

INTRO

What is the difference between gospel grace and religious activity? If we don't understand grace, we don't understand the gospel. How can Christians show grace and mercy to each other and to non-Christians? Jesus said people will know we are his disciples if we love one another. How can we do this? *Gospel Grace Versus Dead Religion* will help believers grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This material is divided into four parts:

- **First**, a story (“A Church for Carl”);
- **Second**, a study (focusing on the Bible and its teaching about grace and holiness);
- **Third**, some scenarios, case studies, of grace (applying Scripture to several situations: Getting a nose ring, smoking, adultery, gossiping, drinking alcohol, getting a tattoo, fornicating, gathers with the church only once a week, eating too much, and playing cards);
- **Fourth**, a brief conclusion.

May the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified in it as Christians in Vietnam live their faith.

PART 1: A STORY

A Church for Carl

Carl closed the door, the echo went throughout the office. His head hung down while he shook it slightly from side to side. He sighed. This was probably his last meeting with pastor Bob. He couldn't take it anymore.

Carl walked outside the church building, texting his friend Victor, also a member of the Singles group. "Pastor Bob still won't let me sing."

On more than one occasion Carl hoped to use his extraordinary talents in the church's Sunday morning choir. But pastor Bob wouldn't allow Carl to sing unless he came to more than just Sunday AM service. He'd need to be there on Sunday evening as a part of the Singles ministry.

Carl carried a heavy load in university and worked a few hours every week; on top of that he felt the attitude of many of the single adults within the church were less than gracious. He recalled a recent conversation with Bruce, a regular attender of the Singles group. "Carl, I never see you around on Sunday night. How come?" Bruce asked. Carl explained his busy schedule but Bruce's eyes conveyed that he couldn't accept such a flimsy excuse.

Others in the Singles group had suggested Carl quit his job to have more time for "God's work." When he talked with Bruce and others in the Singles ministry, the message always seemed to be that he wasn't doing enough for God. "Serve, serve, and then serve some more," seemed to be their motto.

Bob's wife, Kim, had told Carl, "You should read at least two chapters a day in the Bible, and pray for 30 minutes. That's what I do." Tommy the Singles minister said, "You really should make Christ a priority by coming to our midweek outreach where we go out to invite people to our church. The Lord needs us to do more." Upon hearing this, Carl had dropped his head and shame filled his heart. Maybe he wasn't very committed to the God of the Bible.

"Sorry to hear that pastor Bob won't let you sing," Victor texted back while Carl stood just outside the church building.

Carl recalled how Victor's older brother Paul, had recently run into a tough situation with pastor Bob. Unfortunately, Paul and his girlfriend slept together. Paul wasn't caught but went to pastor Bob to confess. He didn't know if his girlfriend was pregnant but he wanted pastor Bob to marry them. But Bob wouldn't hear of it. According to him, since they'd slept together they had to be married outside the church.

Carl hadn't known the Lord long but he felt the tone (the atmosphere) in the church congregation was more like the world than the body of Christ. Didn't Jesus welcome the weary to come to him? Why did the church seem like a place to gossip rather than a gospel-centered hospital where sick sinners are shown Christ? Why didn't it feel like a safe family? Instead it felt like a group of competing teams. Poor Mrs. Leslie seemed to work herself sick, volunteering her time while her service was never enough in the eyes of some church leaders.

Pastor Bob himself in his sermons demanded more devotion but rarely seemed to talk of what Christ accomplished for believers. People were constantly spurred on to do more, show up at more events and

join more programs. But rarely was anyone encouraged to work their regular job joyfully, being salt and light to those outside the building. The building and its crowd and the programs usually drove everything.

Carl wanted a healthy church but didn't know how or where to find it. So he prayed as he stood outside the building. "God, I'm so sad. I feel ashamed because I'm probably not doing enough for you. But I'm disappointed with our church, with your church, your people. What do I do, God? Do you have a solution?"

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During this time key members were growing tired and disgruntled. Families began leaving the church. Eventually pastor Bob's leadership was questioned. Because of his powerful position, he held on for a while but the congregation shrank. Eventually he was dismissed.

Pastor Peter was older and more mature than Bob. From the beginning of his ministry at Carl's church he made much of Christ and his finished work on the cross. Because of what Christ accomplished, Christians could rest, really rest, in the Lord. No one could do enough to add to what Jesus had done.

One of his sermons said, "So many of us say 'by grace through faith' as it applies to salvation, but then the other parts of our lives are lived as though the Christian life is 'by works through earning favor.'" When we focus on God and his Son and the Spirit we'd be able to exhibit the Lord's grace more, said pastor Peter. The fruit of the Spirit would be evident.

One key mark of our connection to Christ and focus on him would be our ability to forgive one another, Peter emphasized. In fact, witnessing to the lost was easy compared to forgiving one another. That was a major sign of how people would know we belong to Christ (*that we love one another*). This means forgiving one another and not gossiping. This means going out of our way to spend time with a Christian whom we'd rather never see again. It means being able to give mercy.

Carl couldn't believe it. God was beginning to answer his prayer. While it took years of Peter's preaching and example to combat the legalism and the harsh spirit that rallied around rules (man-made rules), these rules seemed to be fading with pastor Bob's memory. Some people even began to approach one another to ask for forgiveness, something unheard of before. Bruce and Tommy from the Singles ministry stopped pressuring members to do more and started encouraging them to look to Christ.

Pastor Peter was no lazy man though. While he focused on Christ's sufficiency and the Christian's need to rest in what Christ had done, he also showed in Scripture that growing holy (sanctification) in Christ was a constant walk and consistent battle. It didn't happen *passively*. While believers continue to live by grace through faith they *actively* do that with the Lord's help. Salvation was completely from God; he pursues sinners who would never turn to him, but growth in sanctification (holiness) was Christian effort based on the Lord's power. The Apostle Paul said, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13, NIV).

Pastor Peter considered theology and history important, realizing that Christians must know their Bible and their history, lest they stray into error.

Carl began to wake each morning with more of a sense of purpose in God's kingdom and with less guilt and shame. He was learning that whatever he needed to do that day (school, work, eating, helping another believer grow), he could do it to the Lord's glory whether at the church building or not.

He even grew bold among his university friends. "Larry, I want to tell you that while I'm still a man of many faults, the Lord has changed my attitude. Now, I want to *not* sin." Larry laughed at him, but Carl quietly prayed that God would open his heart. Pastor Peter had taught them that man doesn't open his heart to God. God must woo and open.

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Carl struggled though. As he learned to pray more sincerely and honestly, he saw his imperfections.

"Pastor Peter, I need to confess something," Carl said two years after Peter had started pastoring the church. Peter leaned forward, with eyes curious and caring. Peter loved each of his people like a father would. He himself was quick to admit his faults. And that's what made him such a great pastor. He was in touch with his sinning heart, and the sinning hearts of others.

