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BRADLEY TRUMAN NOEL

TINDER
TATTOOS
and
TEQUILA

NAVIGATING THE GRAY AREAS OF FAITH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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TINDER, TATTOOS, AND TEQUILA

Navigating the Gray Areas of Faith

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	13
1. Absolutely Absolute.....	19
2. Tinder, Tattoos, and Tequila.....	41
3. There’s No “Holy” Without the Holy Spirit	63
4. Principles Are Principal	85
5. Oh, When the Saints Go Stumblin’ Down.....	105
6. Who Cares What Other People Think?.....	127
7. Where’s Solomon When You Need Him?	149
Final Thoughts	171
About the Author	173

INTRODUCTION

Whether you're reading this of your own free will, because you were coerced as part of a church group, or because your mother-in-law insisted you do so, I'm so glad you've picked up this book! I'm pleased because I believe this is going to be helpful to you as you seek to live your best life for God in the midst of what are some *really* interesting times.

Why a title like *Tinder, Tattoos, and Tequila*, you may ask? Excellent question. Well, I've long been convinced that the church has been plagued by two extremes when it comes to living a Christian lifestyle.

On one side, we have the serious folks adorned with really impressive frowns, who remind us of all the *do's and don'ts*. (To be honest, the list of things we're not allowed to do always seems to be much

more extensive than the list of things that make God happy!) So Christianity—our faith in Jesus—gets reduced to a list of things we may or may not do. Our Christian walk resembles a course in legal proceedings, where a great many things are illegal and punishable in court, so we must carefully avoid them in the hopes of staying out of jail—or, rather, hell. If you're thinking, "Wow, that doesn't seem like much fun," you'd be absolutely correct. Long known as *legalism* within the church, this approach has sadly been the go-to path toward holiness for a great many Christian denominations over centuries past, and it is still the case for some today.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, are the folks who seem to be much happier. Their frown has been turned upside down. They aren't quite so burdened down with all of the rules and regulations that their brothers and sisters across the way struggle with. No indeed. They don't view the Christian life in legal terms at all. Rather, in a misunderstanding of what we call the *grace of God*, these folks play fast and loose with the rules. Their attitude is, "If God's grace covers our sin, then why worry? If God forgives every sin, let's live our best lives now!" These believers typically don't spend too much time thinking about holiness, or wondering if their actions align with biblical teaching on the choices and actions of the believer. They live by a mantra oft described by the more legalistic folks as "anything goes."

Unfortunately, neither of these all-too-common approaches to holiness really captures what the Bible teaches in terms of how we should live our lives. The *legalistic* folks miss the power of God's grace in our lives. Incidentally, the *anything-goes* folks miss the power of God's grace as well! Grace is simply that important. So before we go any further, let's figure out what we mean when we use these words and make sure that we're all on the same page. (Pun fully intended ☺.)

WHAT IS HOLINESS, ANYWAY?

When we talk about *holiness*, we're using an English word that comes from words in Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) and Greek (the language of the New Testament) that mean "to be set apart." In the Bible, things could be set apart for God's use. For example, the gold, silver, and utensils destined for the temple were dedicated for the use of God alone. (See 1 Kings 15:15.) But more importantly, the people of God were set apart. God told the Israelites quite plainly:

You must be holy because I, the LORD, am holy. I have set you apart from all other people to be my very own. (Leviticus 20:26 NLT)

This theme is then carried forward into the New Testament. Holiness doesn't become any less important now that we live under grace and are no longer trying to fulfill the law of the Old Testament. In fact, quoting Leviticus, Peter writes:

But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15–16 NLT)

Hebrews 12:14 actually tells us that without holiness, no one will see the Lord! So, we are to be set apart for God in everything we do: our choices, our conduct, our words, and even our thoughts. It's a tall order! But happily, as we'll see later in this book, we have some incredible help—in fact, the very best help possible.

