is the vocation of God's friends, and it prefigures the one Mediator.

## VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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**St. Thomas Aquinas** *Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 88*

Thomas gives the distinction its anatomy: mortal sin turns the soul away from its last end, God himself, destroying charity the way death destroys life, and so is irreparable by anything within us, requiring God's healing action; venial sin is a disorder in the soul's steps toward the end without abandoning the destination, and Thomas insists it does not destroy or even diminish charity, though it slows charity's fervor and disposes the soul toward worse. The names are not degrees of divine annoyance; they describe what each sin actually does to the life of grace in us, which is exactly the letter's vocabulary: life, and death. (The language of venial sin "offending and wounding" charity is the Catechism's: CCC 1855.)

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Alphonsus Liguori** *Prayer: The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection*

Alphonsus, Doctor of moral theology and of prayer, compressed a lifetime of pastoral care into one maxim: he who prays is certainly saved; he who does not pray is certainly damned. He meant tonight's confidence taken literally: prayer according to God's will is the ordinary channel of the grace of perseverance, and so intercession for a sinning brother is never decoration. It is the family's actual work, with actual effect: God will give him life.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Francis de Sales** *Introduction to the Devout Life, Part I*

De Sales presses where comfortable souls go soft: it is not enough to renounce mortal sin; the devout soul must also break its *affection* for venial sin, the fond attachment that keeps small disorders as pets. Venial sin does not kill the soul, he teaches, but cherished venial sin weakens it, dulls its taste for God, and holds the door ajar for worse. The distinction of 5:16-17 is real, and it was never permission.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

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**CCC 1854** grounds tonight's doctrine in tonight's text by name: sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity, and the distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, cites 1 John 5:16-17, became part of the Church's tradition.

**CCC 1855-1857** gives the anatomy: mortal sin destroys charity by grave violation of God's law, turning man away from God, and requires three conditions together: grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent; venial sin wounds charity while leaving it alive.

**CCC 2634-2636** describes intercession as prayer's most Christlike form: asking on behalf of another, even for those who do us harm, participating in the prayer of the one Mediator, the very confidence 5:14-16 commands us to spend on sinning brothers.

## THREAD WATCH

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**The Knowing thread resolves tonight: full ceremony.** Take-Home 1 sheets on the table, the first night remembered, then 5:13 read aloud. The study's title is the letter's purpose statement; let the group feel that the whole architecture was built toward this sentence. Pair it with John 20:31: the Gospel to believe, the letter to know.

**One thread remains.** The Abiding and Antichrist thread, planted in Session Four and developed in Session Seven, resolves next week in a letter most of the group has never read: 2 John, thirteen verses long. Tell them exactly that much and nothing more; the brevity is part of next week's charm.

**Guard the pastoral floor.** Tonight names mortal sin plainly, and someone at the table is carrying one. The session's trajectory must land on the remedy, confession (Session Two's sacrament, now at full weight), and on Monica's long years of prayer, never on a diagnosis without a door. Watch faces at Build 5 and follow up privately where needed.

## SESSION GOALS

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### 1.

Resolve the Knowing thread with ceremony: 5:13 as the letter's purpose and the study's name, paired with John 20:31.

### 2.

Teach Catholic assurance from the text: real, present-tense, tested knowledge of possession, against both presumption and chronic salvation-anxiety.

### 3.

Discover the mortal/venial distinction in Scripture itself: 5:16-17 in the RSV2CE's own words, with Numbers 15 and Psalm 19 as its Old Testament roots, and CCC 1854-1857 as its mature form.

4.

Commission intercessors and land the last line: name this generation's idols and keep ourselves from them.

## TIME NOTE

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75 to 90 minutes. The 5:13 ceremony deserves ten unhurried minutes at the top. If time runs short, compress Build 7 and cut the Dig Deeper. Protect Build 4, the Scripture-itself discovery, and Build 6, the intercession commissioning.

## PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Opening Prayer:

*Father, you did not write to make us guess. You wrote that we may know. Tonight, resolve what you planted in us months ago: the knowledge that we have eternal life in your Son. Make us sure without being smug, watchful without being afraid, and merciful intercessors for every brother in the far country. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

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1.

Take-Home 1 is on the table. Look at your two sealed guesses from night one, both long since opened. What do you remember about who you were when you wrote them?

2.

What is something in your life you moved from *believing* to *knowing*, and what happened in between?

## BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

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1.

The ceremony first. On night one, you were told John uses "we know" more than thirty times and that one day he would state, in a single sentence, why he wrote this letter, and that we would guard that sentence until it arrived. It has arrived. Someone read 1 John 5:13 aloud, slowly. Then look at the cover of your study guide. What just happened?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

"I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, *that you may know* that you have eternal life." The letter's purpose statement, and the study's name: the title has been the answer key on the cover since the first night, exactly as the other seals were. Every "we know" the group underlined for ten

sessions was this sentence being built.

