

Spiritual Living in a Modern World

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Introduction

The Christian life has never been an easy one. The temptation to be conformed to the world rather than to God's will has been ever with us. But our generation faces new challenges. Technology is rapidly advancing and provides us with almost limitless opportunity for good or for evil depending on how we use it.

How can we navigate this new and changing landscape? And how relevant could a book thousands of years old be in times such as these? Have people changed that much? Has God changed his expectations? These are all important questions that we hope to answer in this study.

The Spirit and the Flesh

What do we mean by "Spiritual Living"? The Bible speaks of a mind of the flesh and a mind of the spirit. The one is death, the other life and peace. One is hostile to God, the other pleasing to Him. Spiritual living then is walking in such a way as to please God. It is the way His children are called to live and act.

In his letter to the churches of Galatia, the Apostle Paul wrote this:

"Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want." (Galatians 5:16-17 NRS)

So then do we desire what God wants? Or do we follow our own desires? And how can anyone know exactly what God wants? Thankfully, He has left us with many writings from his apostles and prophets to teach us and guide us so that we can do the works he prepared in advance for us to do.

In case anyone was in doubt about the works of the flesh which are to be put away and avoided, Paul continues:

"Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19-21 NRS)

Now that is a long string of words some of which we don't use very often, but let's take a moment to explain them. **Fornication** is often translated today as "sexual immorality". Simply put it is having sex with someone you aren't married to. **Impurity** can be translated "uncleanness". Here it almost certainly means moral uncleanness or corruption. **Licentiousness** is one of those words we might only hear in church. This is a lack of self-restraint and a total disregard for social and moral standards. A good translation might be "shamelessness". **Idolatry** is the serving of images or idols. Putting anything in God's place could be called idolatry. Paul likens greed to idolatry in Colossians 3:5. **Sorcery** is the practice of magic arts and includes the use of drugs, potions, and spells for magical effect. **Enmity** is more simply "hatred" or "being hostile". **Strife** could also be translated "discord" or "quarreling". **Jealousy** comes from "zeal", but here it means the negative sense of having negative feelings about someone else's achievements or success. **Anger** is rather straightforward, but could also be translated "wrath" or "rage". **Quarrels** here would be better translated "selfish ambition" or "selfishness". **Dissension** is literally "standing apart" or being in "opposition". It would be a disagreement which threatens the unity of a group. **Factions** are also "parties" or "sects"—the problem again being that of division. Later this was used of the teachings themselves and is where we get the word "heresy". **Envy** is "ill-will" or "malice" often caused by jealousy over another's success. **Drunkness** is intoxication by wine or really any strong drink. Here it is in the plural and might refer to drinking-bouts or binge drinking. And finally **carousing** is "excessive partying or feasting". It was used for the night-time processions of half-drunken men who danced through the streets in honor of Bacchus or some other deity.

Paul doesn't limit the works of the flesh to these fifteen things, saying "and things like these". But he makes it very clear that those who practice such things "will not inherit the kingdom of God". That should make us think very carefully about how much we allow these sorts of things in our life and how to get rid of them completely.

This list is contrasted with the fruit (or produce) of the Spirit which is given as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." There is no law against such things. These things are easy enough to understand even if they are difficult to master. But if we belong to Christ and have "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" as Paul says, then by the grace and Spirit of God we can have these things in our lives.

But Paul warns against becoming conceited—that is thinking too much of ourselves. Even a mature spiritual man can fall when he is tempted, so we shouldn't look down on those who have been overtaken by sin. Instead we should restore them gently and help them to bear those things that are weighing them down.

Now he returns to the difference between flesh and spirit. Many people are deceived into thinking that they can live however they want without consequences. But God knows and he will repay us for our deeds. If we selfishly follow the passions of our flesh, then we will be corrupted by it and eventually destroyed. If however we do not grow tired of doing good, then by his Spirit God will give us eternal life. (See Galatians 6:1-10)

How are you doing in your struggle against the flesh? And where do we go from here?