GOD'S MARVELOUS GRACE

When we talk about *God's grace*, we're really talking about unmerited favor; that is, God bestows His favor on us even though we don't deserve it. God's grace is like getting a gift that you don't deserve, not just once but repeatedly. (God's mercy, on the other hand, is quite similar, but in the opposite direction: God is merciful in that we *don't* get

what we *do* deserve, which is punishment!) The Bible teaches that our salvation itself is made possible by the grace of God:

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

(Ephesians 2:8–9 NLT)

Did you catch that? It's by grace that we've been saved. It's not something that we can earn, no matter how hard we try, or how closely we follow the teaching of Scripture. It just can't be earned. Why? So that none of us can boast about how well we've done, or how many good works we've accomplished. No, it's the free gift of God to undeserving people. That's the grace of God.

Now, it turns out that this undeserved favor, the grace of God, also helps us when it comes to holiness. A passage from Paul's letter to Titus is worth reading here, as it clearly links the grace we've been given and the holy lives we're to lead:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11–14)

And just like that, we're taught a couple of very important things about holiness, or being set apart for God.

First, the grace of God teaches us to live godly lives. We'll walk through how that happens in a later chapter. Second, and also very important, we read that while we live our lives, waiting for Jesus' return to earth, holiness is something that *we should be eager to do*. It's not the dreary legalism of rules and regulations, nor is it the careless attitude of

living how we wish. Rather, because we're so grateful for God's free gift of salvation, and so thankful that God daily grants us undeserved favor, we gladly seek to offer our whole lives—thoughts, attitudes, decisions, and actions—back to Him for His glory.

BACK TO HOLINESS

Therefore, holiness happens in two stages, as it were. We are *set apart* for God at salvation and *are being set apart* as we grow in grace and holiness. Having been set apart for God when we accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord, we then continue to grow in grace and holiness for the rest of our Christian lives. Paul told the church at Corinth:

*Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And **let us work toward complete holiness** because we fear God.*

(2 Corinthians 7:1 NLT)

And so the perfecting of holiness—our set-apartness—is a lifetime responsibility. My goal is to help you along the way. Holiness must be more than a lofty ideal; it must be a very practical undertaking, one that impacts our decisions on a daily basis. How exactly do we decide what things are good for us to do, and which ones dishonor God? It's one thing to be eager to do good, to be keen to grow in holiness, but it's quite another to make the good decisions that get us there! In starker terms, *how do we know what is sin and what isn't?*

HOW DO WE LIVE GODLY LIVES?

That's the question to which this book is dedicated. You'll learn how to make good decisions, enabling you to live a godly life, by understanding what things are wrong for us (sin) and what things are permissible.

Some things in Scripture are absolutes. They are commanded by God and apply to all believers, at all times, in all walks of life.

Other things, however, are not so clearly defined in the Bible. Should we use that latest app on our phones, or spend our money on the latest trends? The Bible certainly doesn't address TikTok in the letters of Paul! This book will give you the tools you need to walk through the gray areas of faith and culture, making decisions empowered by grace, and enabling you to strive for perfect holiness. But first, we must address those things that are simply not gray: the *absolutes*.



ABSOLUTELY ABSOLUTE

Absolutely not!” my father would declare, after I had asked permission for one thing or the other.

Given how emphatically he stated it and the accompanying glare, which was able to wither the hardiest of pleas (and plants!), I was left with little doubt as to the acceptance of my proposal! “Absolutely not” carries much more weight than a simple “No.” Absolutes are firm and unchanging. In philosophy, an absolute is “a value or principle which is regarded as universally valid or which may be viewed without relation to other things...something that exists without being dependent on anything else.”¹ My father’s judgment was certainly universal as it

1. *Lexico*, s.v. “absolute,” www.lexico.com/en/definition/absolute.

applied to our home and was not dependent on anything else, especially my opinion on the matter!

Before we can properly entertain a discussion on the gray areas of the faith, we must first pause and readily acknowledge that the Bible teaches us many absolutes. I will define *absolutes* as commands given by God that are applicable to all people everywhere, at all times, whether or not we agree, feel they're valid, or are inclined to obedience.



ABSOLUTES ARE COMMANDS GIVEN BY GOD THAT ARE APPLICABLE TO ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE, AT ALL TIMES, WHETHER OR NOT WE AGREE, FEEL THEY'RE VALID, OR ARE INCLINED TO OBEDIENCE.

So while some things in the Christian life are clearly gray, other things are plainly black and white, whether we like it or not. Before we proceed, let's take a few moments to consider some examples of absolutes in the Scriptures. This will help us better understand what gray areas are, and how we are to deal with them.

