



Spiritual Due Diligence

Exploring questions of eternal significance

Study 2 The Nature of Man

presented by Links Players International

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Spiritual Due Diligence

Introduction to this study

WHEN A MAN OR WOMAN CONSIDERS making a significant financial investment, they normally do not rush into the decision. Rather, they begin a process commonly known as due diligence—a gathering of facts and considerations that will allow them to judge rightly whether this investment is appropriate for them.

Of course, due diligence does not guarantee success. However, if an investment fails and we ask the investors whether or not they did their due diligence, the most embarrassing answer they can give is, “No, we did not.”

While thousands of wise investors each year avoid that embarrassment by conducting due diligence in their financial endeavors, millions of people never take the same careful steps in their spiritual lives. While they have heard stories of God and the afterlife, and while they may have even toyed with such questions loosely in their minds, they have never set about the task of spiritual due diligence—considering the information that would support these eternally significant claims.

Intent of this series

The intent of this series, *Spiritual Due Diligence*, is to assist potential spiritual investors with regard to investigating the claims of the Bible, particularly as they point to a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One study in this series will focus on the claims of other faith systems, but that is not our primary intent here. Instead, by a thorough examination of the Bible, you will have opportunity to study Christianity in depth, and thereafter you will have the tools necessary by which to measure other faiths and religions.

The audience for this series

At least three categories of readers should find great value in this series: those who are beginning their first serious investigation of the Bible, those who are desiring to increase their knowledge and understanding of the Bible, and those who may be speaking with others about their own established Christian faith.

Focus of this particular study

This study is the second in the series. Its particular thrust is to explore what the Bible says about the nature of man. If you are familiar with the humanistic perspective, which says that all people are good inside, you may find things that surprise you. You will have to weigh for yourself the “basically good” vs. “basically evil” arguments and decide which line of reasoning points toward the truth in light of what you have witnessed in the world around you and through your own life experiences. This is a powerful step in conducting your spiritual due diligence.

— Jeffrey Cranford and Jeff Hopper, for Links Players International



The Nature of Man

Lesson One: The claims of humanism

ANYONE ENGAGED IN DUE DILIGENCE OF ANY KIND is willing to accept the fact that, in their inquiry, they will be confronted with choices—often opposing one another—and that they will almost always be forced to make a decision between the options.

In business, this often includes degrees as well, typically pertaining to risk. How much risk are you willing to take? How soon? For how long?

In lesser endeavors, there is risk too: if I buy a new \$500 driver and still hit the ball sideways, I've lost at least some of the money I've spent. But, of course, a devalued \$500 driver is not so great a setback as a life's savings invested in a faulty business venture.

Amidst this decision making landscape of due diligence, we begin to look at spiritual matters. And we can expect to find conflicting ideas. While religious doctrines may teach certain ideas as essential truth, other philosophical approaches to life may not see the truth at all in these ideas.

Such is the case when we consider the nature of man (we use the expression “the nature of man” to envelop all humanity, both men and women—not because we are adherent to gender biases but because of the historical and common use of the expression). The Bible teaches one thing to be true about humanity, while others have different ideas. In this matter, the camp of most basic difference is *humanism*.

Tracing humanism's roots

Beginning in 1933, with the authoring of the *Humanist Manifesto* by several prominent leaders, the humanist notion began to take serious shape. At its core, humanism has held forth a naturalistic view of the world: There is no god responsible for man. Rather, man is responsible for himself.

From that beginning, humanism has been very optimistic about humanity's ability to work for its own common good. That optimism was almost immediately challenged by the rise of Hitler's regime and imperialism in the 1930s and 40s. This and other obviously evil developments in the course of history led to some adjustments in humanist philosophy, as spelled out in the *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973. But the preface to that document was clear: “...humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to live and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.” Humanism was dependent on humans; God (or gods) had no part to play.

In 2000, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* arose, authored by Paul Kurtz. This particular document gave special emphasis to science and technology as the source of much hope: “For the first time in human history we possess the means provided by science and technology to ameliorate the human condition, advance happiness and freedom, and enhance human life for all people on this planet.”