"I looked at porn yesterday," Carl said, while dropping his head.

Pastor Peter didn't take it lightly but nonetheless loved Carl. He helped him look to the cross, to consider himself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Peter told him that he must not keep doing it; his heart, attitude, and character mattered to God. Peter helped him talk with a mature man in the church to stay in touch with Carl and to encourage and pray for him. Peter knew how to help his people help each other. He liked working with a group of elders and not trying to control everything himself. Pastor Bob had been a one-man show, always controlling. Peter knew how to give away his authority to help others serve.

Carl felt the shame lift and he confessed his sin to God, and to pastor Peter. He felt restored and blessed.

As the months moved on, Carl began to learn the ups and downs of the Christian life. Sometimes he woke sad, and other times happy. Life moved on at a boring pace most of the time, and Carl rarely felt anything but ordinary. But he felt loved and nurtured by his church. They had become a family of encouragers and repenters rather than critics. They weren't perfect but they were growing up in Christ. They served less out of duty and more from delight.

Carl was as busy as ever with school and work. He still only had time for corporate worship on Sunday mornings. But he smiled as he thought of the Lord's grace while he sang in the morning choir. Pastor Peter smiled, too, as he listened.¹

¹ We realize that sometimes legitimate reasons exist for a pastor, or elders, to keep a talented church member out of the public use of their gifts. Perhaps the leaders know this person is living in immorality or extremely immature for the new role. But too often leaders set arbitrary standards that aren't derived from Scripture. The Bible alone must become our guide.

PART 2: A STUDY

Here are a few key Bible passages, and other resources, to get started thinking graciously and biblically rather than harshly, or even too liberally. In other words, how can we glorify Christ in how we think about other Christians and in how we treat them? (*All uses of Scripture in English are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.*) But before we look at specific Bible verses, perhaps this chart can help readers process the two categories of gospel grace and dead religion.

	Gospel Grace	Dead Religion
Focus	God	Self
Attitude	Gratitude for the finished saving work of Christ for my sins & a reconciled relationship with God	Pride for being more righteous than others or hatred for others who seem more righteous than me
Motivation	Heart transformation	Improving outward behavior
Measurement of Success	Growing in trust for Jesus, fruit of the Spirit, genuine love for others, faithfulness to abide in His Word	Performance of personal activities, position or respect received
Reward	Lasting fruit, eternal significance to God's Kingdom	Temporary fruit, temporary results masquerading as proof of God's grace
Church culture produced	Caring for one another, talking through difficult issues, focus on attitude as well as actions, always going back to the Bible to set our standard of holiness, going to lost with gospel and making disciples	Judging one another wrongly, gossiping, merely focusing on outward performance, self-righteous attitude towards others, looking only to tradition or our preferences to set the standard for right and wrong, content with church activities

Too many people calling themselves “Christians” are concerned about their outward performance (behavior) without paying proper attention to their heart (their attitude, their way of thinking). Gospel grace causes us to look to Christ and see our need for him each day of our Christian life. We needed him for salvation, but also need him each moment until we see him in heaven. The dead religion lifestyle cares about how we perform and what mere humans think of us, rather than what the Lord thinks.

Here is what Scripture says our attitude needs to be:

Humbly accept one another

Matthew 5:7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Matthew 9:13 ““But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.””

John 13:35 “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Romans 12:10 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Romans 15:7 “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Philippians 2:3-4 “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Colossians 3:12 “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Understand your own sinfulness (Avoid being a constant critic)

Matthew 7:3 ““Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

Matthew 23:1-11 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant.”

Mark 7:7-8 ““They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

Don’t be like the older brother in Luke 15:11-32. [Please read this now.]

It’s all too easy to become like the Pharisee in the synagogue (Luke 18:9-14). [Please read this now.]

Romans 14:3-4 “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Colossians 2:23 “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

James 4:11-12 “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you-- who are you to judge your neighbor?”

If you are certain that you are a follower of Jesus, but discouraged after reading this section. Don’t lose heart. Confess your sins to him. Continue with him humbly knowing your faults and your need for Christ. Keep Hebrews 12:2 in mind, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” In other words, don’t look to yourself to repair yourself. Look to Christ who died to save you from yourself.

Grow in grace

Mark 12:30-31 “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Ephesians 4:15 “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

Philippians 1:6 “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Colossians 2:19 “He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.”

1 Thessalonians 3:12 “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”

2 Thessalonians 1:3 “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.”

1 Peter 2:2 “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation....”

2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

Mingle kindness with holiness

But aren't there rules to follow in the Bible? Yes, but the biblical answer for what we think of others and how we treat them is always concerned with both *holiness and kindness*. These two concepts are always rooted in God himself. He is kind and holy, thus his children are to possess these traits too. In other words, we want our view of grace to be wide enough to truly reflect God's kindness and narrow enough to highlight his divine holiness. Grace doesn't negate holiness. Matthew 18:15-20, and other passages, deal extensively with the type of discipline the church has for wayward unrepentant members. But the goal is always restoration of each other not condemnation. At the heart of it all is grace, God's grace to us and our grace extended to others. In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit is making us more like Jesus, who loves perfectly and hates sin perfectly. As we grow in grace, we love the Lord and we love others. We love truth and holiness (putting off sin and becoming more like Christ). We can't love others well on our own because people are hard to love. This is part of the reason we needed Christ to make us new on the inside.

Matthew 18:15-20. [Please read this now.]

1 Corinthians 10:23 “‘Everything is permissible’--but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible’--but not everything is constructive.”

Colossians 2:16 "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day."

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Gospel Grace Versus Dead Religion: Helping Vietnamese Churches Practice Grace without Abandoning Holiness (Ấn Điển của Phúc Âm và Tôn Giáo Chết) CCRA2

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1 Peter 1:16 ““for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.””