Now, when you hear talk of the *absolutes in Scripture*, your mind may go immediately to all of the "thou shalt nots," the infamous and widely lamented list of do's and don'ts.

As any purveyor of good Christian memes will quickly point out, following Jesus is not about *rules*; it's all about *relationship*. And that's true. Any honest student of Scripture will also tell you, however, that there are a number of commands in the Bible—the absolutes—that we must simply adhere to. But to turn the popular conception on its head, let's begin with a sample of those commands that are in the positive—things we *must* do, rather than things we are *forbidden* to do.

THE POSITIVE ABSOLUTES

FORGIVENESS

As it turns out, God commands us to do one of the things widely regarded by counselors and psychologists as essential to human mental health. We are to forgive, freely and without reservation. I realize that many people have been hurt, deeply and almost incomprehensively, all too often by someone they love, by believers in Christ, or by organizations that bear His name. I understand that forgetting what's been done to you is impossible. God understands that too. But He nonetheless calls us to forgive, for it sets our own minds, hearts, and even our bodies free from the hurt and bitterness that can so easily poison us. As Joyce Meyer once said, "Harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping your enemy will die." Prolonged refusal to forgive simply does not end well for us, so God has insisted that we forgive others. For example, Paul wrote:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Observing that we are to model God's own behavior toward us, Paul instructs us to treat one another with kindness and compassion. Would anyone argue that basic human kindness and compassion are not desperately needed in our world today? Although we are so *connected* via multiple forms of social media, we are simultaneously faced with a harshness and division that is so plainly insensitive in nature that it sometimes catches us off guard. Keyboard warriors—so named because they do their fighting remotely via their computers—say things to others that basic human decency would likely never allow them to say to another person face to face.

Further than kindness and compassion, Paul instructs us to forgive one another, just as God has forgiven us. Modelling the vertical

relationship we have with Christ, we are to forgive horizontally those around us, in the same manner.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
(Colossians 3:13)

Again, using the Lord as our model, Paul instructs us to bear with each other and forgive any grievances that arise in our daily interaction with others.

Matthew records some very helpful teaching on forgiveness from Jesus Himself:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."
(Matthew 18:21–22)

According to some Bible translations, Jesus said we must forgive "seventy times seven" times—or four hundred and ninety times!

In this very well-known passage, Peter is earnestly inquiring about forgiveness. By now, the disciples probably sensed that Jesus was different than your average rabbi. His teachings certainly did not always toe the line of the local Pharisees and Sadducees. I imagine Peter was quite proud of his own question! He instinctively knew that Jesus would want him to forgive more than once, more than twice even. Some rabbis taught that forgiving someone three times was sufficient. So Peter really ups the ante! "Seven times, Lord? Surely that will cover it! You see, Lord, I'm getting your teaching; I'm catching the vision here. I know what this 'good news' is all about! So what about seven times? That'll do it, right?"

I can just imagine Jesus so patiently smiling, sensing what's in His disciple's heart. "No, Peter. 'A' for effort though. Not just seven times. Seventy times seven."

Can you see Peter’s mouth fall open? Can you sense his astonishment? How is that even possible? Surely after 150 times, we’re allowed to withhold forgiveness; by the 321st time, our adversary is *clearly* not learning the lesson our forgiveness is intended to teach! But that, of course, is not the Lord’s point. As often as someone sins against us, we are to offer forgiveness. For all practical purposes, our forgiveness is supposed to be limitless.

Following Jesus’ teaching in a passage now known as *The Lord’s Prayer*—which includes the plea for forgiveness, “*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (Matthew 6:12)—Jesus makes a startling declaration:

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

(Matthew 6:14–15)

Wow! What an *in-your-face* statement! It’s hard to get much clearer than that when it comes to the incredible importance of forgiveness. Again, our ability to forgive others is taught in light of God’s forgiveness of our own sins.

Now, on first reading, this teaching seems very difficult; is Jesus really saying that our *entire salvation* hinges on our ability to forgive others? If we are deeply harmed by someone, and it takes some years for us to fully process what they did or said and offer them forgiveness, is our eternal salvation hanging in the balance? Not at all.

