

The Christian Life Series—Book 5

Spirituality Versus Carnality

I Corinthians 3:1

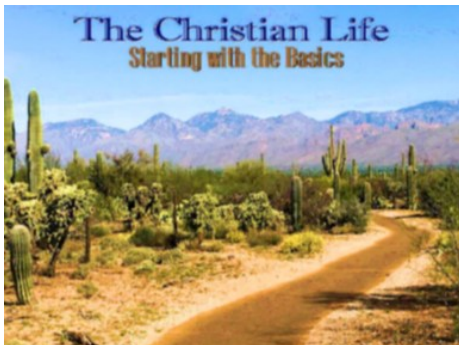


**Brothers,
I could not address you as spiritual
but as worldly—
mere infants in Christ.**

Alaska Christian Ministry to Seafarers

Foreword

This is the fifth book in our series of lessons taken from the streaming Bible Study, entitled *The Christian Life—Starting with the Basics*. By virtue of the title, you have probably assumed this will be closely related to the Basics Book 4—*The Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, and it is. It is also closely related to our study of the Christian's position in Christ and fellowship with God.



In fact, I trust you will find this book to be a great blessing. In it you will begin to see the various pieces of truth that we have been studying start to come together into a wonderful picture of what God has provided so that we would live a life pleasing to Him!

In His grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Kevin Redig". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kevin Redig, pastor-teacher

All Scripture quotes have been taken from either the NKJV (1992 edition) or the NIV (1984 edition).

Spirituality Versus Carnality

We have found it to be helpful to compare and contrast two related ideas, and this lesson will continue that practice. We will compare and contrast *spirituality* against *carnality*. By the time we are done, we should understand God's call upon the Christian to live as one who is spiritual while at the same time recognizing the ever-present threat of becoming carnal or, as some translations render the term, *fleshly*.

That is not our only goal for this study. By this point, we have quite a long list of terms and concepts: our position in Christ versus our experience, fellowship versus family, the filling of the Spirit in contrast to His indwelling, and many more. As we accumulate Biblical concepts, it becomes very important that we put them into a coherent framework of understanding—each part in perfect harmony with the others. In short, we want to build an integrated framework of truth in our souls so that we might face every trial and every circumstance with Divine Viewpoint. By that I mean that we meet every encounter from God's perspective rather than that of man. I trust this study will help us make progress toward both of these goals.

Now the lessons in this book are going to challenge our thinking. We are going to see some things in the text of Scripture that we don't like—and those things are going to apply to Christians. As the saying goes, "Christians aren't perfect—just forgiven." As a pastor, I might say it this way: unless Christians are growing by means of taking in the Word of God and walking in the *filling of the Spirit*, it is possible for them to do anything unbelievers might do. Am I saying that is acceptable or that we should just let it slide? Absolutely not! In fact, the pages of Scripture teach

this unpleasant reality for the sole purpose of warning us ahead of time that we might avoid such a thing at any cost.

The truth is, we will never avoid what we are going to label *carnality* by denying it is a possibility. Instead, we are going to be prepared to avoid carnality in our lives by understanding the following:

- It is a very real possibility, as the record of Scripture makes clear.
- By way of application, every Christian needs to recognize the risk and prepare accordingly.
- Preparation includes learning how to recover should we become carnal, and what God has, in grace, provided that we might avoid carnality altogether.

At this point you may be thinking, “Where does this idea of a Christian living like a non-Christian come from?” Why the Word of God, of course. As always, we are just going to take God’s revelation to us as it comes. When it describes danger, we need to run in the opposite direction! When it commands, we need to listen. When it points us to God’s answer, we need to pay very close attention. So let’s continue by turning to the pages of Scripture.