Now set it beside the same author's other purpose statement, written for his Gospel: "these are written that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Two documents, two verbs, one pen: the Gospel written to produce faith, the letter written to give believers knowledge of the life faith possesses. First believe, then know. This study has been the letter's own program run on this group.

## 2.

Now handle the verse with precision, because your Protestant friends love it and quote it for absolute, once-settled assurance. What kind of knowing has the letter itself spent five chapters defining? Gather the evidence: 2:3, 3:14, 4:13. And what should a Catholic say 5:13 commands, against *both* presumption and chronic salvation-anxiety?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

The letter defines its own verb: we know that we know him "if we keep his commandments" (2:3); we know we have passed from death to life "because we love the brethren" (3:14); we know we abide in him "because he has given us of his own Spirit" (4:13). John's knowing is present-tense and moral, knowledge by walking, loving, abiding, the possession of a living relationship, verified the way health is verified, continuously, not the filing of a certificate verified once.

So a Catholic says both things loudly. Against presumption: the knowledge is of *present* possession while abiding; Trent's sober line stands, no absolute certitude of final perseverance without special revelation, because love can still be abandoned (Session Three's ground). And against scrupulous anxiety: John *commands* this knowledge. "That you may know" is not a Protestant verse Catholics must survive; it is an apostolic purpose Catholics should let succeed in them. The believer walking in the light, confessing sins, loving the brethren, and receiving the sacraments is meant to know, calmly and joyfully, that eternal life is in her hands now. Chronic salvation-panic is not humility; it is the very condition 5:13 was written to heal, and its medicine was given in Session Six: God is greater than our hearts.

## 3.

Read 5:14-15, confidence in prayer "according to his will," and then 5:16 puts the confidence to work on the hardest case there is: "if any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life." Before the categories, notice the promise. What does John say intercession actually *does*?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

It obtains life. Not "it makes the intercessor feel involved": "he will ask, and God will *give him life*." John assigns to a praying brother a real causal role in a sinning brother's restoration, prayer as the family's working instrument, not its decoration. The communion of saints is a supply line.

This is the confidence of 5:14 pointed at its proper target: praying "according to his will" is easiest when Scripture has stated the will, and God "desires all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). St. Alphonsus built his whole pastoral theology here: prayer is the great means, the ordinary channel of persevering grace, which makes intercession for strugglers the most consequential thing most Christians will do this week.

Every person at this table has someone; before the night ends, they will be named before God.

#### 4.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now the discovery. Read 5:16-17 in our translation, slowly, and someone name the two categories the RSV2CE prints in black and white. Then two readers: Numbers 15:27-31 and Psalm 19:12-13. Is the distinction of degrees of sin a Catholic invention, or older than that?

##### ANSWER · share after the discussion

The text itself: "what is not a *mortal* sin... There is sin which is mortal... All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal." The Greek is *pros thanaton*, sin "unto death." Scripture, in the apostle of love, distinguishes deadly from non-deadly sin, and the Catechism grounds the mortal/venial distinction in these exact verses, by citation (CCC 1854). This is one of those evenings where a lifelong Catholic vocabulary turns out to have been sitting in the Bible's last pages all along.

And it is older than John. The Torah distinguished unwitting sin, which sacrifice covered, from sin "with a high hand," defiant and reviling, which cut a person off (Numbers 15:27-31). David prayed the same anatomy from inside: "Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me" (Psalm 19:12-13). Hidden faults cleared, presumptuous sins denied dominion: Israel always knew that all wrongdoing is sin and not all sin is the same wound. The Church's mortal/venial doctrine is Sinai's triage, matured. These texts foreshadow that sins differ in gravity; the precise anatomy of grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent is the Church's mature formulation (CCC 1857), not something read directly off Numbers or the Psalter.

#### 5.

Give the mature doctrine its anatomy, because vagueness here helps no one. What three conditions must meet for a sin to be mortal, what does mortal sin actually *do* that venial sin does not, and what is the appointed remedy? Bring Session Two back into the room.

##### ANSWER · share after the discussion

Three conditions, all together (CCC 1857): grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent. Absent any one, the sin is not mortal, which is why the Church refuses both laxity (nothing is ever that serious) and scrupulosity's terror (everything is). And the names describe effects, not divine moods, as St. Thomas taught: mortal sin turns the soul from its last end and kills charity in it, the way death kills life; venial sin disorders the steps without abandoning the destination, and the Catechism adds that it wounds charity without killing it (CCC 1855). Life and death: the letter's own vocabulary, now with a diagnosis chart.

The remedy: for venial sin, the daily economy of 1:9, contrition, prayer, the Eucharist itself. For mortal sin, the sacrament Session Two grounded in this very letter: confession, where 1:9's *homologeō* meets John 20:23's authority, and what was dead is raised. And St. Francis de Sales adds the flank guard: the devout soul must also break its *affection* for venial sins, the cherished small disorders kept as pets, because loved venial sin dulls the taste for God and props the door for worse. The distinction is triage, never permission.