Through it all, this most recent manifesto maintained the optimism of its predecessors: “Although many problems may seem intractable, we have good reasons to believe that we can marshal our talent to solve them, and that by goodwill and dedication a better life will be attainable by more and more members of the human community. Planetary humanism holds forth great promises for humankind. We wish to cultivate a sense of wonder and excitement about the potential opportunities for realizing enriched lives for ourselves and for generations yet to be born.”¹

Humanism’s core

At its core, then, humanism stands for humans. It sees their great potential for good, without the help of an outside preeminent being (God). By themselves, men and women will solve their greatest problems and make continued advances. And when we look around at the many things that scientists and inventors have been able to produce through the decades, we wonder if the humanists might be right. Except that this is not what the Bible teaches. The discussion of the Bible’s view of the human condition will be the essence of the ensuing lessons in this study.

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

In which direction have you leaned in your own thinking—manward or Godward? Do particular personal circumstances or reports of world events play into the ebb and flow of your thinking on this matter? If so, how?

Read the words of theologian John Piper at the right.

If both the humanist and the Bible believer were “born deficient and needy and dissatisfied,” what is the difference in their approach to this problem? Would you say that you more desire things that come from within you or things that come from outside of you?

¹Quotes from the Humanist Manifestos were taken from the Contender Ministries web site, www.contenderministries.org/humanism.php. A fourth document, Humanist Manifesto III, was published in 2003.

John Piper on desires

“We have an immense void inside that craves satisfaction from powers and persons and pleasures outside ourselves. Yearning and longing and desire are the very stuff of our nature. We were born deficient and needy and dissatisfied.”

—from *The Pleasures of God*

SAUL’S ‘SOLUTION’

The Bible presents its contents in many forms, including history, prophecy, poetry, and doctrine. We can learn from each of these forms, but one of the Old Testament accounts of human effort points out the difference between the endeavors of man and the endeavors of God from the Bible’s perspective.

The first king of the Israelites was a tall, strong man named Saul. In human terms, Saul’s appearance was certainly what most subjects would desire in their king. But Saul’s character proved to be suspect in many ways, chiefly in his waffling obedience to the God of his people.

God often issued His instructions to Saul through the prophet Samuel. But in 1 Samuel 13, Saul’s impatience with both God and Samuel led him to act according to his own council.

Hard-pressed by the Philistine army, Saul waited seven days for Samuel to arrive and make the sacrifice before God as an authorized priest. But when Samuel did not appear, Saul’s men grew more skittish than ever, and the king took matters into his own hands. He offered the sacrifice, though he was not legally authorized to do so. Just as the offering was completed, Samuel arrived. Immediately he asked, “What have you done?” Then Samuel told Saul, “You have acted foolishly.”

Like Saul, we too will often be faced with the decision between Godward faith and self-governing action. This is the difference between Christ-following and humanism.



The Nature of Man

Lesson Two: The fall of man

DO YOU KNOW ANY PERFECT PEOPLE? If you do, you had better leave your perfect friends alone—you sure don't want to be the one responsible for bringing them down!

As much as we hesitate to admit it, we all make mistakes—frequently. But more than mistakes, we commit what the Bible calls sins. We tell lies to the detriment of others, we pridefully take stands for our own benefit, we speak foully of others, we consume to excess. These are not things we enjoy doing, and they often cause us to pay a heavy consequential price.

At Links Players, we have a friend who starts a conversation with playing partners when they hit an ugly golf shot. “Ever do that in life?” he asks. “Something you regret?” He always gets an affirmative answer. But there's no surprise in that. Whether or not we like to talk about it, whether or not we are religious, we can all see quite readily that we are guilty of wrongdoing.

But how did all this get started? From the biblical accounts, where did selfishness and foolishness and shamefulness come from? We'll begin to answer these questions with today's study.

Adam and Eve

If the names in that subheading sound like mythological characters to you, there could be a simple explanation for this. It is the difference between reading the Bible as literature and reading the Bible as history. Many people learned to read the Bible in the same way they read other literary works: as fiction. In these studies, we ask that you read the Scriptures as authenticated history. While you may be hesitant to do this at this stage, a later study (*The Nature of Scripture*) will delve into the reliability of the Bible. In the meantime, since the Bible presents itself as a book of factual accounts, we will discuss it that way.