New Testament scholar Leon Morris says it very well:

It is not that the act of forgiving merits an eternal reward, but rather it is evidence that the grace of God is at work in the forgiving person and that that same grace will bring him forgiveness in due course. Forgiveness is important for the followers of Jesus, whereas the nature of the offenses committed against

them is not. Jesus is saying that to fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God.²

GIVING

Giving or tithing is a topic that many in the church *really* don't like! Many pastors avoid the topic (or so I hear) because their normal loving and encouraging congregation becomes quite, shall we say, quiet and even suspicious when the pastor begins talking about their wallets. Despite this, it is widely understood that Christians are to be a giving people. We are commanded to support the work of the kingdom. Paul teaches the Corinthians to put aside a sum of money in keeping with their income, to be given when they gather together. (See 1 Corinthians 16:2.) The church has long recognized that the command to give is for all believers, at all times, in all locations. As we know, this teaching first finds expression in the Old Testament:

“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the LORD Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:8–12)

I don't think you have to be a biblical scholar to see that God is not altogether happy with His chosen people! It's hard to see how God could take giving, or the lack thereof, more seriously. He equates their

2. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 149.

failure to give with robbery. They are literally stealing from God, in His estimation. And let's face it, what other opinion counts?

One of the reasons that I find it so sad that this topic is often avoided is that it is inherently laden with good news! Yes, *giving* is a good news message! It's right there in that passage. After God chastises them for "*robbing*" Him of their tithes and offerings, He offers one of the greatest promises we could hope for. Despite the many times God tells us never to test Him, in this case, He's all about the test! God poses the challenge, "Give it a try! Give the proper tithes and offerings and just see if I won't *'throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it!'*"

Can you imagine a challenge more wonderful than this?

How unfortunate it is, then, when believers can only see pastors who teach on giving as being after their money! Yes, God commands us to give—because inherent in our giving is His blessing upon us. We'll see more of this shortly in the New Testament. But further, I believe that God desires His children to give because He knows full well that regular giving keeps us from greed, and greed poisons everything it touches.

Of course, the biblical commands to *give* cover more than just our money; we are also to give of our time and talents, among other things.



WE'RE STILL COMMANDED TO GIVE, BUT IT'S NO LONGER 10 PERCENT. IN ALL LIKELIHOOD, IT'S MUCH MORE!

Now, you may be asking, "Well, tithing is clearly taught in the Old Testament, but is it a New Testament doctrine as well?" Yes, under the Law, God's people were commanded to give the first 10 percent of their income, which we know as the *tithe*. (See Leviticus 27:30–34 for example.) To people still under the Law, people without the indwelling Holy

Spirit, God gives a specific requirement: you must give 10 percent of your income. (The Old Testament is prone to give very specific requirements.) But does this 10 percent requirement apply to believers in the New Testament era, after the day of Pentecost, to saints now filled with the Holy Spirit? Well, yes...and no. We're still commanded to give, but it's no longer 10 percent. In all likelihood, it's much more! (If this has caused you deep distress, and you are experiencing the innate feeling of your wallet closing even tighter, I apologize. Please take a moment to compose yourself before reading on.)

A look at several New Testament Scriptures should help to clarify this.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

(2 Corinthians 9:6–8)

Here, Paul incorporates several of the key themes of biblical giving.

First, we are no longer compelled to give exactly 10 percent of our income. That number was given to the Jewish people, who were under the Law, not filled with the Holy Spirit. Christians are encouraged to give what we've *decided in our hearts* to give. Why? Because the Spirit indwells us and will help us determine what to give. Could it be less than 10 percent? Indeed it could. But I'm of the belief that if 10 percent was the baseline for those in Israel, the Spirit will regularly inspire and enable us to give much more than that!

Notice that we shouldn't be giving "*reluctantly or under compulsion.*" This is not about giving because God demands it and the Bible requires it. Rather, it's about giving with joy and gratitude. And how is *that* possible? How might we be joyful in giving away our own money? The secret

is to first realize that it's not our money at all! Everything we have—from the clothes we wear to the money in our bank accounts, the car we drive, the phone we use, the food we eat, and even the very breath in our lungs—is all a gift from God to us. So we're not giving God 10 percent of our money anyway; He owns 100 percent and we're simply returning some for use in His kingdom.