Titus 2:11-12 “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,”

Continue learning

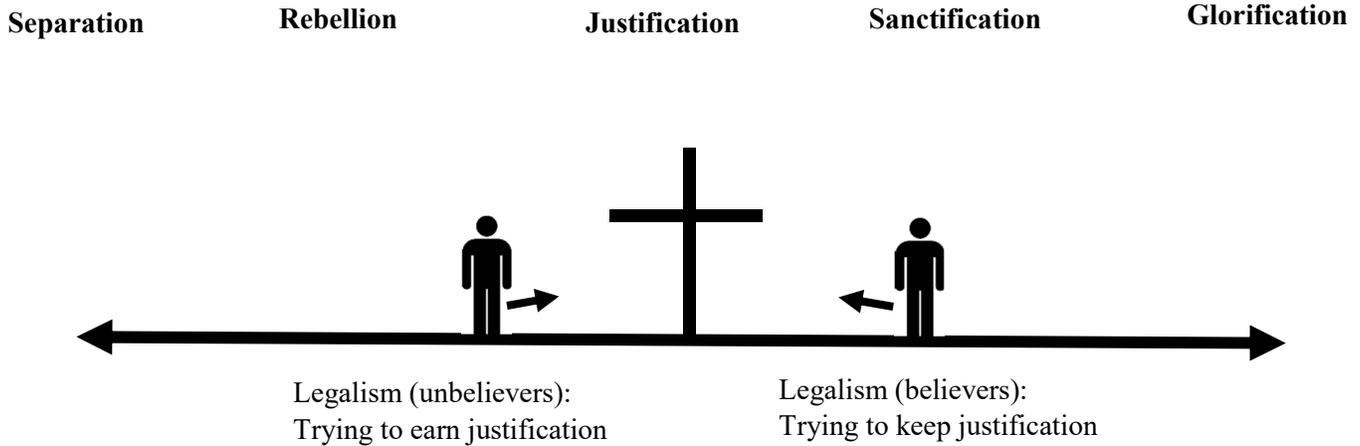
Who doesn't need to know more of the Bible? We all stand in need of more knowledge. And learning is as much about attitude as it is knowledge. We want to be humble learners. Below in Part 3, we will encounter several scenarios (case studies) to practice being gracious to each other and to nurture our wisdom of Scripture. Who doesn't need to know God better and grow wiser? One key aspect of biblical wisdom and knowledge is being a learner. Jesus came “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:77) and then Peter says that the Lord's “divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3). Thus, knowledge is important. In fact, the Apostle goes on to say, “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge...” (2 Peter 1:5). At one level, we already know enough to keep following our Lord, but then again, we all need to know more and *to know him more*. While merely learning isn't necessarily the same as knowing our Lord, we must know more truth to know our Lord better.

Few of us could excuse ourselves for sinning because we lack knowledge. But what we know affects what we become and how we act. It affects our attitude. To grow in holiness and dependence on Christ, we need to know some things. One author describes a godly woman wrestling with holiness and self-identify.

“Underneath her obedient life is a sense of helplessness. It has become part of her very nature...almost like breathing. Why? Because she is weak. She can feel her restless heart, her tendency to compare herself with others. She is shocked at how jealousy can well up in her. She notices how easily the world gets its hooks in her. In short, she distrusts herself. When she looks at other people, she sees the same struggles. The world, the flesh, and the devil are too much for her. The result? Her heart cries out to God in prayer. She needs Jesus. As we mature as Christians, we see more and more of our sinful natures, but at the same time we see more and more of Jesus. As we see our weaknesses more clearly, we begin to grasp our need for more grace.” (Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*, Kindle location 807-812)

The godly woman in this story had to learn some things about herself. Because she was a learner, a humble learner, she knew just how weak and sinful she was.

So, let's take a moment to get started more thoroughly with learning and knowing in order to love better. Here let's focus on a few concepts that are important for our learning and growing in grace: **justification** (our right standing in the eyes of God), **sanctification** (holiness), **legalism** (our trying to be right with God on our own without Christ), **grace** (his goodness in Christ to us), **gospel** (the Father's rescue of sinners through Christ).



What is **justification**? Justification is how we get into the family of God. Another way to put it is, “God regarding sinners as if they had never sinned and granting them righteousness because of Jesus.” We must not confuse justification (declaration of right relationship with God) with sanctification (growth in holiness).

Sanctification is how we become more like Christ once we are in his family. A children’s catechism wisely answers the questions this way, “In sanctification God makes sinners holy in heart and conduct so that they will demonstrate his goodness in their lives.” Then it asks, “Is this process of sanctification ever complete in this life?” to which it answers, “No. It is certain and continual, but is complete only in heaven.” Even though there’s work to do in the Christian life, we still must live by grace through faith. It’s wrong to approach holiness as passive, that I will grow stronger without effort. It’s also wrong to think it’s all up to me. We still lean continually on what the Lord has done for us. Note what the Apostle Paul says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Legalism is a way of following religious laws and rules to obtain a right standing (relationship) with God. “Good Christians don’t dance,” might be one example. If belief in Christ means to trust in him alone for salvation, then legalism must mean the trusting in oneself to keep rules to be right with God. The focus is on what the Christian does or doesn’t do to be right with God instead of Christ’s work on the cross. Legalism is the opposite of liberalism; liberalism is when we give up and think that we can do whatever we want and God won’t care. Legalistic people don’t understand God’s grace, that only Christ was worthy enough, holy enough to keep all of God’s laws. Sometimes good Christians find themselves in a legalistic church. In other words, they themselves may not be legalists, but the leaders in their church are.

Simply put, **grace** is something good that God gives to us that we don’t deserve. Specifically, grace is God’s salvation given to us through Christ. It is undeserved and unearned goodness.

Even though we are hopelessly sinful rebels, the **gospel** is the good news that in Jesus, through his death and resurrection for our sins, God is for us not against us. God hates sin and must destroy it but the good news means instead of destroying you, he was gracious to send Christ to give you, by grace through faith, a right relationship with him.

Now let's apply this biblical truth in several scenarios (case studies) in part 3.

PART 3: SOME SCENARIOS (CASE STUDIES) OF GRACE

In this section, we'll explore several controversial topics for Christians: Getting a nose ring, smoking, adultery, gossiping, drinking alcohol, getting a tattoo, fornicating, gathers with the church only once a week, eating too much, and playing cards.

Gospel grace produces heart transformation to love God and others more. Dead religion only produces temporary behavior change for self-satisfaction. God is love and wants all his children to love as he does. He cares first for our heart (is what we think, say and do for His glory?), and our heart shows who or what we truly worship. Relying on God to change our heart to produce right behavior is the Lord's way and opposes the world's way of trying to change our behavior by our own strength in the hope of producing a heart transformation. Therefore, we must look to God and trust him to help us change at the heart level.

As we think about the following controversial situations and topics (Getting a nose ring, smoking, adultery, gossiping...), are these activities or issues right or wrong according to the Bible? Are they personal preferences or outright sinfulness? In other words, how do we practice being gracious and being gospel centered when facing these situations with others? How do we as Christians love other Christians well? There may be some elements you don't agree with. But please approach these topics as learners, not as those who already know the answer. The Bible is the final source of authority. How can you learn to look to the Word and be gracious in thinking about others? (Assume that all people in these scenarios are genuine Christians.)