Now here are the facts as the Bible presents them:

- God created Adam and Eve in His own image and placed them in the garden of Eden, a place where His creative perfection was on display.
- God told them they had freedom to roam the garden and eat of its many fruits. However, there was one tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—whose fruit should never be a part of their diet.
- At the tempting invitation of the enemy, Satan, who posed as an attractive snake, Eve ate of the fruit so that she could “become like God.” Adam followed her in this meal, and thereby both committed the first sin, directly

disobeying the commands of God.

- As is the nature of sin, this first disobedient act was quickly followed by two other sins: lying to God and the false placing of blame on another.
- God explained to Adam and Eve that by their sin, they had introduced sin into the world. Both sin and its consequences would pass through the generations.
- God promised that “the seed of the woman” would one day produce a redeemer who would crush the serpent’s head—a prophecy of Christ’s victory over Satan on the cross.

What this means to us today

Because of the sins of Adam and Eve, the sin nature has passed from them through the generations right down to us. Despite the common suggestion that people are “basically good,” we notice that the first tendencies of young children are not toward obedience, but toward disobedience—they want to see how much they can get away with. This does not make them “evil” as that word is used in the common vernacular, but it certainly shows that from birth we move not toward perfection but toward imperfection. “Nobody’s perfect,” may be a popular dismissal of responsibility for our ill actions, but it is also a plain indictment. We err, and we will continue to do so until the day we die, a matter we will discuss in the ensuing lessons.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Genesis 2:15-17.

How extensive was God’s command? How restrictive? Are this extent and restriction in keeping with what you have considered about God in the past—that is, is He shown here to be more or less lenient than you had considered?

Read Genesis 3:4-6

What allurements did the serpent (Satan) use in tempting Eve? How did she think she would be made better through her sin?

REFLECTION

Are there times when you have used a “greater gain” to justify something you were fairly sure was wrong? What was the result?

GENESIS 2

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die.”

GENESIS 3

¹Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden?’”

²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden.

³But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴“No! You will not die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it.

THE LONG RUN

Genesis 3:14-19 records God’s pronouncements to Adam and Eve and Satan in response to the sin they have committed. This includes punishments: thorns and thistles among the crops of the field, pain in childbirth, sparring in marriage, death.

But before that, God made a remarkable promise. Satan would be relegated to a position of submission, signified by the lowly nature of a serpent in the dust. Meanwhile, through the woman, God would bring a Savior who would overcome the work of Satan.

From this early stage, then, God ordained a master plan. He has overseen it ever since.



The Nature of Man

Lesson Three: The continuing result of sin

IF THE BIBLE'S ACCOUNT OF SIN'S BEGINNING IN AN IDYLIC GARDEN is only a myth, we could in some ways expect that sin does not exist today. And in fact, some people would argue that very thing. Sin, they say, is only an idea culturally—even arbitrarily—attached to a particular set of actions. In one part of the world, for instance, truth is a virtue, while in another part of the world the best liars are lionized.

Further down the line in that argument, some will reason that since cultures vary and your residence in one is only the accidental result of where you were born, we should each be allowed to determine what is best for ourselves.

That all makes sense except for one thing: consequences. Ill actions almost always lead to a price that must be paid. And this is a dynamic that, without question, continues into our time.

'Natural consequences'

Often, when a golf ball takes a bad bounce, you will hear it said that the player got a "bad break." But if that player's ball is 30 yards offline to begin with, the question really has to be begged: wasn't it the player's poor play that caused the poor consequence?

If a player makes his way through a tournament round with 15 clubs in the bag (one above the legal limit), then the rules are in place to impose a penalty, even disqualification, on the player. But in golf, as in many other ventures, the more common ill results are what we would term "natural consequences." Hit a ball way right, where it flies among the trees, and the chances of a "bad break" greatly increase.

While some may have difficulty with a seemingly arbitrary set of laws established by a culture or a religion, it is more difficult to set aside the fact that many of these same laws, when disregarded, produce devastating consequences. These consequences fall into one of three categories: emotional, physical, and spiritual.

Although we could choose from a number of examples in discussing these consequences, the prevalent nature of sexual interest in our time makes this particular arena worth noting. First, sexual expression similar to what we see today was common at the time when men and women first started to follow Christ in the Roman Empire. Also, sexual boundaries invite great debate, for where the Bible restricts Christ's followers to sex inside of marriage, current social leanings suggest that such restrictions are unnecessary if two people consent to the sexual activity. And yet, whether or not we classify extramarital sexual activity as "sin," we find these consequences at work when sexual activity goes awry.