Second, Paul draws on a basic principle regularly taught in the Bible, and it comes from a truism about farming: those who sow very little will reap very little. Makes perfect sense, right? If you only plant a few carrot seeds, you cannot expect to harvest five hundred pounds of carrots. But Paul expands the traditional application of farming into the arena of the believer's giving. In so doing, it's very possible that he's following teaching that comes directly from Jesus Himself.

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:38)

Here, Jesus is clearly echoing the teaching of the last of the Old Testament prophets. “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over” sounds an awful lot like “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in!” (Malachi 3:10 NLT).

Elsewhere, Jesus notes that those who give up much to follow Him will not fail to receive a hundred times as much in return, plus eternal life! (See Mark 10:30.) Again, God's blessing is inherently tied to our sacrificial giving, although it's worth noting, in opposition perhaps to some modern-day prosperity preachers, that Jesus specifically does not tie the reward to financial gain. The sacrifice He mentions is a personal one, and so the reward might very well be personal as well.

As with the principle Paul highlights in his second letter to the Corinthians, Jesus indicates that we may give whatever amount we determine to give. But Jesus quotes a Jewish proverb and thereby includes an

all-important caveat: the measure you use will be measured back to you. This merits careful consideration. It sounds very much like God's generosity toward us is measured, at least in part, by our generosity toward God and other people. Now, just based on our understanding of grace and mercy—a gift God gives us that we don't deserve and exoneration from a punishment that we *do* deserve—we know that the correlation is not direct. Undoubtedly, God is more generous to us, and more consistently so, than we are to Him and others. However, the principle still applies: the measure you use is the measure that will be used to determine your blessing.



***BECAUSE SO MANY HAVE BEEN GRIPPED BY A SPIRIT OF GREED,
THEY WANT TO BLESS OTHERS WITH THEIR TEASPOON, ALL THE
WHILE HOPING THAT GOD BLESSES THEM WITH HIS BUCKET!***

What are we to make of this? Well, Jesus is teaching that a generous spirit is welcomed by God and certainly leads to His abundant blessing on our lives. Many of us, however, seem to miss this correlation: counting on God's grace and goodness to us, we somehow feel like it's permissible to be stingy toward the work of the kingdom and toward those who walk with us in life. To use an analogy, because so many have been gripped by a spirit of greed, they want to bless others with their teaspoon, all the while hoping that God blesses them with His bucket! "Oh, here's my pocket change, Lord, but by all means, please send a few hundred dollars my way!" Jesus is teaching us a variant of the Golden Rule: as we give, so shall it be given to us. This biblical teaching on giving is very good news! As we are generous with our time and financial resources, volunteering our efforts for the kingdom of God, He promised to pour out blessings on us, and lavishly so, spilling out into every area of our lives.

THE NEGATIVE ABSOLUTES

SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Despite waning standards relative to sexual morality in both culture and the church, the Bible is quite adamant that believers are to maintain the highest ethics. Over and again, *sexual immorality* is listed as something to be avoided by God's people. To be sure, sexual morality was still a developing concept in the Old Testament; although God forbade certain deviant practices for the Jews, things such as polygamy were still widely practiced. By the time the New Testament writers are inspired, however, the call was consistent. One man and one woman for one lifetime is God's intention for human sexual expression. Over and again, we read that believers are to avoid sexual immorality. Let's look at some examples.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is dealing with people who think themselves so spiritual, so *otherworldly* almost, that they believe what's done in the body doesn't really count. They've bought into the philosophy of *Gnosticism*, which in part teaches that only *spirit* is real and true; flesh is inherently sinful and may be discounted. These Corinthians were so spiritual, in fact, that some were having sex with prostitutes because, after all, what's done in the body doesn't matter—their spirits remained pure and holy. "Nonsense!" Paul replies.

Our bodies are intrinsically valuable and holy to God; as believers, we are united with Christ, who was bodily resurrected from the dead. What's done in the flesh really does matter. Paul concludes:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples 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 bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:18–20)

The apostle could not be stronger: “*Flee from sexual immorality.*” Avoid all forms of sex that occur outside the bonds of marriage. Our bodies were purchased at a price and are now the temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul pushes back quite hard against the Gnostic idea of dualism, stressing that both our bodies and our spirits are the Lord’s and must be used for His glory. Sexual immorality is forbidden, regardless of the circumstance.