A: Gets nose ring

Helen is newly married. She did not grow up in church. But she has recently trusted Christ and been baptized. She is enjoying reading her Bible and learning how to pray; she fellowships often with her Sunday school class. With her husband's approval, Helen and her close friend at work decided to get a nose ring.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

While the Bible addresses modesty, things worn, and heart issues it doesn't seem to directly deal with nose rings. In 1 Timothy 2:8-10 Paul says: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God." Then in 1 Peter 3:3-4 Peter says, speaking to wives: "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."

From various places in Scripture we know that bodily ornaments were spoken of favorably or at least not negatively (Exodus 28; Song of Solomon 1:10; Isaiah 61:10). In 2 Chronicles 33:11 the enemies of Israel put rings through their noses and led them off to Babylon.

We know that the Lord looks upon the heart rather than the outward appearances (1 Samuel 16:7b).

Is it a sin?

Wearing a nose ring does not appear to be a sin. God looks at the heart, and like so many things in our lives, our attitude matters. So Christians could wear a nose ring, and other possibly acceptable things, arrogantly seeking undue attention from others or even to rebel against their authorities or culture. Thus, if the attitude is wrong the act probably is too. But, generally speaking, for an adult Christian, wearing a nose ring seems to be a personal preference.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

Not everyone has the same tastes. Sometimes different is just different and not wrong. I would not want a nose ring nor would I want my spouse to wear one, but others might remain humble while wearing one. Of all the important things to fight about in life, I wouldn't want to spend too much time debating with Helen about it. In fact, I'm not sure I'd mention it. But because attitude matters, if I'm close to her, I might ask why she wanted it. I'd hope to mostly listen and think through her answer rather than talk her out of it, unless I sensed a bad attitude.

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

If I think I'm a better Christian than Helen, or think that I'm closer to the Lord because I don't have a nose ring, then my heart is straying on the issue. If I ask her about it assuming it's wrong or condemn her for it without first trying to find out why, then my heart may be further from the Lord than hers. A classic terrible response would be, "Helen, what have you done?! You can't be a good Christian and wear that. Take it out now or don't come around me."

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person (Helen) if you find out about this issue?

"Lord, you know how often I wrongly condemn people in my heart even for things the Bible does not call sin. I end up being worse in my heart than I accuse them of being outwardly. Give Helen grace to check her own motives about this act. Give me grace to see her as I did before, as my sister in Christ. Keep her joyful in you. Keep me welcoming her no matter how she dresses. Help her to find her complete acceptance in Jesus, nose ring or not."

One or two helpful links, articles:

- https://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=469
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/women-makeup.html> (This article is also in Vietnamese)
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-earrings.html>

B: Smokes

Mike is 50 years old and divorced. As a child he attended church. As an adult he's been very rebellious and never gone to church. Recently he heard the gospel several times and repented of his sin and trusted Christ. He will be baptized in a week. Mike has smoked for 20 years and he hasn't stopped.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

The Bible does not deal with this issue directly, but there are principles. Whatever you do or wherever you go, Christ goes with you (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:15). Christians have freedom (Romans 14:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 10) but not all things worked for our good (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). Christians are not to be addicted to anything (1 Corinthians 6:12), and we know that using tobacco is highly addictive. Smoking destroys the body, and a Christian's body is the temple of Christ. Smoking also effects the health of others.

Is it a sin?

Since smoking (at least being addicted) destroys the body, then it is a sin. Of course, we never want to give the impression that this person isn't saved merely because he smokes. A person isn't saved by giving up smoking. A person is saved by looking to Christ and trusting that he alone is an adequate sacrifice and risen Lord for sin. We need patience with those struggling to overcome something. New believers especially need time without a mountain of rules regarding this issue.

First Corinthians 5:17 says that we are new creations in Christ. Yet many temptations and struggles will continue. Those who have been Christians longer need patience shown to them too, but may need more direct encouragement to stop. If they have a bad attitude, one that doesn't care about themselves or others, they may need to be disciplined according to Matthew 18.

First Corinthians 8 and 10 teaches us to love other Christians. Does smoking help the smoker or others nearby? Is it a loving thing to do to yourself or others? The Bible also teaches us to be good overseers of our money. Smoking requires a lot of money, and this is money spent to destroy your health, and likely someone else's.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

Rejoicing that the Lord has saved Mike is important. Celebrating that he is about to be (or already has been baptized) is primary. Knowing that he, and we, are not finished in our maturity (Phil 1:6) should help keep us humble (Matthew 7:3-5). A friend of Mike's in the congregation, or maybe a leader, could approach him and say an encouraging word about the Lord saving him. He should keep in mind that Mike has experienced a lot of pain in his life. Mike needs to know that he is loved, even if he never stops smoking. And he probably has bigger problems than this. Yet, when the time is right, someone can lovingly say, "Bill, may I talk with you about something important? It's about you and your health." Assuming he says yes, this friend can say (if Mike hasn't figured it out) that he wants to talk about smoking. The friend might mention any addictions he's had that were hard to combat. Then perhaps something like this would be in order: "I love you and accept you whether you stop smoking or not. I care about you and your health. What can I do to help?" Then listen carefully.

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

"Bill, how can you call yourself a Christian if you smell like the pit of hell itself?" Approaching him as though his salvation depended on quitting smoking would be horrible. Even telling him that he can't be baptized until he fixed this area would be out of place. Remember, giving each other random, non-biblically-based, rules aren't helpful. It misses the point of loving one another and seeking change in the heart through the Holy Spirit and God's Word. Relying on rules doesn't make the congregation more holy; it makes them less because it causes them to trust rules and self rather than Christ and his Word.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

"Father I'm so happy Jesus has saved Mike. I'm a work in progress just like he is. Please help both of us continue to grow in Christ. I'm delighted Mike is obeying Jesus by being baptized. Help Mike love you with all his life. He is still addicted to smoking so help him break free that he might be healthier and a better witness of how you bring self-control and meaning to our lives. Let me know how to love him if he never quits. Let me know how to truly be a friend to him regardless. I look forward to growing to be more like you alongside Mike. In Jesus' name."

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/if-a-person-drinks-or-smokes-does-that-mean-theyre-not-a-christian>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-a-sin-to-smoke-or-eat-junk-food>
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/smoking-Christian-sin.html>

C: Pastor commits adultery

Hank and his wife were happily married for 13 years. He's been pastoring faithfully for eight. Recently he committed adultery one time with a lady in the congregation. He was caught in his sin but has stopped it and is genuinely remorseful for what he did.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

The Bible directly addresses both adultery and the qualifications for pastoral leadership, among which it is generally agreed marital faithfulness is critical. God included a prohibition against adultery in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14), as well as decreeing a death sentence upon those guilty of adultery in the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 20:10-16). Perhaps the one person in Scripture most well-known for his association with adultery is King David, who surprisingly is also the only person in Scripture described as “*a man after [God's] own heart*” (1 Samuel 13:14). David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12) was clearly a forgivable and forgiven sin (see Psalm 51), but it also resulted in painful consequences among David's family (2 Samuel 12:10-11), and affected his ability to rule God's people without discord.