Knowing God¹

Self-awareness is important for spiritual living, but it is not the beginning of spirituality. Before you can begin to know and accept yourself, you must come to know God. He is the maker of all things, visible and invisible. He has revealed himself through his word to the prophets. And most importantly, he has come down in the flesh through His Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot know how incomplete we are without knowing something of the completeness of God. We cannot know how to accept ourselves without knowing to what extent God has gone to redeem us and set us apart for more noble living and purpose. We cannot know our potential without knowing how marvelously we are made in the image of God.

Simply and most correctly stated, the way into the presence of God is Jesus Christ, His Son. It is still true, Jesus is "...the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through..." Him (John 14:6). He further elaborated by saying, "To know me is to know the Father" (cf. John 4). Walking in His ways, believing His truths, and living His life is not only the surest, as compared to all other proposals, it is the only hope of being with God. A lifetime spent in knowing the Son is the only way to know the Father.

Walking the Way begins in observing the life and teachings of Jesus, believing in His divine nature, understanding His atoning sacrifice, and acknowledging that, separate from Him, there is no hope in this world or in the world to come. Those experiences, be they long or short in time, must result in trusting in Jesus, committing oneself in a purposeful redirection of life, of acknowledging and following Him, and making a faith response in baptism by being immersed into Him (cf. Romans 6:4). With all sins atoned for and washed away, forgiven by God, one then walks in a new life. Such a one is committed to live the truths he is learning and to drink deeply of the joys of the abundant life.

Mastering the Gospels, for the new believer, both in structure and content is a good place to begin in living a spiritual life. However, one must continue by listening intently and repeatedly to every sermon preached by Jesus, pondering over every one of the parables, again and again, taking note of every conversation and every confrontation. One must marvel over every one of the recorded miracles, and stay close in following Jesus from Judea through Samaria to Jerusalem and back again. Feel His weariness of teaching, walking, hungering, and grieving with people. Determine not to miss a detail in any of the some thirty days described in His life and ministry, straining to drink deeply of every event, plumbing the depth of each statement and feeling the impact of every response of the lives He touched. Capture His love, feel His concern, understand His anger, laugh with Him, puzzle with Him over the hardness of hearts and be touched by His tenderness with children, widows, and the suffering. Climb to the heights of His view of the Kingdom, to the Holiness and purposes of God, to the unfolding of the Scheme of the Ages, and to His becoming the Suffering Servant of Old Testament prophesies. Agonize with Him in the Garden, cringe with His beatings, torture, and crucifixion. Be broken up inside with His humiliation, with His seeming defeat, and powerlessness in burial. Be disturbed with all that began to happen from the Temple, the earthquake, the disemboweling of the tombs, and His own empty tomb. Be awakened to wonder over the select meetings after the resurrection, His promises, and His return through the skies to the throne room on high to be enthroned in glory. Be discerning of how the earliest

¹ The following three sections are taken with some alterations from Spiritual Living for Ministers by Truman Scott. Sunset Institute Press. Lubbock, Texas. 2008. "Introduction" and Chapter 1

Christians lived out their lives in practicing the teachings of Jesus and paying the highest price for their unflinching faith in His being the promised Messiah, their Savior.

Spirituality is more than human quest for learning knowledge of the Bible. It is something God does to our lives. Stepping out of the pages of the Gospels into the lives of living people is one of the most emphatic ways of really knowing the Son. His promise was if we see the Son, we see the Father (cf. John 14:7).

A young Asian, college professor in Russia, who prided herself in being an atheist and in having convinced a number of Christian believers to renounce their faith, listened to a lecture on Jesus in His dealings with people. At the end of the lecture, she asked to be baptized into Christ, explaining that in all her studies of human history, she had never encountered anyone like Him. Her first reason for baptism was to become like Him, she was in love with Him and His ways. Further, she acknowledged that she could not begin to become like Him until she was free from her sins and could start living, feeling, and acting like Jesus. She wanted to devote her life to calling on everyone to believe in Jesus and be given a new life.