The writer to the Hebrews agrees. “*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral*” (Hebrews 13:4). In other words, marriage should be viewed as something of great value, to be highly prized, and must be treated as such.

Two extremes should be avoided. Contrary to the prevailing understanding in Greco-Roman culture, the unknown writer—who may have been one of Paul’s associates—teaches that it is entirely reasonable to think that a man can uphold the sanctity of his marriage and refrain from taking mistresses on the side. On the other side, many in that culture viewed asceticism—refraining from sexual intercourse entirely—as the goal of true holiness, even within marriage. Paul combats this idea directly in 1 Corinthians 7:1–6. The New Testament teaches that a sexual relationship within the bounds of marriage is a gift from God. Those who commit adultery and practice other forms of sexual expression outside of marriage will be judged for those misdeeds.

There are numerous verses in the New Testament that list vices that believers are to avoid; in each case, sexual immorality is included. Consider Paul’s instruction to the churches of Ephesus and Galatia:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

(Ephesians 5:3–5)

*The acts of the flesh are obvious: **sexual immorality**, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, **orgies**, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19–21)*

When Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, he simply could not be clearer: sexual immorality is absolutely forbidden.

*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should **avoid sexual immorality**; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

(1 Thessalonians 4:3–8)

The apostle does not seem to be enamoured with the idea that sexual purity is an old-fashioned idea, and believers are instead free to express themselves in any manner they wish!



THINGS PAUL NEVER SAID

Oh? The culture has redefined sexuality in terms of whatever makes you feel good, or makes you happy? The old norms of keeping sex within marriage are out of vogue? Social media portrays a very different sexual ethic than the biblical view? Well, then, by all means, enjoy sexual expression in any way you see fit!



No, the command to sexual purity is an absolute, the rejection of which will be punished by God because it is rebellion not simply against those who teach it, but against the Holy Spirit Himself. The stakes could not be much higher.



**TIME AND AGAIN, SEXUAL IMMORALITY IS NOTED AMONG THE
LISTS OF PRACTICES FOR WHICH GOD IS BRINGING JUDGMENT.**

Finally, what really drove this point home to me was a study of Revelation in preparation for a course I was teaching. Here we have God's final thoughts on a wide variety of issues, from the perseverance of believers to the judgment of the wicked. Time and again, I noticed, sexual immorality is noted among the lists of practices for which God is bringing judgment.

*The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, **their sexual immorality** or their thefts.*

(Revelation 9:20–21)

*He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, **the sexually immoral**, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."*

(Revelation 21:6–8)

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 22:14–15)

At the very end of time, when God is describing the things for which He has sought but failed to find repentance, and for which He is therefore judging the world, sexual immorality is listed repeatedly. In the face of those who would insist that biblical sexual morals are simply limited to the first century and no longer apply to us *enlightened* souls today, Revelation reminds us that both now and at the very end—perhaps in the near future—God still considers sexual immorality to be wrong, and rewards those who remain sexually pure.

PRIDE

Although this absolute is widely known, it seems to get very little press in the church today compared to the more sensational “sins” of having female preachers, for example, or voting for the wrong political party! But pride is a sin that goes directly to the core of the human condition; it’s as old as humanity itself. It’s been said that all sin stems from pride, for we willingly choose our own direction, and our own desires, over those God has ordained for us. Pride says that we know better than God and are therefore in charge of our own destinies. It’s an intrinsic sin, in the sense that we can faithfully follow Christ and name Him as Lord, yet struggle daily with our will versus His. In some sense, pride exists deep within all of us.

The Bible unmistakably and regularly warns us of pride, in both the Old Testament and the New. Before we look at a few examples, it’s worth noting that many biblical scholars believe the very first sin in the universe—the rebellion of Satan—was actually motivated by pride. In a passage that many believe is referring to Satan’s fall, Isaiah writes:

How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit. (Isaiah 14:12–15)

In these verses, we see the pride of Satan manifested: "**I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne...I will sit enthroned...I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.**"

God is having none of it; you say you will ascend, but you are, in fact, brought down to the depths of hell itself.