Carnal Christians Are Real

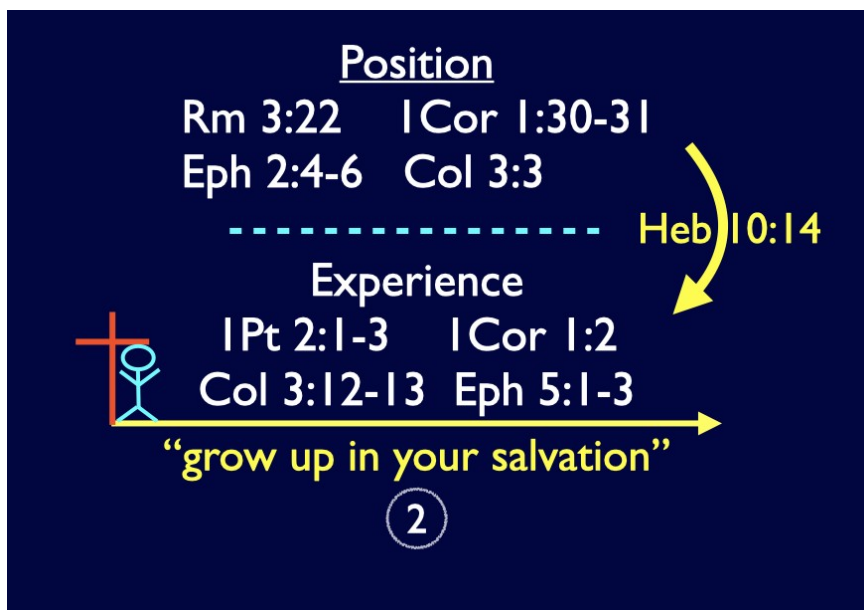
There is such a thing as a *carnal Christian*! The proof is everywhere in Scripture, but particularly notable in the Book of I Corinthians, starting with Chapter 3. Consider the verse I selected for the cover of this book:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.

I Corinthians 3:1

In Chapter one, Paul has already declared that those in the church in Corinth are righteous, sanctified, and redeemed. (I Corinthians 1:30) By the time we arrive at Chapter 3,

First, consider what we have already learned about our *Position Versus Experience*. Paul's letter to the Corinthian church actually follows the pattern of the diagram that we have used to depict position and experience. In Chapter 1, Paul is quick to remind the Corinthian believers of their privileged position in Christ. They are going to need to stand firmly upon their position because Paul is about to start chewing them out for their failures with respect to the Christian experience. That's what carnality is—a failed Christian experience.



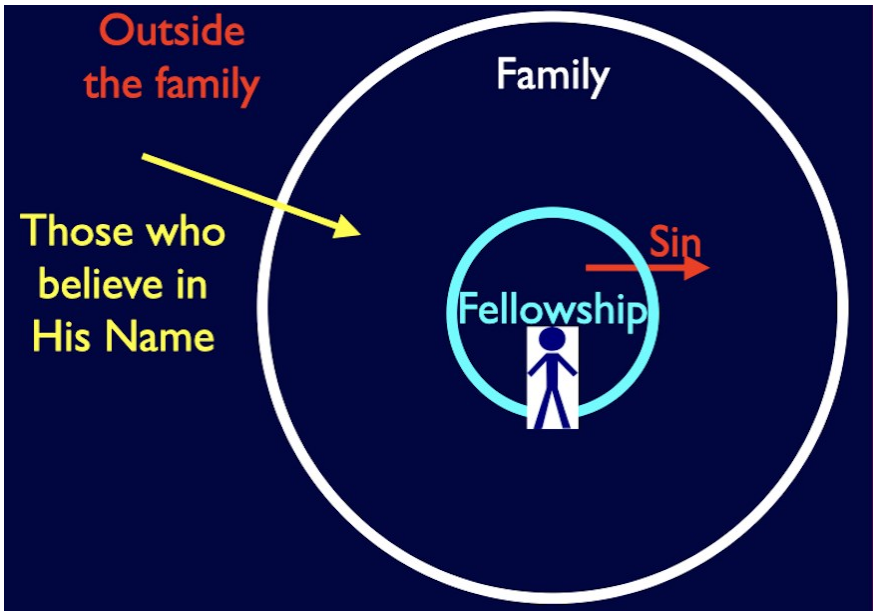
And while we are reviewing, let's recall our understanding of *Family Versus Fellowship*, as illustrated in the diagram on the next page. Paul has called the church in Corinth *babes in Christ*, so they are most certainly part of the family of God. On the other hand, their carnality indicates that they are out of fellowship with God. Although they are still indwelt with the Holy Spirit, they are most definitely not filled with the Spirit. What has caused this disastrous situation? As the result of our previous understanding, we would have

to say that the cause is *sin*! If we are right, we would expect Paul to do just what he does—document a variety of sin in the Book of I Corinthians.