Emotional consequences. If a husband or a wife chooses unilaterally to engage in

a sexual affair with another partner, the door is opened for any number of possible emotional consequences. Even if the affair is kept secret, the lover of the wandering spouse can place emotional demands (beyond keeping the secret itself) on the spouse. Worse still, if the affair is revealed to the unwitting spouse, distrust, anger, jealousy, and depression all can result. But such consequences exist not only in secret affairs. When a “free” married couple chooses to allow one another to roam sexually, distrust and inferiority arise all the same.

Physical consequences. The physical consequences of multiple sex partners is well-documented and requires little discussion here. Without diligent, absolute precautions, sexually transmitted diseases and increased chances of certain cancers arise when one’s sexual activity does not follow the Bible’s prescribed monogamous track.

Spiritual consequences. Because all men and women possess what we have commonly called a conscience, there is a most certain awareness when one steps outside their spiritual comfort zone. That awareness is guilt. And only two human responses to guilt are allowed of our consciences: suppression by rationalization, or depression by acceptance of the blame. Either way, one’s spirit cannot rest with sin. (The Bible does offer a third response—accepting the forgiveness of Christ—which will be discussed in Lesson Seven: “Is there no hope?”)

In the end, then, no matter how we classify sin—as a religious restriction, a cultural stamp, or an imperfect act against a perfect God—the consequences continue from the time the Bible was written into our own lives. We cannot escape this plain fact.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Romans 1:18-32.

In what ways does this passage give you a sense of the First Century culture in which it was written compared to the culture we live in today?

What natural consequences of open sexual activity are noted in these verses?

What other sins are mentioned? How visible are these sins today?

REFLECTION

What do you think of the argument that negative natural consequences point to the ill nature (if not the sinful nature) of certain actions? Is there a way to escape such consequences yet live as one wills?

ROMANS 1

¹⁸For God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, ¹⁹since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰From the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse. ²¹For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God delivered them over in the cravings of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served something created instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

²⁶This is why God delivered them over to degrading passions. For even their females exchanged natural sexual intercourse for what is unnatural. ²⁷The males in the same way also left natural sexual intercourse with females and were inflamed in their lust for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the appropriate penalty for their perversion.

²⁸And because they did not think it worthwhile to have God in their knowledge, God delivered them over to a worthless mind to do what is morally wrong. ²⁹They are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, disputes, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful. ³²Although they know full well God’s just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die—they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.



The Nature of Man

Lesson Four: The extent of sin

IN THE LAST TWO LESSONS, WE EXPLORED THE NOTION that the inclination toward sin, sin itself, and the consequences of sin have been carried down from generation to generation from Adam and Eve to us. And now we'll admit that that idea is offensive to some, perhaps to many. While we are normally willing to admit our own faults, we certainly don't like others to point out our sins. It can be embarrassing, emotionally painful, and downright maddening.

And yet, we are also quite aware that there is great value in learning from our mistakes. When in golf, for example, we hit shot after shot to the right, or we cannot consistently get the ball off the ground, we are more than happy to report to our professional the symptoms of our poor play. That makes it easier for the pro to diagnose our problem and move us toward a cure.

Likewise, if we intend to build a career in a certain profession, we will often choose to find a mentor early on. And we will allow that person to help us identify our weaknesses and errors so that we can make modifications toward success.

In this lesson, then, we will operate on the assumption that you are willing to look at the extent of sin—how it touches your life and the lives of others, and the scope of the damage it does. Our hope is that such a study will not place you under a cloud of guilt so much as it will spark your realization that something must be done about sin's impact on your life.

The gross sins

The big sins are easy to identify, aren't they? When a corporate accountant embezzles hundreds of thousands of dollars from the business, we understand that a severe penalty should be paid. In the same way, we see almost immediately the heinous nature of serial murders, gang rape, or a shooting during a robbery that leads the victim into a life of paralysis.

Most people never worry too much about sin in their life because when they categorize acts that qualify as sin, they see only these frightening crimes. "I'm better than those folks, certainly," they say, "and better than a lot of others as well." And through this justification, they dismiss another set of sins that concerns God greatly.