Some of the most inspiring and instructive parts of the New Testament can be seen in watching how Jesus touched and changed the lives of others in His own time. His humanity is seen everywhere and in every way. Yet, there is that something that stands out that draws people to Him, wondering what kind of man is this and what is His source of spirituality?

The Cross of Jesus

The cross stands at the center of time. It is the focal point of God's redemptive plan. Without it, we have no savior, no promises, no hope. With no hope, we are left miserable and without purpose in the world. The scriptures would be nothing but empty platitudes and Christian teachers only peddlers of deception. But the cross, and Jesus' subsequent resurrection, changes all of that.

The cross made no human sense. To most people it was foolishness, to the Jews it was blasphemous. Why would God become a man only to die? And yet the cross is our basis for understanding God's long term desire to save us. It shows how far he was willing to go to redeem us from sin.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

“Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...” (Hebrews 10:19–22)

God in his power and wisdom has given us a way to truly draw near to him in his holiness. But as Jesus' road to save us was not an easy one, neither is our path to follow him without sacrifice.

Choosing the Way of the Cross

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23)

This statement of Jesus gives us a path to follow in in spiritual journey and development. Let us consider the four points revealed here which lead us to spiritual living: 1) desiring to be a disciple, 2) denying ourselves, 3) taking up one’s cross, and 4) following Christ continually. All of these are ongoing, active, personal, and constant. By the grace of God, we can bring it to completion.

It may be helpful to express each of these points as a question:

1. How much do you desire to be a learner in the school of Jesus?
2. How much are you willing to give up to excel?
3. How much are you willing to suffer to be identified with Jesus?
4. How much are you willing to go wherever Jesus leads you?

Fervent Desire

Confronting trials of the Christian life requires strong motivation. None of the later steps of discipleship will be fully taken unless we truly burn with a desire to be like Jesus. Seeing his compassion for people, his impeccable life, his power and mastery over every temptation and situation in life, his fulfillment of prophecy and his miracles should all fill us with a desire to follow him and learn from his ways.

How could Stephen be so confident and loving in his death without a desire to be with Jesus? How could Paul endure such repeated persecution without a deep, stirring devotion for Jesus?

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia; that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves...” (2 Corinthians 1:8–9, cf. 2 Corinthians 11:22–28).

Genuine desire purifies our motives, strengthens our resolve, provides us with clearer vision and insight, and authenticates every action. It picks us up when we have faltered or fallen and sets us again on a heaven-ward course. A driving desire leads on to making other decisions in spiritual living. Making those decisions further perfects a mature desire to serve faithfully until death.

Decisive Self Denial

There can be only one master over our lives (see Matthew 6:24). There are a multitude of choices, and in the weakness of our flesh we often try to keep self on the throne. But Jesus offers Himself as the best and most lasting of choices:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Removing self from the throne and giving Jesus his proper place is crucial to spiritual living. Anything less will lead to doubt and inner struggle. Recall the works of the flesh reviewed earlier. So many of them are the result of giving in to selfish desires. Spiritual living cannot really begin without a visit to our own Garden of Gethsemane. We must make the same decision to submit fully to the will of God. “...*Not as I will, but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39) must be the beginning and daily experience for spiritual living to take root and flourish.

As long as we are second-guessing Jesus on the throne, we will fail to carry out his orders, or give up the fight too soon, or not use all the resources of faith in the battles of the Kingdom. Without dying to self and accepting Jesus on the throne, spiritual living will not blossom into its most fruitful.

A Life of Sacrifice

Picking up the Cross and following Jesus underscores a two-part decision: choosing a life of sacrifice over security and comfort and choosing a radical end of self so that it can't come back and reassert itself when it seems we have been victorious.

The “cross” is not the common troubles of humanity, but what is purposely given up for Christ. It could be something that we've earned and have every right to enjoy, but we give up to advance the Gospel. It is something we refuse to hold on to lest we risk hindering the purposes of God's Kingdom. It is a choice between protecting our own interests and our possessions or giving priority to spiritual concerns.