This Is What Carnality Looks Like

I showed you in I Corinthians Chapter 3 that Paul is clearly addressing the believers of the Corinthian church as carnal:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal. . . I Corinthians 3:1



And then he moves right on to document one of their problems. You decide whether or not he is describing a sin:

. . .for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? I Corinthians 3:3

He lists items that are clearly sin, and then, in effect, says they are acting just like the unbelievers. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

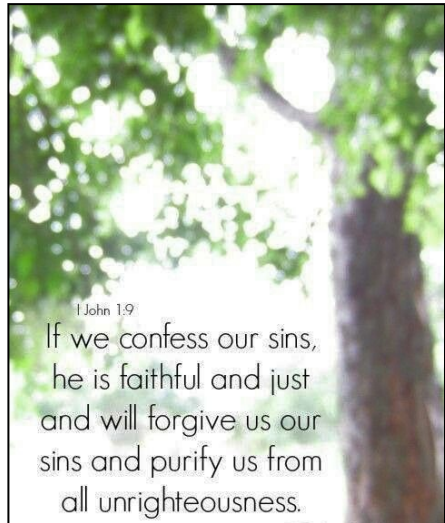
If you continue to study the book of I Corinthians, here are problems within the church that Paul tried to address:

- Chapter 5—incest
- Chapter 6—lawsuits between believers
- Chapter 6—sexual immorality
- Chapter 8—sins against the weaker brother
- Chapter 10—idolatry
- Chapter 11—drunkenness at the communion table
- Chapter 14—improper use of spiritual gifts and division

There are many who would dismiss such behavior as impossible for a *true* Christian. Yet, here is Paul doing his best to get the attention of the church in Corinth by pointing out their sins that they might rid themselves of such behavior. He does not once even remotely suggest that they need to get saved. He does, however, most certainly say that they need to change!

It is quite clear, that unless a Christian is growing by means of taking in the Word of God and walking in the filling of the Spirit—two subjects we have already covered—he or she can pretty

much end up participating in any sin that an unbeliever would. Look again at the above list inside the church. This is a terrible situation with many negative consequences. Thank God He has warned us, and thank God that He has provided everything we need so that we can avoid the above situations. That's why we are studying them!



This Is What Happens When a Christian Becomes Carnal

Just to be clear, when we use the term *carnal*, we are talking about the Christian who, at the moment, is failing to respond to God's call to *walk worthy* of who and what he or she is in Christ. A lost individual lives constantly *in the flesh*, and so the term ceases to be useful for the unsaved. But, as we have learned, a saved person is to *walk by the Spirit*, and carnality is a term descriptive of something having gone wrong in that walk.

To develop the concept further, the Christian has very clear marching orders when it comes to the challenges of the Christian Life:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

Galatians 5:16-17

Note the way that the Scripture makes clear the conflict that every one of us is going to face. It is the battle between the sin nature within and the Holy Spirit within. This battle can be won by the Holy Spirit, but it is going to continue until we are in our glorified bodies and finally free of the sin nature. So at this point, it should be very clear what is meant by the term carnality.

In summary, carnality refers to those times in the life of a believer when the sinful nature is dominating the soul—getting its ways and satisfying its desires—in whatever form those might occur. It goes without saying, that the walk of the Spirit has temporarily gone by the wayside whenever our sin nature is ahead in the battle with the Spirit.