The subtle sins

Consider this verse: "For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all" (James 2:10). In our minds, this has the flavor of an illogical teaching. Certainly, covetousness or lying cannot be so serious a transgression as murder or even idolatry.

And yet Christ Himself taught that the seemingly less consequential sins sprang from

the same nature as the gross sins. In the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, He taught this: “You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, *Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.* But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Such comparisons—for there were many others—were drawn by Christ because His foremost concern is with the condition of our hearts. How often have you heard neighbors say of a man convicted of a stunning crime, “He seemed like a nice fellow. He kept to himself and didn’t cause any trouble”? But something wicked was obviously brewing in that man’s heart. Normally, it began only with anger or resentment—what we might call subtle sins. Unchecked, however, those subtle sins led to heartbreaking results.

Does this always happen, a move into terrible sin? Of course not. But God sees all sin the same for a reason: all sin stands outside His own perfect circle. All sin carves out a chasm between us and God. In an average lifetime, just one “little sin” a day—a selfish act or a false word, say—adds up to more than 25,000 sins. That’s a lot of imperfection to match up against a perfect God. The Bible calls our meeting with God “the Day.” Certainly, all honesty will be required of us then. He calls on us to start with honesty now.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Psalm 14:1-3, Romans 3:23, and James 2:8-10.

How do these passages speak commonly of the extent of sin?

Read Revelation 19:11-14.

This passage depicts Christ as eternal ruler. How would we match up against such a king even if our sins are “few” or “minor”?

REFLECTION

When you look in the mirror of self-assessment, are you willing to admit that you have missed the mark on many occasions? How does a person who does not accept God work through such sins? How does today’s lesson suggest this must change if we are to know God?

PSALM 14

¹The fool says in his heart,
“God does not exist.”

They are corrupt; their actions are
revolting.

There is no one who does good.

²The Lord looks down
from heaven

on the human race
to see if there is one who is wise,
one who seeks God.

³All have turned away;

all alike have become corrupt.

There is no one who does good,
not even one.

ROMANS 3

²³For all have sinned and fall short of the
glory of God.

JAMES 2

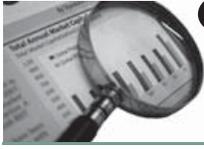
⁸If you really carry out the royal law
prescribed in Scripture, *You shall love your
neighbor as yourself*, you are doing well.

⁹But if you show favoritism, you commit sin
and are convicted by the law as transgres-
sors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the entire law,
yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking
it all.

REVELATION 19

¹¹Then I saw heaven opened, and there
was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful
and True, and in righteousness He judges
and makes war. ¹²His eyes were like a
fiery flame, and on His head were many
crowns. He had a name written that no one
knows except Himself. ¹³He wore a robe
stained with blood, and His name is called
the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies that were
in heaven followed Him on white horses,
wearing pure white linen. ¹⁵From His mouth
came a sharp sword, so that He might
strike the nations. He will shepherd them
with an iron scepter. He will also trample
the winepress of the fierce anger of God,
the Almighty. ¹⁶And on His robe and on His
thigh He has a name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.



The Nature of Man

Lesson Five: What sin looks like

IN CLOSING THE PREVIOUS LESSON, we drew a rather daunting conclusion: sin is far more pervasive than you might have previously considered. According to the Scripture, we are all guilty of it. Of course, in order to finalize our conclusion in that regard, we would have to be able to show what sin looks like, for certainly not all people are murderers or thieves or perhaps even liars. So can we conclusively say that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”?

There are two methods we could employ in considering what sin looks like: the line-item and the litmus test.

With the line-item approach, we could spend many hours surveying each of the Old Testament laws and New Testament directives. One by one, you could consider whether or not you have lived by each of these rules. Eventually, nearly every last of us would agree that, yes, over here is a sin that I have engaged in more than once. It is my weakness, and I do not know how to overcome it. (You will on rare occasion actually find a person who insists they have never sinned—one such lady was heard to say, “I have always done what the nuns told me to do when I was in school as a child”—but we’ll let these people be for now.)

But the cumbersome nature of the line-item approach causes us to wonder if there might instead be a litmus test—that is, a single lens through which we can view all actions and decide whether they qualify as sin or as righteousness. Actually, the Bible does offer such a single lens. It is the lens of faith. Consider the following two verses:

“...everything that is not from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23)

“For without faith it is impossible to please God...” (Hebrews 11:6)

It is likely rather obvious that the faith being spoken of here is not an unpointed faith (as is sometimes implied in expressions like “keep the faith”). Rather, it is faith in God. In fact, Hebrews 11:6 ends like this:

“...for the one who draws near to Him must believe that He exists and rewards those who seek Him.”