Sacrifice is the common experience of all believers. Some will suffer martyrdom, shame or exile. We must all accept that very real possibility from the start. It may require giving up our inspiring ambitions or a rewarding career to serve Christ somewhere beyond the applaud of men. Serving others almost always means sacrificing time and leisure and personal pleasure. Following Jesus almost always will lead one from adding more and more to his possessions in order to contribute to Kingdom needs. But beyond the expected moments of sacrifice, there is the daily readiness and joy in doing whatever it takes to exalt Jesus before a needy world.

The new lifestyle to which Jesus calls His followers is to be suffering servants, identified with Christ in His suffering. In suffering, sacrificing, and dying, the faithful servant is identified with Jesus and shares the nature of the people of God of all centuries. Peter acknowledged that truth:

“...for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin; that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” (1 Peter 4:1–2)

The choice for discipleship is the choice of sacrifice, even sacrificing one's autonomy to Christ, and a choice of suffering, even choosing the road to being hunted, scorned, and killed. Discipleship is joining the company of the suffering in which true fellowship with Christ is found.

A young man in Pisa, Italy, after being immersed in the sea asked, “Please help me that I will never let the old Andrea come back out of this tomb of water to dominate my life.” He understood that baptism, among other truths, speaks of a willful act to put to death the old man of sin, bury him forever, and get on with a new life of submission and sacrifice for the purposes of the Kingdom (cf. Colossians 3:9–10). The break with the old man is so decisive, so radical, it is called a crucifixion of self. Paul described it:

“Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:6, NKJV).

The road to the cross that Jesus pictures in His appeal is the accomplishment of dying to self and continuing a daily walk to Calvary to renew oneself in the resolve to keep Jesus as the Lord of life, to reject any self-opposition that could be on the rise, and reaffirm that self is dead and Jesus Christ is alive. Spiritual living includes looking at the cross daily through the door of the empty tomb of Jesus, reaffirming the supremacy of the risen Lord, and a readiness to pay whatever price is needed to keep Him before the world as the Lord of life.

Dedicated Walk

Spiritual living is not a “talk” religion, as much as it is a “walk” religion. It is rich in thoughts that must be proclaimed, but it is powerful in actions that appear as lights in a world of darkness. The “talk” will not be heard or believed without the “walk” being seen and appreciated. Falling in love with the author always makes a book more interesting and credible. Seeing how Jesus and His followers act will either make believers or stir up opposition. The centuries-old hostility of Muslim fundamentalism finds some of its fuel in the Christian crusades and the immoral and secular practices of 20th century Christianity of the Western Civilization. The Calvary message saves when believed and obeyed. It will not be believed without the world seeing that it can be lived in every culture and in every land. For the believer, the daily experience of walking with Jesus is vital to one becoming intimate with the Father.

Spirituality means absorbing the thoughts of Jesus as one walks with Him and patterns His responses. It is seeing how He encounters different folks, helping them in confronting temptations and Satan’s threats as they arise daily. With Jesus at one’s side, through early morning and evening prayers and prayers throughout the day, God becomes so very real and near.

Consequences of Discipleship

Jesus could not have been more open about the consequences one must face in making a choice for discipleship (cf. Matthew 16:24–26; Luke 9:24–25). Turning from discipleship to gain security can have its immediate rewards. Self first and safety first makes good, worldly sense. Rejecting Christ in order to live and avoiding the humiliation of being identified with the company of the Man of Galilee will work for awhile. Holding on to possessions rather than helping others provides life pleasures in the short term. Pursuing one’s own life agenda with its ambitions and rewards can result in a life of worldly gain. However, if any decision causes one to lose his soul, the gaining of the whole world could not compensate the endless loss. It comes down to a choice of the moment or the choice of an endless joy. One way or another, every person will lose his life. Either give it to Christ and enjoy fellowship with God now and forever or keep it for oneself and lose it in a Christ-less death and eternal ruin. The validity of the choice to follow Christ is to be seen in the certainty of the second coming of Christ in glory to gather those who have chosen to follow Him in life and death.