Carnality Can Become Advanced

For the believer, all carnality is bad! Of course, carnality in the life of the believer should be addressed immediately—and not surprisingly it begins with the confession of sin. But what happens if the believer disregards the need to confess? What happens if carnality is allowed to continue unchecked for a period of time? This is a very hazardous situation, spiritually speaking, for the extent of carnality can get progressively worse in the life of a believer.

We have learned that the Holy Spirit can be grieved as the result of sin. (Ephesians 4:30) Let me suggest that prolonged sin can *quench* the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the believer. (I Thessalonian 5:19) It is also possible to become hardened to the Word of God and the voice of the indwelling Holy Spirit through prolonged gratification of the flesh.

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

Ephesians 4:17-19

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by
whom you were sealed for the day of
redemption.

Ephesians 4:30



This passage in Ephesians is very instructive with respect to the dangers of prolonged carnality. Our hearts can become hardened and our lives spiral down into increasing carnality. Have you ever heard someone exclaim about an individual, "So and so was so committed to his faith and now I am not even sure if he is saved?"

Unfortunately, this all too often happens with children or grandchildren when they head off to college and/or get caught up in the world. Of course, the question of whether or not they ever placed their faith in the person and work of Christ is paramount. There are many who have, and then just allowed the flesh to dominate their lives over an extended period of time. If we do, we will look and act pretty much like an unbeliever. Perish the thought that we would ever let sin get that kind of hold in our lives.

Never Underestimate the World

Never underestimate the pervasive and deadly nature of that which comes from the world!

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

I John 2:15-17

Did you note how the scripture sums up that which comes from the world? The world seeks to stimulate cravings, visual lust, and pride—and the world is very good at it. How does the world know to go after those things which are part of the flesh? Because behind the world is Satan, and he knows exactly how to stimulate the sin nature.

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

I John 5:19

If we are not on guard with respect to what comes from the world, we will be walking in carnality rather than by the Spirit before we know it.

Learn From an Example



Let's look at an eye-opening example of carnality in the life of a believer. David is a great Biblical character! As the writer of so many of the Psalms we see his spiritual sensitivity. Within the Biblical narrative he is also a courageous warrior, and, most importantly, here is God's summation of the man:

"I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will."

Acts 13:22

I wish that were the complete story, but II Samuel Chapters 11-12 record a segment of David's life that is a shocker. You will have to read it on your own, but, after recording David's adultery, deceit, and act of murder, we get this damning summation from God:

But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.

II Samuel 11:27

The text of II Samuel 11-12 reveals to us a picture of carnality that most would never believe could have been committed by David if it had not been recorded in Scripture. This godly man acts out of character, and then begins to pile one sin on top of another once he is out of fellowship.

Those who claim a truly saved individual cannot be carnal cannot reconcile such a position with Scripture. It is far, far better for us to realize that even a man as godly as David

can stumble into carnality when he is not watching his spiritual life closely. Two points of application:

- Even a man after God's own heart becomes unrecognizable once caught up in carnality!
- There is never a safe time to relax our spiritual guard. Abiding in Christ, keeping short accounts with respect to sin, and taking up our spiritual armor should all be daily maxims lest we allow the sin nature to dominate our lives.

That's Why the Bible Warns So Often

We have seen all we should need to see in order to realize that carnal Christians are both a real possibility and a condition to be assiduously avoided. Understanding the risk of carnality should also provide us with all the incentive we should need to confess sin as soon as we become aware of its occurrence, lest carnality get a grip on our lives as it did on David's. If a man after God's own heart could become tangled up in a web of sin, we certainly can as well.

Now you know the reason why so much of the New Testament is cautionary in tone. By that I mean New Testament scripture is constantly warning us to watch out for this pitfall and to be on guard against that danger. When the Scriptures start to warn about sinful behavior, many try to explain it all in terms of the unbeliever. This is to do a terrible disservice to believers, for we are the ones who have a life that can come under divine discipline and a witness for Christ that we can compromise.