The same prohibition against adultery continues in the New Testament, warning believers to guard the sanctity of marriage (Hebrews 13:4), while at the same time promising judgment for those who are unrepentantly guilty of not guarding the sanctity of it (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21).

Those who lead the church, particularly pastors, should be “*above reproach, the husband of one wife*” and have “*a good reputation with those outside the church*” (1 Timothy 3:2, 7). Further, they should be an example to all those who believe “*in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity*” (1 Timothy 4:12), all of which infer the responsibility upon pastors to have and maintain exemplarily faithful marriages, free of adulterous relationships, past or present.

Is it a sin?

Adultery is unquestionably a sin according to God's revealed standards of morality and appropriate relationships; however, it is not an unpardonable sin. As with any sin, there will be consequences arising from those involved in adulterous relationships (Galatians 6:7-8). But just as King David was forgiven of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, so too can leaders today be forgiven when there is confession and repentance (Acts 3:19; 1 John 1:9). It would be wise for any pastor guilty of adultery, and who subsequently confesses and repents of his sin, to surrender his pastoral role, even though his sin has been forgiven by God, the church family, and the parties involved.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

A right and gentle response to any pastor guilty of adultery is to immediately bring him into an accountable relationship with a small group of godly, non-judgmental leaders within the church. Their primary responsibility in this relationship will be to meet regularly with the pastor for prayer, strict accountability of his day-to-day moral behavior, establishing parameters for reconciliation among all offended parties, and providing biblical counsel, particularly regarding battling sexual temptation. This group should continue to meet with the pastor until all members of the group have confidence in the pastor's spiritual and emotional recovery from his failure, offended parties have been reconciled, his marital relationship is fully restored, and his restoration to the fellowship of the church has occurred (see Galatians 6:1-3).

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

A wrong response to pastoral infidelity which has been biblically confessed and repented of, would include condemnation (Romans 8:1), rejection (2 Timothy 4:11b), or excommunication (Matthew 18:15-35). It would also be wrong for people to keep bringing this up to him and the other woman.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

“I thank you, Father, that you do not despise a broken and contrite heart, and that when we confess our sins you are faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I thank you for my pastor’s confession of sin, and his subsequent repentance. I thank you for your forgiveness and cleansing in his life, and in mine. I pray that he will now choose daily to abide in your Word and to flee from all harmful desires which would plunge him into ruin and destruction, and guard my heart too. Empower him by your Holy Spirit to fight the good fight of faith and to take hold of the eternal life to which he has been called in Christ Jesus. Strengthen his resolve to set his mind on things above, not on things that are on the earth, and to consider the members of his earthly body as dead to immorality. Do this for the perseverance of his life, his marriage, his future ministry, and for the glory of your name, I ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/april-3/should-adulterous-pastors-be-restored.html?start=1>
- <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/1517/when-a-pastor-commits-adultery#.Wb1PJ617H-Y>

D: Gossips

Brenda trusted Christ five years ago. She’s a wife, mom, and grandmother. She helps with the children’s ministry. She is at the church building every time there is a service. She’s willing to help with any project. Nonetheless, she has a problem controlling her tongue. Most people who know her well know she spreads gossip.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?) Gossip is more than just sharing information with someone about another person. It is sharing information that cannot be confirmed as being true. This can lead to lies being spread to other people. Romans 1:29 has people who gossip in the same wicked group of non-Christians who are full of greed, deceit, and other sinful acts. However, Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:20, is talking to the Corinthian church (Christians) and gossip is listed among other sins that he hopes not to encounter when he sees them. The rich book of Proverbs has several references to gossip:

- “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.” (11:13)
- “A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.” (16:28)
- “The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives. The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.” (18:7-8)
- “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.” (20:19)
- “Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.” (26:20)

Is it a sin? Gossip is a sin. Romans 1:29 and 2 Corinthians 12:20 reveal that non-Christians and Christians both can be guilty of gossiping. The difference is that Christians (like Brenda) will feel guilty of this sin, repent of their sin and seek forgiveness from someone they wronged. As with any sin, if there is no deep remorse and shame from gossiping then we must wonder about Brenda’s maturity. But the non-Christian won’t feel a deep need to repent of this sin, after all they may not even know it is a sin. There is an answer to sin: Jesus! For the non-Christian, they can come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Then, Jesus can start to bring sanctification of this sin.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.) One thing that we all have in common with Brenda is that we are all sinners as Romans 3:23 says. I am not better than Brenda. Brenda seems to be blind to this sin and she may not be intentionally trying to hurt others but this issue needs addressed. A godly woman can talk with Brenda and tell her to stop gossiping, and telling her this with love and grace. She can memorize Proverbs 31:26, which speaks of a godly woman: *She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue.* Jesus gives grace to save us but also gives grace to help us stay away from sin. Maybe a friend could approach her and say something like this, “Brenda, it has come to my attention that you have said these things about this person. Is that true?” Assuming she says yes, then it might continue like, “As we know, the Bible teaches us to say only those things which are for the up building of others. It teaches us that gossip is wrong.”

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response. I could approach Brenda with an attitude that I am better than her because I am not currently struggling with gossip. I myself could start gossiping about Brenda and her actions with the hope that it would teach her a lesson but that is mean and not Christ-like.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue? “God, I pray that I will be humble to see my sin and for Brenda to be humble to see her sin. She is created in your image and created for good works. I beg you to reveal this sin to her and with humility she will bow to Your will and seek to honor You with words. Use this as a way that she can teach others not to be involved in gossiping. Let me know if I need to talk with her about it. I pray she will be like the godly woman in Proverbs 31 and speak words of wisdom and life to people rather than words that could hurt and tear down people. I pray she will find great friendships with other women who can disciple her and that I will love her deeply. Because of Jesus’ name.”

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <http://www.desiringgod.org/search/results?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=Luke+9.57#gsc.tab=0&gsc.q=gossip>
- <http://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-gossip/>

E: Drinks alcohol

Tom has never been drunk, but he does sometimes drink a beer at home. He has followed the Lord and been faithful to his church for more than 20 years. He is an accountant and has always been a person of integrity at his job. He teaches Sunday school.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

The Bible clearly teaches a distinction between drinking alcohol and drunkenness. Scripture teaches that drunkenness is a sin (see Romans 13:13-14, Galatians 5:19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:5-7, Ephesians 5:18, Isaiah 5:11, 1 Peter 4:3-5, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and Luke 12:45).

Although drunkenness is sin, drinking alcohol is not. There are several biblical examples that allow for a Christian to drink alcohol in moderation:

- Deuteronomy 14:26: “Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice.”
- Isaiah 25:6: “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--the best of meats and the finest of wines.”