Our Spiritual Battle

I've talked in the past on the question, "Should Christians go to war?" I believe the clear answer of the Scriptures and the early church was no, Christians are called by God to avoid violence at all cost. Ours is a different battle. Ours is a spiritual warfare, not against flesh and blood, but "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

If we want to have any hope to stand against "the wiles of the devil", then we will need the armor of God:

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness, and with your feet fitted in the readiness of the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Ephesians 6:13-17)

Paul uses the image of a soldier to make his point here, but each piece is a metaphor for some important aspect of Christian life. Notice that the goal here is not to defeat any particular enemy, but only to "stand firm". Truth, righteousness, peace, salvation, and faith all protect us. And our main weapon is the word of God.

"Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak." (Ephesians 6:18-20 NRS)

Another powerful weapon of the Christian is prayer. *"The supplications of a righteous man can do much while in action."* (James 5:16b) Sometimes we might discount the usefulness of prayer, and many people today mock the sentiment of "thoughts and prayers." But while we certainly shouldn't pray so much that we never actually do anything to help someone, prayer is something that no one can take away from you. At any moment anywhere prayer can do its work and it doesn't matter if you are on a mountain top or in a prison cell, God can still hear you.

That's not to say people have tried to stop people from praying. "Safe access" laws in the UK have recently banned even silent prayer within 150m of abortion facilities, at least prayers for the women and babies involved. The world is full of wickedness, and arresting people for "thought crime" while encouraging the death of the unborn is a new height for the 21st century.

Notice Paul, like most spiritually influential Christian of all time, also wants people to pray for him so that he can proclaim the gospel boldly and properly. He spoke to the Corinthian church about other weapons he had: *"weapons of righteousness for the right and the left"* (2 Corinthians 6:7) and *"the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but exceeding powerful for the overturning of strongholds, overturning reasonings, and every high thing raised up against the knowledge of God; and leading captive every thought to the obedience of Christ"* (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

A right life and right understanding are powerful tool for overcoming the lies of the evil one. It is our example in life and speech that is going to have the biggest impact for good in the world around us. And a sound knowledge of scripture will help us in defeating the find sounding arguments of so many today.

New Technology

For thousands of years, technological changes came slowly, if at all. Nearly 3,000 years ago, King Solomon wrote, *“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”* (Ecclesiastes 1:9) But in the last two centuries technology has been advancing at an exponential pace and now it seems that new things are being invented every day. That’s not to say Solomon was wrong, he went on to say that there are things which happened long ago in ages past which have only been forgotten. Only God knows what was done in other ages or in other worlds in eternity past.

Regardless, today we are faced with ever new situations and challenges which none of our ancestors ever dreamed about much less experienced. Perhaps we don’t even appreciate how much changed over the course of the 20th century: electricity, radio, television, air travel, nuclear weapons, the personal computer. But never before have people faced so many distractions in the palm of their hand as we have with the smartphone. And yet it is also a powerful tool giving us access to more information and connecting us to more people around the world than anything which has ever existed. Thus, just like so many things it can be used for evil or for good, and that isn’t new at all.

Instant Access to the Word

First, the good parts. The Word of God is now at our fingertips 24/7. No group of people have had more access to the Bible than internet connected smartphone users today. There are dozens of apps and websites which have dozens if not hundreds more Bible translations in almost every language. Not only the texts are available, but many translations have also been made into audio Bibles for easy listening when you don’t have the luxury to sit down and read for while. You can even watch professional quality video productions of the Gospels and Acts which follow the Bible text word for word help you picture what it was like to be there in the first century.

For those that are interested, original language versions of the Bible can be downloaded for free today with various translation tools to help you understand the original message. And for those who want to learn Greek and Hebrew, a number full courses are available online for free without the need to attend a Bible college or seminary. You can even find scanned copies of the earliest papyrus and parchment manuscripts and see how the text has been transmitted over the centuries.