The litmus test of our actions—are they sinful or are they righteous?—is whether or not we have faith in God when we do them.

How does this work?

Obviously, because so much of what we do in any given day is spontaneous, you might find it hard to assess each action, even with such a straightforward unit of measure. For instance, it would be hard to imagine that among those crowded New York

sidewalk scenes we so often see in the movies, there is a certain set of people—albeit randomly distributed—who are more righteous than the rest of us because they are “walking in faith.”

The question usually becomes easier in hindsight, as when we are reflecting on a potent moment of our day—a full-blooded dispute, say, or a decision to spend thousands (or hundreds of thousands) of dollars on a new headquarters for our burgeoning business. Did we act in faith then? Did we even for a moment consider the presence (and preference) of God in our actions, or reactions as they may be? If we did not, then we have acted apart from God, we have acted without faith, we have sinned.

Now, you may not be convinced that such an act is sin. But take this idea one step farther. Atheism is the disbelief in a transcendent, almighty God. Relatively few people are philosophical atheists. But all of us, at many times in our lives, have acted as practical atheists. We have functioned as if there were no transcendent, almighty God—even if we say we believe He exists. In this regard, it is no wonder that Scripture says faithlessness, however it shows itself, is sin.

And if faithlessness is sin, the rest is easy. For every act that ignores the decrees of God through the writers of Scripture ignores the God who issued those decrees. It ignores the fact that in His utter wisdom He really does know what is best for us. With no room for argument, our godlessness meets His Godliness. According to this simple litmus test, we have indeed all sinned.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Hebrews 11:23-29.

How were Moses' actions governed by faith in God?

Read 2 Peter 1:3-8.

What is faith's position in the pursuit of righteousness as a follower of Christ?

REFLECTION

Without a doubt, you can admit after a teaching like this that you are sinner and yet still stand on your merits compared to other “greater sinners.” Such a choice banks on the judgment of God using relative standards versus the judgment of God using absolute standards. From what you have read in the lessons so far, what standard seems more likely to you? Why?

HEBREWS 11

²³By faith Moses, after he was born, was hidden by his parents for three months, because they saw that the child was beautiful and they didn't fear the king's edict. ²⁴By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and ²⁵chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the short-lived pleasure of sin. ²⁶For he considered reproach for the sake of the Messiah to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since his attention was on the reward.

²⁷By faith he left Egypt behind, not being afraid of the king's anger, for he persevered, as one who sees Him who is invisible. ²⁸By faith he instituted the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. ²⁹By faith they crossed the Red Sea as though they were on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to do this, they were drowned.

2 PETER 1

³For His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.



The Nature of Man

Lesson Six: How we know we have sinned

IN GOLF, IT IS EASY TO KNOW THAT WE HAVE ERRED. Our shot sails wide of the mark. In business, we lose a client by speaking rudely or becoming lax in attending to their account. In education, we mark the wrong bubbles; in technology, we push the wrong button; in industry, we use flawed materials. In other words, in virtually all of life's arenas, there are telltale signs of the trouble into which we have gotten ourselves.

When we turn in a spiritual direction, however, we can find people who suggest there is no way of knowing right from wrong. As we discussed in Lesson Three, these people suggest that certain errors are not sin in a moral sense, but rather a violation of some cultural moré. Such an error may be wrong in some places, but not in others, so it cannot be universally classified a sin. In this way, almost any action can be regarded as acceptable, even actions deemed illegal by governmental authorities.

But as we discussed in that earlier lesson, there is the glaring matter of consequences. In fact, a logical (left-brained) person might very well steer clear of certain sins for this reason alone. They have thought through the progression of an action to its possible end result and, in dread of the consequences, they choose not to commit the act (not to sin).

Others, however, are not so logical. They “play by feel.” If what they desire to do now feels good, they will deal with the consequences later. For now, they will do as they please, with perhaps the single caveat that their actions shouldn't harm others.

And yet, both the logical person and the one who attends more closely to their present feelings deal with a common result of their sin—even when they willingly accept the emotional, physical or spiritual consequences. This common result is guilt.