The unbeliever is already dead in trespasses and sin, and that's why the guidance to the lost centers upon *belief in Christ* so that they might change eternal destinies. Once we become a child of God, then the message becomes one of *grow in the faith* and *be on your guard* lest as a child of God you end up living once again like an unbeliever! If we do, we should have a fearful expectation of discipline

coming from the hand of the Lord. I am quite certain I could never stand the heartache that came into David's life as the result of his sins. We should want to avoid the same in our lives at all cost.

Integrating Carnality with the Truths We Already Know

We need to take our newly-developed understanding of carnality, and relate it to the truths we have previously studied. For there is significant overlap.

Our Position In Christ

Let's start with our position in Christ and the experience that is meant to follow our achieving that position through faith. As you recall, our position is the term we used to describe our righteousness in Christ, our sanctification in Christ, and the way in which our very lives are identified with Christ in the heavenlies. Carnality in the life of a Christian does not impact our position in Christ in the least. We didn't do anything to earn or deserve our position, and we can't do anything to cause us to lose it either:

By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever, those who are being made holy. Hebrews 10:14

We have a perfect position—standing—in Christ, and carnality on our part cannot tarnish it. However, when it comes to our experience, that is another situation altogether. As we learned, God wants us to appropriate what He provides to bring our experience into alignment with our position. This is what progressive sanctification is all about. When we become carnal, we short circuit the whole process of our progressive sanctification. Growth stops, and our walk becomes unworthy of one with such an exalted position.

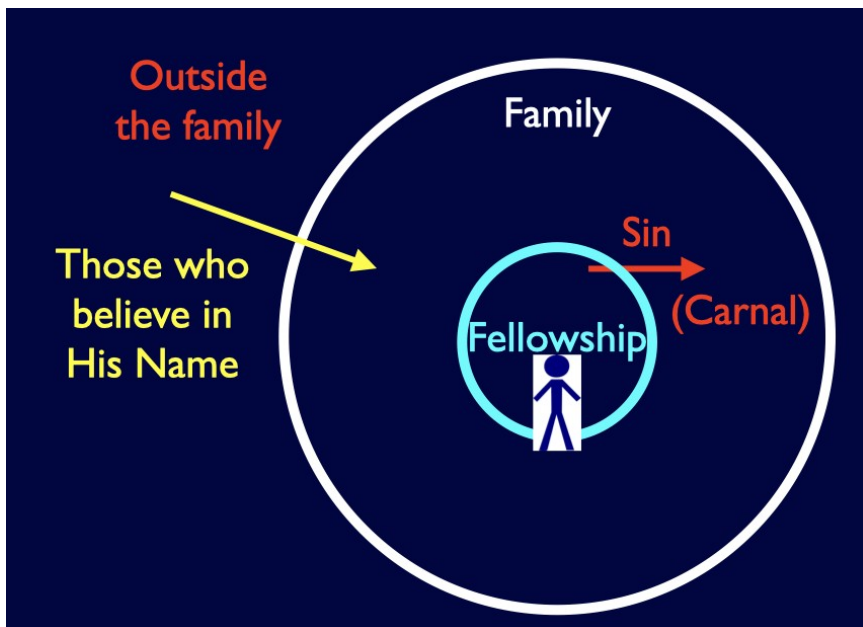
Furthermore, the carnal man or woman is living a life dominated by the desires of the flesh and therefore cannot

produce anything acceptable to God. Thankfully our position remains intact, but carnality in the life needs to be dealt with immediately, so that we can go back to *growing up* in our so-great salvation.

Family and Fellowship

Carnality must also be understood in the context of family and fellowship. As you recall, faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ brings us into the Family of God—a standing we can never lose. Furthermore, it also brings us into a personal relationship with God which He desires for us to pursue and maintain as fellowship with Him. However, sin breaks our fellowship as our holy God can have no fellowship with one walking in sin.

What this means for the subject at hand is as follows: We are carnal when we sin, which means carnality is simply the result of being out of fellowship as the result of sin. Of course, we would still be in the family of God, just as were



the carnal Corinthians. We will investigate this more thoroughly shortly, but in the same way that the means to recover our fellowship is through confession of sin, it most certainly stands to reason that this would be the means God has provided for us to recover from carnality.