Technology has also nearly made obsolete some Bible tools from the last century. The concordance which allowed people to look up any word in the Bible and find a list of verses which contained it has not been replaced by a simple search feature. Many tools also have complex search functions for groups of words or even parts of words or grammatical parts of speech. It’s easier and faster than ever before to find exactly what you’re looking for in the Scripture. Of course, even a perfect search tool will never be a replacement for personal knowledge of the Scripture gained through years of reading and study, but it’s certainly nice to have especially when you are studying an unfamiliar topic.

In addition to the Biblical texts, we also have easy access to early church fathers and other Christian writings which give us insight into issues that they were struggling with over a thousand years ago. Even fifty years ago, all these things would have required visiting a special library or paying large sums of money to get the books for yourself. It's true that even today many of these resources are not yet free, but they are available a much lower cost and can be downloaded and accessed from any computer or smartphone.

Instant access to each other

Social media tools like Facebook connect us to literally **billions** of people around the world. Gone are the days of sending a letter and waiting days or months for it to travel over land and sea and then back again. Within moments, we can start up a conversation with someone in just about any country in the world any time of day not just through text but with audio and even high definition video. Family and friends separated by mountains and oceans can practically sit in the same room with one another for hours on end. Separate group chats allow us to keep in touch with friends, plan things for work or school, update our families or congregations all with near instant feedback. Need some help or advice? It's only a message or a call away.

The internet is a powerful tool for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. In countries and regions that are hostile to Christianity, thousands and thousands have discovered Jesus through online videos and freely available copies of the Bible. They can then join with other Christians through the internet and meeting apps like Zoom as many did during the pandemic lockdowns. The elderly and disabled or a mother of small, sick children can share in singing praises to God and listening to an uplifting sermon with the congregation right in their own living room.

Freely available information

On YouTube, you can learn just about anything you'd like to know and there is no shortage of videos on Christianity. They have them for every level of education from the most common and beloved stories of Bible heroes for children to deep theological discussions on issues which the church has struggled with for a thousand years or more. Personal testimonies, seminars, lectureships, moving hymns both classic and modern, the list goes on and on of helpful resources available to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Dangers of Technology

But things aren't all good. With so much information at your fingertips, where do you begin? And how do you separate the wheat from the chaff when for every good video or article, there might be a dozen pushing false teaching and heresy. That's why it's important to develop a love for the truth and a discerning eye. It's also important to stay in the Word of God and not let the "pure milk of the word" be drowned out by the voices around us no matter how popular or convincing they might seem.

There's also the matter of all the other temptations and stumbling blocks that come with unlimited access to the internet. One of the most pernicious is the abundance of sensual and pornographic images and video just waiting for some young man to stumble upon it and be consumed.

Addiction is a huge problem when it comes to technology. Algorithms designed for the purpose feed us just enough of something interesting or new to keep us scrolling or watching. Before you know it, an hour has passed or two, and while you may have had a few laughs or learned a few insightful nuggets of wisdom, you've completely wasted your morning or stayed up far too late in the night. In the endless stream of "content", you forgot about your daily Bible reading or to spend some time in prayer.

This temptation isn't completely new. Cable television had many people on their couches late into the night pressing the button on their remote surfing the channels for anything to watch. But everyone in the room was watching together. Now the whole family, each on their own separate screens, can spend the evening each in their own little world. And when you go out everyone can stay caught up in that world in they carry in their pocket. On the bus or in the barber shop, in the waiting room or the dining room, people no longer need to talk to the people around them. They can just slip off into their own little world until they reach their stop or their number is called. And so our connection to strangers on the other side of the world—ones we've never even met or spoken with—might be stronger than with those in our own home or neighborhood.

Many young and now even middle-aged men suffer from gaming addictions. It might not be as obviously destructive as a drug or gambling addiction, but it can cause serious damage to marriages, lead to problems with children, and just generally get in the way of more important things in life, especially those of a spiritual nature. Again, leisure and entertainment is nothing new, but having it at literally at your fingertips anytime, everywhere makes avoiding the temptation much more difficult.

Social media has become such an integral part of many people's lives, but it brings significant risks that can impact mental health, relationships, and spiritual well-being. One of the most concerning dangers of social media is its capacity to fuel feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Constant exposure to curated, idealized images and lifestyles can lead to unhealthy comparisons, fostering low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, particularly among younger users.