The role of the conscience

“Let your conscience be your guide” is an adage we have all heard and employed to some degree. The Bible, too, speaks of our conscience. We can listen to it, because it comes from God—or we can reject it, because it comes from God! In other words, our conscience is like God Himself. We must accept it or reject it, just as we must accept Him or reject Him. The middle ground doesn't get us very far.

If we make a habit of listening to our conscience, it will send us a series of warnings or chastenings. If we are attentive to our conscience when considering a questionable moral action, it will suggest (often quite strongly) that we avoid the action and choose a more noble course.

If, however, we choose to go against the suggestion of our conscience and act in a sinful way, we will be confronted again by our conscience “on the back end.” This

time, we call the voice of our conscience *guilt*. Biblically, true guilt (as opposed to false accusations from the enemy, Satan) is a gift from God; it creates an ill feeling within meant to lead us to repentance before God. This repentance, which is a confession of our sin and a return to right action, is met by God's forgiveness and restoration to intimacy with Him.

There is another option, however. This is the dismissal of guilt. Many people, because they do not like the feeling of guilt telling them that they have acted in sin, rationalize or excuse what they have done and return to those same actions. According to Scripture, there is grave danger in this practice: our consciences cease to function in a way that will keep us from trouble, both on earth and in eternity.

The question for all of us, then, is not whether we sin, but what we do in response to that sin. If we pretend it never happened and return to our sin, we are ignoring the very mechanism God placed within us to keep us from disaster. But if we let our conscience (and guilt) guide and correct us, we will not only make good decisions but godly ones.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Romans 2:14-15 and 2 Corinthians 1:12.

How do our consciences function in the same way that witnesses serve a side in a court of law?

Read 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and Titus 1:15.

What are the dangers of ignoring or rejecting your conscience?

Read Romans 2:1,2-8.

In what ways does a right response to God make a difference in our lives?

REFLECTION

Before this lesson, what role did you allow your conscience and guilt to play in your life? Has your thinking been changed in any way by what you have studied today?

ROMANS 2

¹⁴So when Gentiles, who do not have the law, instinctively do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences testify in support of this, and their competing thoughts either accuse them or excuse them...

2 CORINTHIANS 1

¹²For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with God-given sincerity and purity, not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace.

1 TIMOTHY 4

¹Now the Spirit explicitly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared.

TITUS 1

¹⁵To the pure, everything is pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; in fact, both their mind and conscience are defiled.

ROMANS 2

¹Therefore, anyone of you who judges is without excuse. For when you judge another, you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the same things.... ³Do you really think—anyone of you who judges those who do such things yet do the same—that you will escape God's judgment? ⁴Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hardness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed. ⁶He will repay each one according to his works: ⁷eternal life to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; ⁸but wrath and indignation to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth, but are obeying unrighteousness...



The Nature of Man

Lesson Seven: Is there no hope?

MOST GOLFERS HAVE HEARD THE OLD JOKE about the player who made his way along on a hole near the clubhouse. When he had finished, he noticed that the head professional had come out on the veranda. Fishing for a compliment, the golfer called up to him, “How am I doing?”

“That depends,” the pro called back. “What game are you playing?”

We can all imagine how it felt to be that golfer. Similarly, we have put great effort into ventures in life only to be told that our work was all in vain.

This may be the very reason that many people fail to conduct their spiritual due diligence. They are afraid that the course they thought right all these years would be deemed all wrong. And after all that effort, they would simply rather not hear the bad news.

After a series of lessons like those that comprise this study, it would be easy to sit in that seat right now. Looking at one’s own sin can be a real “downer,” as they say. And we can be led to wonder, *Is there then no hope for someone like me?*

No comparison

First of all, we hope you realize by this point that sin is universally pervasive. No one is immune. So if there is no hope for you, there is no hope for anyone. Those who adhere to this notion, usually called existentialists, suggest that we just live as we please, because there is no way out. Hopelessness births the hellion.

While it is no consolation that we are all in the same boat if the boat we are in has a hole in it, we might also be led down a different path. In this framework, we purport that if there is an almighty God and He really does have control of the universe, He has an answer for this universal problem. He would not allow us to be hopelessly trapped by our own condition.