The Indwelling and Filling of the Holy Spirit

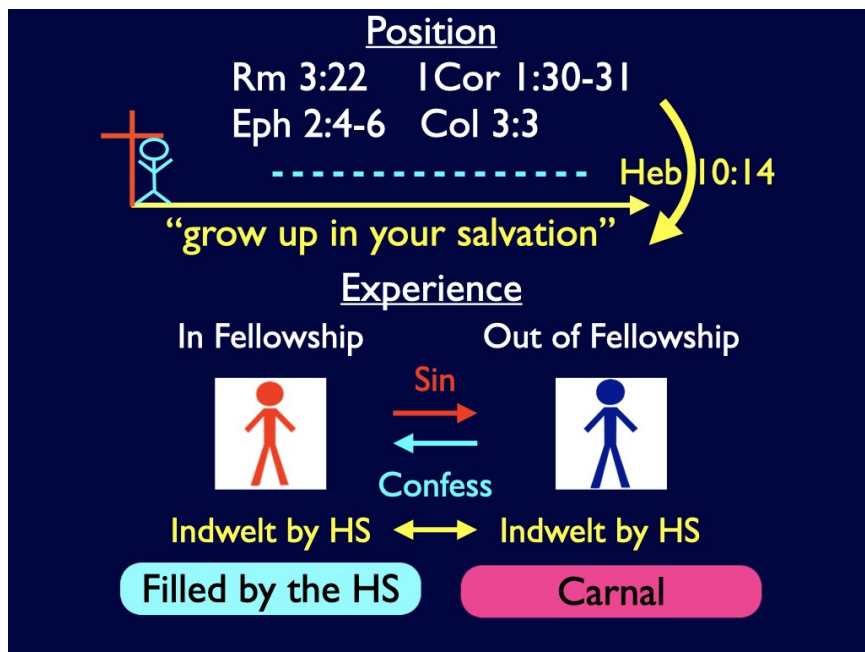
To relate carnality to the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit, let's start with our position in Christ. Once eternally saved, our position remains constant. While our position in Christ remains constant, the subject of carnality is related to our experience. When we walk in the light as our heavenly Father is in the light, we are in fellowship with God, and we are both indwelt and filled with the Holy Spirit. Sin causes us to lose the filling of the Spirit and breaks our fellowship with God. Thankfully, the indwelling of the Spirit remains, in part, to convict us of our need to confess sin. As we apply I John 1:9, God is:

. . .faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This results in our fellowship being restored and our regaining the filling of the Spirit. As a reminder, this is true for no other reason than:

. . .the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all (every) sin. I John 1:7

Where does the topic of carnality fit? One simple modification to our Position/Experience diagram tells the story. Sin results in a carnal life—one dominated by the flesh. As you can see, it corresponds to being out of fellowship and having lost the filling of the Spirit. Further, the same confession of sin that restores us to fellowship and allows us to once again be filled with the Spirit, also puts an end to our carnality and, instead, puts us back into the category of *he who is spiritual!*



Spirituality is the condition of the believer who is in fellowship and walking in the filling of the Holy Spirit. Carnality is the condition of the believer who is out of fellowship with God and either grieving or quenching the Spirit.

God's Check on Carnality

In God's grace, He has provided a check on carnality in the life of the believer. From God's perspective, and, of course, it's the only one that matters, the only acceptable action on the part of a carnal believer is repentance and confession of sin! By this, I refer to Biblical repentance, which at its core is *change of mind*. Like the Prodigal Son of Luke 15, something prompts the carnal Christian to come to his or her senses. It could be difficult circumstances, the Word of God, or a loving grandparent—but something brings that Christian to a change of mind. The pain caused to others may bring them up short, and, of course, a growing fear of pending discipline from the hand of God is a very good

reason to repent. To be sure, the Holy Spirit is also behind the scenes using all manner of people and circumstances to bring the carnal believer to the point of repentance! The result is that the sin that seemed so appealing is now clearly a disaster.