- Proverbs 31:6-7: “Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”
- John 2:1-12, Jesus changes water into wine: “...Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now...”
- 1 Timothy 5:23: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.”

Even though there are biblical examples to drink alcohol in moderation, there are also Scriptural reasons and examples to abstain from alcohol:

- If it causes another to stumble, it is sin (Romans 14:21).
- There is a higher standard for Priests, Kings, Princes, Elders, Church Leaders (see Leviticus 10:9, Proverbs 31:4-5, Numbers 6:1-6, and 1 Timothy 3:3).
- There are several examples of individuals who abstained from alcohol, which included Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11), Samson (Judges 13:4-7), John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), and Paul (Acts 18:18).
- Biblical freedom and personal conviction might lead one to abstain from alcohol for personal reasons, although these reasons are not commanded in Scripture (Romans 14:22-23):
 - Abstaining makes a positive statement to our culture which is gripped by alcoholism
 - Shows sensitivity between different kinds of viewpoints that exists in relationships: a Christian to a non-Christian, a Christian to another Christian (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).
 - Saves money, personal health, and avoids the drinking environment and foolish behavior.

Is it a sin?

As shown above, drinking alcohol is not a sin. The Bible teaches that alcohol, when used properly, is a gift from God. First Corinthians 10:31 states, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” When alcohol is used in a way to cause harm to others or when it is used to get drunk, it is sin. Like all God’s gifts in our lives, the human heart can pervert them. When this happens, we sin.

Drinking when under age is a sin because it’s breaking the law. Christians of all people should obey the law, as long as it doesn’t violate Scripture (1 Peter 2:13-17).

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

Romans 14:1-8 instructs the Christian on how to apply grace to others in this situation. The Bible teaches that Christians will hold different convictions when it comes to matters of food and drink. The proper Christian response is to “not judge the one who [drinks], for God has accepted them” (Romans 14:3). Additionally, to the one who drinks and to the one who chooses not to drink, they are to hold their convictions privately in faith. Romans 14:22-23 states, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

A wrong response would be to break the principles outlined in Romans 14. This is seen in several ways:

- “You drink. How dare you! This is a sin, and you must repent.” This is the wrong response, because it passes judgment on the individual who has freedom to drink, thus this response breaks the command of not passing judgment on another regarding food and drink (Romans 14:3).

- “You drink. I don’t. My conviction is more holy, and I believe you should have my conviction and follow my example.” This is the wrong response, because it breaks the command of keeping personal convictions private between oneself and God (Romans 14:22).
- “You don’t drink beer? You should!”

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

“Lord Jesus, thank You for my Christian brother Tom. Thank You that he knows you and walks with you. Thank you that he stands strong, and hasn’t committed the sin of drunkenness. Thank you that he performs his job with integrity, and thank you for the opportunity he has to be a light in this world. Continue to give him grace and wisdom as he navigates the complexities of alcohol in society. Might he be like you Jesus, and use alcohol in a way that points people to you (John 2). Thank you for the freedom we have in Christ. Teach us not to pass judgment on others regarding food and drink. Help us to be wise and know when it’s appropriate to drink alcohol and when it is not. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-okay-to-drink-alcohol>

F: Church member has tattoo

Tina trusted Christ when she was a child. She’s been faithfully growing in her faith for many years. She is single and shares her faith often with her friends at work. She recently got a small tattoo on her ankle. (In some parts of the world, certain tattoos are connected to black magic. This scenario is not addressing those cases. Here we are addressing tattoos as body art.)

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

Leviticus 19:28 says, “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.” It is important to keep in mind the original context: God is giving laws to Israel, the nation. He wanted his people to be obviously distinct from the pagan culture around it. He wanted them holy in their hearts and attitudes too. Not everything forbidden for the nation of Israel is off limits for the church. Idolatry is the main concern; and we still must watch our hearts lest they drift. Our hearts drift in lust after others’ bodies, wanting more money, more possessions, the talents that others have. Our faith must always be loyal first and foremost to the Lord. With that being said, marking the skin is addressed in the Bible but not the contemporary practice of tattoo’s for art’s sake.

Is it a sin?

But the setting in Leviticus does not mean that getting a tattoo today is everything it meant then. Is the trimming of sides of a beard a sin for Christians today as Leviticus 19:27 teaches? (Also see Deuteronomy 14:1). How many Christians think that the teaching of Deuteronomy 14:8 against eating pork is applicable today? Regarding certain foods eaten, Romans 14:3-4 says, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.” (Also see Colossians 2:16.) It is a sin to do anything with a wrong attitude or to do something against your conscience or to do something that is part of a pagan practice. So, getting a tattoo for the dead or a tattoo which is vulgar is sinful. (The question that troubles many Christians is, *Why are sorcery and adultery and homosexuality still wrong but not some of these other practices?* This is complicated but the short answer is, the New Testament gives us guidance.)

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply gospel grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

We must remember that Leviticus 19:18 told the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus repeats this (Matthew 22:39). I tend to think everything that is different from what I like is a sin. But Scripture tells Christians to accept others about matters that aren't clearly wrong (Romans 14:1; 15:7). I think there's wisdom in not getting a tattoo and I don't find them attractive. They are permanent and costly. But others may feel that they can wear them to the glory of Christ. I must not think I'm better than they are. Perhaps I will ask them to share why they wanted that specific tattoo, and then really listen.

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

It would be wrong if someone says, "Christians should never get a tattoo because Leviticus 19:28 forbids them to Israel. No one who really loves Jesus would do that. I can't fellowship with someone like that because I'm better than anyone who would do such a thing."

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

"God, you know that I'm not a fan of tattoos but you also know how judgmental I can be. Please give me grace to love my sister just the way you love her. I pray that she will also adorn her inner attitude, and that she will make sure it is right, just as she has her body by this tattoo. May she find all the love and affection she needs in you and in your church. May she not be rejected by your people over such a minor thing. Humble me that I might dwell in peace with her."

One or two helpful links, articles:

https://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=170

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/six-reasons-to-skip-tattoos>

G: Christian singles commit fornication, desire marriage

Keith and Tammy have grown up in the church. They regularly attend the single's group. They read their Bibles daily and pray quite often. They have been dating for a year. Recently they gave into temptation and committed fornication. They have confessed to God and their church leaders and repented; they have asked the pastor to marry them.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

Fornication is when two people have sexual contact outside of marriage. The Bible deals extensively with sexual sins in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." Since Christians are part of the church and the church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, their bodies are to be holy. We must seek to honor God with our bodies. When we sin sexually we are dishonoring the Lord with our heart, mind, and bodies.