## 6.

LIVE DISCOVERY. The delicate clause: "There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that" (5:16). Read it like a lawyer: what exactly does John decline to say, what does he *not* say, and what has the Church done with hard cases ever since? Someone find Exodus 32:30-32 for the pattern.

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

John declines to attach the automatic promise, "ask and God will give him life," to the deadly case; he does not forbid praying for it. The likely sense: where a person has set themselves against the Giver with open eyes, the letter's secessionists in their settled apostasy being the case in view, life cannot be promised for delivery over a barricaded will. John does not define the sin unto death; honesty says so, and its nearest kin are the blasphemy against the Spirit (Matthew 12:31) and Hebrews' warnings: sin that refuses the remedy itself.

And the Church's practice: she has never stopped praying for any living soul, because while breath remains, repentance remains possible. The pattern is ancient: after the golden calf, the highest-handed sin in the wilderness, Moses climbed the mountain to intercede anyway, offering himself: "But now, if you will forgive their sin, and if not, blot me, I pray, out of your book" (Exodus 32:32). Eli asked, "if a man sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?" (1 Samuel 2:25), and the Gospel's answer is the one Mediator, into whose intercession ours is grafted. And when the case feels hopeless, tell them about Monica: years upon years of tears for a son in high-handed rebellion, and the son became St. Augustine. Nobody at this table gets to declare a living person a lost cause.

### DIG DEEPER · The three last knowings

Verses 18-20 close the letter's argument with a final triple chord of the Knowing thread: *we know that any one born of God does not sin, but "He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him"; note the verse's hidden gift: the second "born of God" is the Son, and the believer is kept safe not by his own grip but by Christ's; we know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one; we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true.* Read the three aloud and notice their temperament: utterly sober about the world (in the evil one's power, no varnish) and utterly serene about the children (untouched, of God, understanding given). Christian realism is exactly this pairing; optimism about the world and anxiety about the children are both mistakes, and John makes neither.

## 7.

The letter's last line, and it is abrupt on purpose: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21). After five chapters of light, love, and life, why end *here*? Look at 5:20's last words for the setup. Then do the work: what are this generation's actual idols, and, harder, what are yours?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

The setup: 5:20 has just named Jesus Christ "the true God and eternal life," and the final sentence guards the claim: everything else offered as god or as life is counterfeit, so keep yourselves from the counterfeits. An idol is not primarily a statue; it is anything trusted for what only the true God gives: identity, security, meaning, life. John ends abruptly because the danger never ends; the last word of the epistle of love is vigilance.

Then the naming, and make it personal, not cultural commentary: the phone and its liturgy of hours; the body and its metrics; the career and its promised justification; the relationship asked to be salvation; the politics worn as a soul; even the curated religious self, an idol with a rosary. The test from Session Three still works: what, if lost tonight, would make life feel over? That is the altar to watch. And the remedy is not white-knuckled avoidance but the whole letter: walk in the light, confess, abide, love the brethren, receive the witnesses, and the idols starve. He who has the Son has life; the idols only ever had our attention.

## SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

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### 1.

Name your brother or sister "committing what is not a mortal sin," or worse, whom 5:16 assigns to your prayers. Will you take them on, by name, daily, Monica-style, for as long as it takes?

### 2.

The honest 5:21 question: what in your life currently functions as an idol, trusted for identity, security, or life, and what is one concrete step of keeping yourself from it this month?

## LIVE IT THIS WEEK

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### 1.

Begin a Monica list this week: the names you will intercede for daily, starting with the one from tonight's Send. Keep it in your Bible at 1 John 5:16 and pray it every day without exception.

### 2.

If anything mortal stands unconfessed in your own life, go to confession this week; that is not a suggestion appended to the study, it is the study. If nothing does, make a devotional confession anyway and name one cherished venial attachment to break.

### 3.

Memorize 1 John 5:13 and pray it each morning as an act of obedient assurance: written that I may know. Let the day begin from possession, not from audition.

### Closing Prayer:

*Father, you wrote that we may know, and tonight we know: eternal life, in your Son, in our hands. Make us confident without presumption and vigilant without fear. Take the names we carry tonight, the brothers and sisters in the far country, and give them life. And keep us, little children, from idols, for Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life. Amen.*

**Scripture Memory Verse:** "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13, RSV2CE)

## PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Ten, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

### PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text; 5:13 read ceremonially at Build 1

**John 20:31**

Build 1: the Gospel's purpose statement, paired

**1 John 2:3; 3:14; 4:13**

Build 2: the letter defines its own knowing

**Numbers 15:27-31**

Live discovery, Build 4: unwitting versus high-handed sin

**Psalms 19:12-13**

Live discovery, Build 4: hidden faults, presumptuous sins

**Exodus 32:30-32**

Live discovery, Build 6: Moses intercedes after the calf

**1 Samuel 2:25; Matthew 12:31; 1 Timothy 2:4**

Leader background, Builds 3 and 6

**CCC 1854-1857; 2634-2636**

Catechism Connection