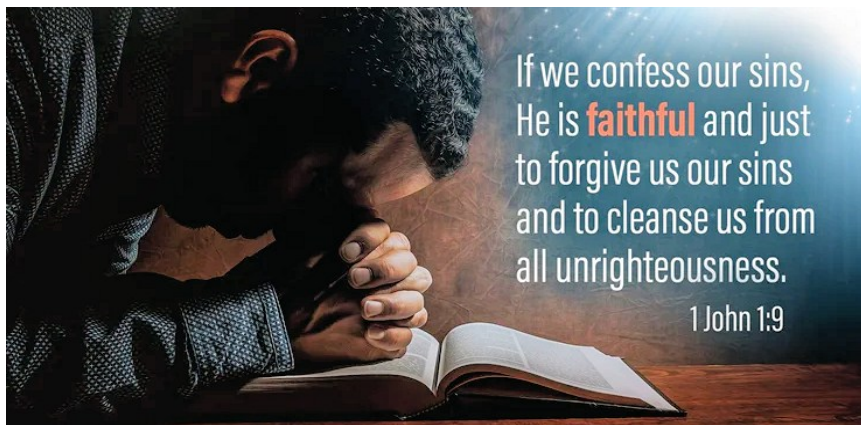
Understand that this decision to turn from something is only *half* of the necessary change of mind. The other half of repentance is to turn to God, and that's where confession comes in. Turning from sin to God requires us to address whatever sin may have accumulated in our lives while in carnality—that we may be restored to fellowship with God and *walk in the light as He is in the light!* We do this by confessing our sin—literally *to speak* the same thing about our thoughts, words, and behavior as God would. That is what it means to *confess* our sin and we need to do so to our heavenly Father.

That fulfills the first part of I John 1:9:

If we confess our sin. . .

If we do confess our sin, then the second part of the verse naturally follows:

. . .He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.



Do you realize what this verse means with respect to the topic at hand? It means the issue of carnality has been dealt with between us and the Lord. There may still be consequences on the human level, but God has dealt with the spiritual issue.

What This Means

When we turn to God and confess our sin, we are acting in faith regarding the sufficiency of the cross to cleanse us from every and all sin. You see, this is the only thing we can do—we can't make up for carnality! This is the only thing God wants from us—to see the work of His Son, the blood of Jesus, as the only adequate remedy for our failure, our carnality.

I am making a point of this, because it is harder to trust in the complete sufficiency of the cross than you might think it is, especially when we need it the most.

We can question whether God can really forgive us (again)! We can be overwhelmed with the extent of our sin. Just think about how David must have felt given the huge failure in his life! It comes down to this: What is going to loom larger in our thinking, our sin or the cross of Jesus Christ? It needs to be the sufficiency of all that our Savior accomplished for us on the cross. He declared, *Paid in full!* The Greek word in John 19:30, translated *It is Finished*, could equally well have been translated as *Paid in Full*.

Will we take Him at His Word? Further, we know the Father is satisfied with the work of His Son, for:

He raised Him (Jesus) from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Ephesians 1:20-21

The Concept of Spirituality

We have spent time looking at carnality but have not yet directly addressed the concept of spirituality. We laid the groundwork in a previous lesson when discussing what it means to be *filled with the Spirit* and to *walk by the Spirit*.

I trust that you have already seen that the condition of being carnal and being spiritual are mutually exclusive. If you are one, then you are not the other. You cannot be a little bit carnal and mostly spiritual! You become carnal when you sin and, at that point, your fellowship with God is broken—simply because:

God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

I John 1:5-6

As mentioned above, the only acceptable response on the part of a carnal believer is repentance and confession. Then, once restored to fellowship via confession, the goal is always the same: to perpetuate the filling of the Holy Spirit into a walk by the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to be spiritual, and it stands in great contrast to carnality.