God teaches us something about his singular love for the church by keeping marriage between one woman and one man for life. He's showing us something about his holy, loving nature. The Apostle says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." We hurt ourselves and others when we disobey.

Is it a sin?

Sex outside of marriage or sex with someone who is not your spouse is sin. Looking at pornography is also a sexual sin. Colossians 3:5 says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

We should weep for the sins of our brothers and sisters in this situation. We should also know that this sin is pardonable. Jesus came to redeem sinners: real, terrible sinners who do things just like this. We should humble ourselves lest we fall and seek to help restore those who have succumbed to temptation. Galatians 6:1-2 says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” We should treat them the way we’d want to be treated if it was us (Matthew 7:12). We should not gossip about it. We should pray and seek to help. While we want to be gracious, we don’t want to excuse their sin. Since they have repented, we can go to their wedding and celebrate with them.

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

It would be wrong to gossip about them. Telling them they are terrible people or refusing to help them would be a sin on our part. Thinking that it could never happen to us would certainly reveal our wicked heart and leave us vulnerable for the same sin or worse.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for these people if you find out about this issue?

“Father, it breaks my heart to hear about the sin of Keith and Tammy. But I’m so glad to hear that they have repented. I’m glad they are wanting to be married. Please give the pastor wisdom as he considers this chance to serve them in their time of need. Please let him say yes to marry them. Give them a long and happy marriage. Give our church family the grace to not gossip but to support them through this time so that they might start their marriage on a solid footing. Thank you that Jesus died to redeem big sinners. Watch over my heart too, Lord. In Jesus’ name.”

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-to-deal-with-the-guilt-of-sexual-failure-for-the-glory-of-christ-and-his-global-cause>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-safe-place-for-sexual-sinners>

H: Gathers with the church only once a week

Val trusted Christ when she was 15. She’s now 22. Until she recently got a new job, one that keeps her busy in addition to her university studies, she has faithfully gathered with the church twice on Sunday and once during the week. She regularly prays and shares her faith with her friends at work and university. Now she’s busy and only worships with the church during the main service on Sunday mornings.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

As to the frequency of gathering with Christ’s local family, the church, Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” At the very most the first century church met daily and at the least once a week. Since Scripture doesn’t say how many times a week to gather, then we must give proper grace. Some churches, congregations and leaders, will define faithfulness different than each other. We must allow for differences. At the same time, emphasize that believers need to be *with* each other on a regular basis.

The church is not a building but his people, and the Lord will build his church, that is, he will make it grow. In Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus said, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” It’s important to note that *Christ will build* his church (and of course, he’ll do that through us). The church is also Jesus’ bride (Ephesians 5:23-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7). We must be the kind of people who welcome one another, especially those who are different or hard to love. (At times, all of us are hard to love.)

Is it a sin?

Again, Scripture says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10). Leaders have a right to expect that their members be faithful, but must be gracious in how they define *faithful*. Members must also not take the church lightly by never gathering. We, the church, walk through this life together, helping each other along the way. Mostly we help each other keep looking to Christ, to keep believing in him (Hebrews 3:12 “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.”) The church is his plan not ours. It shows his wisdom. The Lord’s purpose is that through the church, he will show the many-faceted wisdom of God--making it “known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 3:10). So we’d better be careful how we treat people in it and how we talk about them (individually or corporately).

One article says it well: “Christians should be *committed* to their local church, *involved* in their local church, and *supportive* of their local church. This requires regular church attendance. A believer will naturally love his brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 4:21), and that love will manifest itself in a desire to fellowship, not avoidance” (gotquestions.org/church-service.html).

With all of this in mind, no, it is not a sin for Val to gather with her church only once a week, as opposed to two or three or four times a week.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

If we are to spur each other on (Hebrews 10) and be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10), then we must be together quite a bit. We must welcome and accept one another (Romans 15:7), so we need to actually be with each other to do this (Ephesians 4:1-3). But part of accepting one another will be understanding what’s going on in each other’s lives. Knowing that Val has a job, we want to encourage her to do her job well. Rarely would we want to encourage her to quit. We must show mercy to each other (Matthew 5:7), which means being glad she has a job and gathers with the church at least once a week.

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

If we tell Val that she’s not a good Christian for not being at the building, or gathering with God’s people, twice or three times a week, we are not loving her. “Val, if you loved Jesus, you would join more programs at the church and be here more often.” While some people’s lack of love for the church, and thus for Jesus, may clearly be shown in their absence from the body, we must be careful not to assume everyone’s situation is the same.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

“Lord, thank you for giving Val a steady job. I know she needs the money and I’m glad she’s faithfully doing it like Scripture says (Col 3:22-25). She has a lot of responsibilities with work and university. May she get enough rest. Forgive me for ways in which I sometimes think I’m holier than she is because I meet with your people more than she does. I’m glad you love Pharisee’s like me. Please allow Val to keep

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making your church, your people, a priority. May she be a good witness to all the non-Christians she works and studies with. I'm so happy that she still faithfully gathers with us once a week. In the name of Jesus."

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <https://www.gotquestions.org/church-service.html>

I: Eats too much

Linda has been faithful to Christ and the church, her Sunday school, and even mid-week services since she was 12. She loves the Lord. She has recently been divorced. She's been under a lot of stress and is gaining a lot of weight. You've been out to eat with her and know she eats too much.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

The Bible addresses gluttony directly. Gluttony is eating greedily or eating too much. In the Bible eating too much is often associated with those of worthless character, laziness, those out of control and lacking wisdom: One example is Proverbs 23:20-22, where it says, "Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags. Listen to your father, who gave your life, and do not despise your mother when she is old." In Proverbs 28:7, gluttony is affiliated with law breakers, those who shame their father, likely due to laziness and wastefulness without self-control: "He who keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father."

In Jesus' day it continued to be associated with a loose and unwise lifestyle: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions'" (Matthew 11:19).

Is it a sin?

In light of the above information from the Bible, yes, eating too much is a sin. To do it occasionally or on a regular basis is sinful, because that behavior reflects an attitude in our lives that focuses merely on the appetites not on the Lord, the giver of all good things. Overeating is a failure to trust the Lord as we should.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

Linda is facing a lot of challenges and problems. It should be easy to sympathize with her difficult life. The Lord's grace has been obvious in her life for many years. Now more than ever she needs her Christian friends and the church. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. Such will be a great testimony to herself and those around her that despite her big problems, she continues to look to him. It would be wise for a Christian friend to approach her, ask about the details of her life, then pray with her about them. In that conversation or another soon after, the friend could ask what she's doing to combat stress. Listening carefully is always wise. Then, expressing concern for her well-being and health would be appropriate. Here's one idea that might be headed in the right direction, after some good conversation that leads into this: "Linda, I love and appreciate you. I've got so many problems myself, so please know this is hard for me to say. But I care about your health and you. Are you handling food the right way during this time? How can I help?"