Another critical issue is the spread of misinformation and divisive content. Social media algorithms prioritize engagement, often promoting sensationalist or polarizing material that can exacerbate societal divisions and distort users' perceptions of truth. This environment not only undermines trust but can also lead individuals down dangerous paths of extremism or radicalization. Additionally, the anonymity of social media can encourage cyberbullying, harassment, and other toxic behaviors, creating a hostile space for vulnerable users.

From a spiritual perspective, social media poses unique challenges. It can become a distraction from meaningful activities, such as prayer, meditation, and genuine human interaction. The pursuit of likes, followers, and online validation often competes with deeper values of humility, truth, and selflessness. Moreover, excessive screen time can erode relationships by reducing the quality of face-to-face interactions and diminishing opportunities for genuine connection.

The Dawn of Artificial Intelligence

In the last few years, a new technology has arrived on the market. I decided to incorporate it into this material to make a point. I asked ChatGPT, a popular online chatbot to give me a few paragraphs about the spiritual impact of AI and how it can be used for good and evil. This was its reply:

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) marks a new era of technological progress, but it also carries profound spiritual implications. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, it reshapes how we think, connect, and even worship. While AI offers remarkable tools for spiritual growth and ministry, it also raises critical concerns about human dignity, morality, and the nature of truth. This section itself was partially crafted with the assistance of AI, underscoring its pervasive role in shaping human expression.

AI has the potential to be a powerful ally in spiritual pursuits. Bible study applications use AI to analyze texts, suggest interpretations, and provide resources that deepen understanding. Translation tools bring the Word of God to unreached people groups, fulfilling the Great Commission in unprecedented ways. Virtual prayer apps, chatbots for pastoral care, and sermon-writing assistance expand the reach of ministries to people who may otherwise feel isolated or disconnected. These technologies can inspire faith, foster community, and equip believers to grow spiritually in the digital age.

However, the spiritual dangers of AI cannot be ignored. At its worst, AI can become an idol, subtly replacing human reliance on God with dependence on algorithms and machines. The pursuit of convenience and efficiency can eclipse the call to spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading. Furthermore, AI-driven platforms often prioritize engagement over truth, creating echo chambers that promote division, misinformation, and confusion—forces that are antithetical to the unity and clarity offered by God's Word.

The ethical dilemmas surrounding AI also carry spiritual weight. Autonomous systems and AI-driven decisions often lack moral accountability, reducing complex human values to mere calculations. This mechanistic approach to life risks diminishing the inherent dignity of each person as created in the image of God. Moreover, as AI enables deepfake technology and pervasive surveillance, it challenges notions of truth, privacy, and trust—values central to healthy relationships and a thriving spiritual life.

Ultimately, the spiritual impact of AI depends on how it is used. As believers, we are called to approach this technology with discernment and intentionality, ensuring that it remains a tool to serve humanity rather than a force that controls or dehumanizes us. By grounding our engagement with AI in prayer, Scripture, and community accountability, we can navigate this new frontier in a way that honors God and nurtures our souls.

What do you think? It's pretty amazing isn't it, and perhaps a bit frightening? I don't know that I quite agree with everything it has to say, but it's something worth thinking about. Truth be told, it's not the only part of this material that it wrote, I enlisted its help for a few earlier paragraphs as well, but I'll leave you to figure out which ones.

This technology is developing very quickly and it's not just written text. Some can generate still images, audio clips, and even full videos. There are usually some obvious tells in those last three, but in another year or two they may well be indistinguishable from the "real" thing. It might not be much longer before we have to start wrangling with questions of consciousness and humanity. What exactly does it mean to be made in the image of God? How far do our own powers of creation go?