The Proverbs repeatedly warn us of the dangers of pride, even telling us that God *hates* pride:

To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. (Proverbs 8:13)

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. (Proverbs 11:2)

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. (Proverbs 16:18–19)

Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the unplowed field of the wicked—produce sin. (Proverbs 21:4)

Other biblical writers echo the same idea: pride is a sin before God. John writes:

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. (1 John 2:16)

When teaching on the evil that so easily resides in the human heart, Jesus notes that pride or arrogance is, in fact, one of the things that defiles us:

[Jesus] went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark 7:20–23)

In perhaps the most devastating critique of the sin of pride, James quotes Proverbs 3:34 and notes clearly God’s stance toward pride:

You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:4–7)

Now, I don’t know about you, but life is quite hard enough without God opposing me! We all pray for God to be in our corner, and because of the grace of God, that prayer is answered. While God doesn’t often remove the obstacles we face, He daily gives us grace to face each day with hope, joy, and optimism. But God opposes those who are proud. I simply cannot imagine how difficult life must be with God standing in opposition! It’s likely that you too count on God’s favor each day.

The sin of pride has had devastating effects on humanity and continues to pervade the human condition. We can easily see the effects of this sin throughout culture, via the millions who declare, “Not Your will, but my will!” in the face of God’s commands and desires. We see the effects of pride that come from the material possessions, positions of power, and status afforded our celebrities. But looking *in the mirror* rather than *out the window*, we also see the destructive effects of pride in our own lives, and the work of the Holy Spirit to eradicate this sin from our hearts and minds. Thanks be to God for His grace and mercy, and for the Spirit who works in us to put to death sins such as pride, which so easily entangle us!



THE SIN OF PRIDE HAS HAD DEVASTATING EFFECTS ON HUMANITY AND CONTINUES TO PERVADE THE HUMAN CONDITION.

THE BLACK AND WHITE

The preceding examples serve to remind us that although there are in fact many gray areas the believer must navigate today, there are nonetheless absolutes by which we must abide. Everything is not gray, nor is everything black and white. The Bible contains both.

We’ve seen that there are some things God commands us to do, including being generous with our giving and offering forgiveness. To these, we could add showing compassion (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Peter 4:8), submission (Ephesians 5:21; Hebrews 13:17), good deeds (James 2:14–17; 1 Peter 2:12), and loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:14).

In addition to sexual immorality and pride, the Bible also forbids idolatry (Leviticus 19:4; 1 Corinthians 10:14), lying (Proverbs 12:22; Colossians 3:9–10), revenge (Romans 12:19; 1 Peter 3:9), and gossip or slander (Exodus 23:1; James 4:11).

In each case, God commands that we live in a particular way, doing the things He proscribes and abstaining from things that war against our soul. There is no debate about these things. Idolatry is not simply a cultural prohibition from the ancient Near East or first century, even though the form of idolatry may change with context and era. All believers are to avoid idolatry, period. Likewise, forgiveness is not optional; all followers of Christ are to forgive as the Spirit enables.

Make no mistake: these absolutes can only be followed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not able to remain sexually pure by self-discipline alone (remember that Jesus equated lust with adultery!), just as we're not able to avoid idolatry, offer forgiveness to someone who has hurt us deeply, or give generously when the spirit of greed is all around us. Thankfully, though God has given us absolutes by which to live, He's also given us the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us live holy lives. In chapter three, we'll explore the biblical teaching surrounding the Spirit of holiness and the Spirit's role in our lives.

SHADES OF GRAY ABOUND

But first, let's take a moment to recognize that in light of the absolutes we've mentioned, there are still quite a number of gray areas. Believers in the twenty-first century are faced daily with decisions for which there is no clear answer like, "*Flee from sexual immorality*" (1 Corinthians 6:18).

What are we to make of the heated debate in many Christian circles today about the consumption of alcohol? Why do so many believers declare that the Bible teaches tattoos are a sin, and why do so many believers insist on getting tattoos nonetheless? How should we navigate

the rapidly exploding world online, including social media? How can an ancient book like the Bible speak into concerns that didn't even exist twenty-five years ago? It is to these questions and others that we now turn.