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

Talking about her behind her back or making jokes about her weight would be wrong and offensive (Ephesians 4:29). If she ever found out it could be deeply wounding. Being too direct without showing

concern for her could also offend. “Linda, how are you? Oh, I notice you’re getting fat” or “You need to lose some weight” or “You aren’t as pretty anymore because of your weight” would probably do more harm than good. A gentle and humble approach would be best. We should speak the truth in love, as we’d want to hear it.

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

“Father, you accept us no matter what we look like on the outside. You’re not sizing us up according to how beautiful we are outwardly. And we know you love us so much that you care about our attitude, how we are on the inside. You know my tendency to see the faults of others and overlook my own. Linda is going through some difficult times. She is my sister in Christ. Please help her. Please give her peace of mind during these troubled times. Also, please help her to look to you and not eat too much during this stressful period. She loves you, and please help me know how to minister to her, and not condemn her. Because of Jesus.”

One or two helpful links, articles:

- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/but-what-about-gluttony/>
- <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/gluttony-temperance/>

J: Plays cards

Tim is 30 and a follower of Jesus. He’s been baptized and sometimes leads a Bible study. He doesn’t gamble but loves to play poker with his friends on Friday night.

How does the Bible directly address this issue? (If not, is there a principle?)

Playing cards is not addressed in the Bible. Thus, it will have to be evaluated from the perspective of leisure and entertainment. Is it legitimate for Christians to enjoy themselves, to be entertained? Generally, entertainment (parties, social gatherings) is permitted in the Bible (Wedding Feast in John 2, etc.). Yet is it edifying, helping, building up, or merely entertaining and possibly creating an addiction? For example, resting in the Lord, taking a day off, or the Sabbath, can be enjoyed, because rest is for our good, but typically the focus was that the time be spent with God’s people focusing on God himself (Psalm 46:10).

While we can certainly have fun and enjoy life, consider that we will die, so that we may be wise (Psalm 90:12 says, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”) We miss much of life by giving ourselves too much of a good thing. Life was meant to be lived for God’s glory, not merely entertain ourselves. Vitamins are good in the right amount, but too much can harm us.

Is it a sin?

If too much time is given to playing cards, then it, and many other things, is sinful. For example, playing games on a computer can turn into a time-wasting addiction. Watching too much TV, even if wholesome, can be sinful when other important things are neglected. (Note what Colossians 3:5 says about idolatry.) Since our world is bombarded with entertainment, smart phones and computers everywhere, Christians must ask themselves hard questions: “What kind of time is left for good works?” We must keep in mind that Ephesians 5:15-16 says, “Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” Because in some cultures playing cards is associated with gamblers, drunks, and other types of hooligans, some Christians might quote Psalm 1:1 (avoiding being among with the wicked, sinners, and mockers) against card playing, but it would be assuming too much negativity about this activity in general.

What does love require? If card playing could lead a weaker brother to fall into addictive gambling, then avoid it for his sake. (Giving up eating meat... 1 Corinthians 8:13; Romans 15:3). Christians who don’t

see card playing as wrong might give up the right to play to love others (at least they can refrain from doing it, or bragging about having done it, where weaker Christians are present). Ultimately neither do our church leaders nor our culture get to say if something is right or wrong. God's Word is the highest standard. We do not have to be more strict or lenient or spiritual than it is.

GOSPEL GRACE: Use the passages from Part 2 above (or other passages) to apply grace in this situation. (Give an example of a right and gentle response.)

Since the Bible teaches us to accept others regarding issues that aren't wrong according to God's Word (Romans 14:1), we need to lean on the side of grace. If we have a concern that Tim is playing too much, then we can talk with him about time management. But we must also look at our own lives first to make sure that we aren't also wasting a lot of time on entertainment that our church culture believes is permissible. In other words, the person who plays cards with a pure heart may be more holy than the self-righteous Christian who looks down on him for doing it. Loving one another and thinking the best of each other is vital: "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him" (Romans 14:3).

DEAD RELIGION: Give an example of a wrong response.

"Tim how can you do this and still be a good Christian?" would be a bad response. Or "Tim, if you keep doing this, we will kick you out of the church, or Sunday School." Another unbiblical statement would be, "Tim, you can't teach any more until you've stopped this." A wrong response from Tim would be, "I play cards and too bad if it offends you."

What is a humble (gracious) prayer you might pray for this person if you find out about this issue?

"Lord, you know I'm more likely to condemn than to praise someone. Please soften my heart that I can see Tim as a brother equal with me. Show me how to praise him for what he's doing right. I may actually be more concerned about me and how I feel in this matter (and what my church culture thinks) than I truly care about Tim. Give me grace to accept him and love him the way God loves us. We know that you desire mercy more than sacrifice in our lives. Help me to also walk in freedom and enjoy the pleasures that you give without throwing holiness, or good time management, out the window."

A few helpful links, articles:

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/rethinking-our-relaxing>

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/breaking-my-addiction-to-entertainment>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-video-games.html> (This article is also in Vietnamese

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Viet/co-doc-choi-dien-tu.html>)

PART 4: CONCLUSION

Again, as was said above, there may be some perspectives in the scenarios that you don't agree with. Remember, the Bible is the final source of authority for Protestants, not parents, not church tradition, not even church leaders. How can you learn to look to the Word and be gracious in your attitude with others?

To understand the gospel is to understand grace. We can't show others grace if we are only religious without a heart change on the inside. The gospel is about *God being favorably for us* through Jesus rather than against us. If we've been forgiven, then we can show kindness and mercy to other Christians because we have the Spirit living in us. And we can also walk in unity with other Christians and certain churches.

There are surely some good Christians (who aren't trying to find Christ's approval of them in their participation of legalism) caught in legalistic churches, but nonetheless these believers are simply trying to cope with the legalistic pressure from their leaders. The fault is with the leaders for permeating the congregation with rules and regulations. Then, there are surely some leaders who are not legalists but some of their members are. The answer to legalism in both cases is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is about so much more than just how to become a follower of Jesus. The implication of the good news is that a holy God is for us through Jesus rather than against us (Rom 5:8). We must keep going back to the Bible, studying it carefully to know what it means to trust in Christ alone for our salvation (justification) and for our holiness (sanctification) as we walk towards heaven together with other believers.

Please go to the Bible now and mediate on this passage in its context, 1 Corinthians 1:30-31: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"

THANKS

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If you're a follower of Jesus, and a Protestant, and you'd like to write your own scenario (case study) in Vietnamese using our outline above (*How does the Bible directly address this issue? Is it a sin?, etc.*), then you may submit it to us. We'll look at it and consider posting it to help other Christians.