Tips For Navigating All This

- Be discerning in the media you consume.
 - Is this really something I should be hearing/watching/reading?
 - “I will set nothing wicked before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not cling to me.” (Psalm 101:3 NKJ)
- Look for ways to do things together with friends and family instead of being alone.
- Have someone to be accountable to regarding your weak areas. Keep in touch with them and be honest.
- Leave your phone in the other room.
 - Set up boundaries for when, where, and how you will communicate.
 - It’s okay to not be on-call 24/7.
- Have conversations with real people about real things.
- Keep in touch with your family. People get busy, don’t wait on them to contact you.
- Dedicate time to prayer/meditation/study and also to family.
- Don’t neglect meeting together with the church.
- Use technology to your advantage.
 - Plan out how to use it.
 - There are apps to help you manage your time and device use or to build new and healthier habits.
- Guard your children.
 - The internet is a dangerous place.
 - Help them develop healthy habits and safe practices.
 - Be very careful about unsupervised device use.
 - “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8 NIV)
- Protect your identity and your accounts
- Look out for elderly and vulnerable relatives and friends
- Be careful what you share online
- Use AI tools responsibly
- Don’t believe everything you see/hear on the internet

Other Issues

Of course, not all of the problems and temptations we face today are because of the internet and technology. The devil knows that his old trick still work just as well as they always have and there are plenty of new people around to tempt and ensnare.

Sexual immorality has always been a big problem for people. It's no wonder that Paul lists it first among the works of the flesh in Galatians. Adultery and pre-marital sex both seem to be at all time highs. It's estimated that over 1/3 of Filipino married men have engaged in extramarital affairs, and nearly 60% of children in the Philippines are born to unwed mothers.

The scripture though is very clear:

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled; but God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.” (Hebrews 13:4)

The last few decades have also brought a resurgence in homosexuality and confusion about gender. These things have always on the margins of society, but now they are celebrated and advanced as good or even ideal expressions of ones “authentic self”. Christians have to know the truth about God's roles for men and women and be able to share them with others in a way which shows genuine love and concern for the people involved—many of whom are ignorant of the truth and have been deceived by people they trust or caught up in a fad.

Modern technological advancements in plastic surgery and hormone treatments are also resulting in irreversible changes people's bodies. Many are left permanently scarred or infertile and suffer from serious mental health problems. Bringing the gospel to them and helping them find a place of healing in the church is going to be a task of spiritually mature Christians in the 21st century.

The unborn are also under attack. Many, if not most, non-Christians count the desires of the mother over the life of her unborn child. They may even have been misled into thinking that the child is nothing more than a clump of cells which can be discarded without any moral implications. But Christian teaching has always held that it is a grave evil to kill an unborn child. That sentiment seems to be waning in the Philippines though as attempts are made to legalize abortion here as in much the rest of the world. It would do us well to educate ourselves in this area and help others to do the same.

We could also consider things like drug addiction and mental health issues, but those will have to wait for another time.

One thing I do want to touch on though is grace and forgiveness. As children of God who walk in the spirit, we should always remember the grace he as given us to be set free from our sins and the gift of eternal life we have in Christ Jesus our lord. Part of our commission is that we let others know about that great gift if they will repent of their sins and turn to God.

A big part of spiritual living extending that same grace and forgiveness that we have from God to the people around us. We know from experience that the flesh is weak, and that we ourselves have failed many times. Jesus sternly warned his disciples on more than one occasion, that if they did not forgive their brother from the heart, then God would not forgive them. It is of the utmost importance then that we master the art of forgiveness. It is especially important when we realize that most of the hurts that we experience never really happened, or they didn't happen for the reasons we give them. Are we

holding people to a standard that we do not hold ourselves to? How we respond to offense and how we deal with anger and resentment is a strong measure of spiritual maturity. A spiritual man is a forgiven and a forgiving person.

One final note: despite the promises of God and the forgiveness we often give to and receive from others, many people struggle to forgive themselves. They constantly see themselves as unworthy of forgiveness. We need to remember that God's love for us is greater than our own. As Jesus said, if we know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more does our heavenly Father know how to give good gifts to his children? And "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness...we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world." (1 John 1:9; 2:1-2) Don't let your own internal doubts and fears keep you from having grace and peace in your heart.

Final Thoughts

"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:1-17 NRS)