**KEEP ON BEING FILLED WITH
THE SPIRIT - SING SONGS,
HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS
TO EACH OTHER; SING
TO THE LORD
AND MAKE MUSIC IN
YOUR HEART
TO HIM.**

...
Ephesians 5:18-19

So let me remind you:

To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be in a condition such that the Holy Spirit has an unhindered ability to influence the soul and empower the life.

So then, to walk (live) in the Spirit is to, moment-by-moment, maintain the filling of the Spirit, through the influence of both the indwelling Spirit and the indwelling Word of God, that the life of Christ might be manifest in us, as we navigate life's daily demands.

The Struggle is Real

The ongoing struggle between carnality and spirituality may seem abstract and theoretical. I assure you, it is desperately practical in nature. We all have to deal with sin far more often than we would like, and yet God's gracious provision of applying the finished work of the cross via confession allows us to quickly recover. We have already learned this in our discussion of fellowship, and that is not the reason I brought up the subject of carnality in this introductory series. Rather, I want you to have a healthy awareness—and fear—of how difficult it can be to recover from prolonged carnality.

If the sin nature dominates the life for an extended period of time, then the believer has a very difficult way forward. This difficulty is not because God's provision is anything other than totally sufficient, but because of what we have done to ourselves. Consider the following:

- Persistent sin causes us to literally build up spiritual scar tissue that renders us much less sensitive to all manner of spiritual things. Ephesians 4:19 says it this way:

Having lost all sensitivity they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more.

So even when we confess and regain fellowship—the desire for sin remains very strongly developed. It takes time walking in the Spirit for our lives to turn from carnal desires to spiritual, and that is hard for someone who has been away from the Lord for an extended period of time.

- After the *glamour* of sin, the *grind* of spiritual growth can be a real challenge. Time in studying the Word, prayer, meditation on Scripture, and just communing with the Lord can seem dull and tedious once we have spent a prolonged time apart from *sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to what He has to say*. (Luke 10:39)
- Any discipline we are under may make it hard for us to remember that we are *accepted in the Beloved* (Ephesians 1:6), and that God has truly forgiven us as He did the Prodigal Son. Further, the earthly consequences for our sin may bring many a trial into our lives which make spiritual growth much harder to pursue.

I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. Ephesians 4:17

The Scriptures Show Us The Way

The Ephesians verse is a warning to avoid carnality at all costs! No wonder the Scriptures encourage us to:

- Spend time daily in the Word:
Blessed is the man who listens to Me, watching daily at My doors. . . Proverbs 8:34
- Gather with the saints *as iron sharpens iron. . .* (Proverbs 27:17)
- Worship and *be still and know that I am God!* (Psalm 46:10)

- Fellowship because we are to *consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds . . .* (Hebrews 10:24)

All of these are the very food of spirituality and will keep us from straying into carnality or promote a quick return should we do so.

What We Have to Look Forward To

Don't forget what we have to look forward to in eternity—a new resurrection body, just like that of our Lord and Savior, a body suitable for eternal life. We can look forward with great anticipation to the fact that this new body will no longer have a nature to sin, and carnality will cease to be a possibility—ever! In the meantime:

The heart (self) is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Jeremiah 17:9

It doesn't need to be coddled or accommodated, it needs to be crucified—daily! (Romans 6:6) Only the manifestation of the life of Christ, as guided by the Word and Spirit of God, produces anything of value in God's sight.

I trust you can see how yet another topic fits together in perfect harmony in God's plan for His children. We have seen the blessing of our position in Christ and the call to have our experience match that position by means of the Spirit and the Word. Now we understand the potential a pitfall of carnality. It is clear that there is no autopilot in the Christian Life. But God has:

. . .provided everything we need for life and godliness. . .that we might escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires and participate in the Divine Nature. II Peter 1:3-4

May you find great encouragement in learning of His precious provision—one truth at a time!



Publications written and produced by

Vistoso Community Church

1200 E. Rancho Vistoso Blvd., Oro Valley, AZ 85755 ☎ 520 825-0652

Website: www.vistoso.org