God’s way out

In fact, the Bible unveils God’s plan from beginning to end, that through His Son Jesus Christ He has made a way for us to escape from the eternal consequences of our sin. Chiefly, consider this verse, which encapsulates what God did through Christ:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18, New International Version)

In Scriptural terms, this death is called *atonement*. Its origins go back to the Old Testament sacrifices, wherein priests offered the blood of animals as a “covering” for the sins of the people. The shortcoming of those sacrifices, however, was that they were

only symbolic acts, requiring repetition. They were made by imperfect priests with imperfect animals. And in this way, they lacked eternal power. For that, the people awaited a great savior, the one they would call Messiah.

In the writings of the New Testament apostles, we discover not only that Christ was called the Messiah, but that His death met the requirements for a lasting atonement: His blood was shed, and it was shed by one who was “without sin.” We read about Christ’s role as the lasting Savior in the general letter to the Hebrews:

So Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.... For this kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He doesn't need to offer sacrifices everyday, as high priests do—first for their own sins, and then for those of the people. He did this once for all when He offered Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak, but the promise of the oath, which came after the law, appoints a Son, who has been perfected forever. (Hebrews 7:22,26-28)

God’s answer to our move toward eternal separation from Him, then, is neither one of indifference or one of angered silence. By sending His Son Jesus Christ to become a sacrificial atonement for our sin, His answer is one of action. Many people cannot bear looking deeply at the death of Christ on the cross, chiefly because of its pain and sorrow. But the cross is where those who choose to follow Christ begin their journey with Him. They find in Christ’s death on the cross the answer to the question we started with today: Is there no hope? In Christ, there is great hope. And in our next study, “The Nature of God and Christ,” we will consider more thoroughly who God is and how Christ became our hope.

BIBLE STUDY

Read *Colossians 2:16-19*.

How does this passage contribute to our understanding of how the Old Testament regulations have been replaced by God’s ultimate design, the perfect Messiah?

REFLECTION

While our due diligence is far from done, this lesson brings us to a crossroad: is it possible that Jesus Christ is the answer we have hoped for, and how much do we want to go on in finding out about Him?

COLOSSIANS 2

¹⁶Therefore don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or new moon or a sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah. ¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm and inflated without cause by his fleshly mind. ¹⁹He doesn't hold onto the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by ligaments and tendons, develops with growth from God.

CHRIST AND US

While the Bible may state that eternal life is available through Jesus Christ, many people want to know whether Christ can identify with them personally. In other words, they don't want only to know about God, but they want God to be able to know them. Consider these words in Hebrews:

“Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to that confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive grace and find mercy to help us at the proper time.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

If you are a follower of Christ, this is a particular encouraging passage. It tells us that:

- (1) our priest (or mediator), Jesus Christ, has spent time in heaven
- (2) our priest is able to understand the temptations and trials we face
- (3) the relationship forged by Christ allows us to approach Him with confidence
- (4) our priest is able and ready to assist us at the right time



The Nature of Man

Lesson Eight: In review—what do I know about sin?

THE TITLE OF THIS STUDY IS “THE NATURE OF MAN.” Because we discussed the humanistic perspective at the outset of this study, we made room for the fact that there is more than one view on the inner workings of the human heart. As we proceeded, however, we focused exclusively on what the Bible has to say about us and how we are born into and motivated toward sin. This singular perspective allows you to weigh the claims of Scripture on their own merits. Do they resonate with you from what you have observed in the your own life and in the world around you?

For you to carefully consider that question now, as you make decisions about progressing to future studies, it may be helpful to review some of the key thoughts of this study.

The contrast between humanism and the Bible

The foundational beliefs of humanism stand for humans. They suggest that humans have the abilities and morals within them to make choices for good, without the influence or assistance of a preeminent being like the God of Scripture. Contrarily, the Bible teaches that men and women have throughout time turned from God’s direction and chosen their own wisdom. Thus, humans are not “wired for good” but rather quite prone to sin.

Where you stood in regard to humanism and the teaching of the Bible may have been at one place when you began this study, and you may find yourself in a far different place today. Would you say your thoughts have remained the same, become open to other possibilities, or changed substantially through the course of this study? Why?

The beginnings of sin

Sin began when Adam and Eve disobeyed the one rule that God had required them to follow: do not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In their disobedience, they moved from their perfected created state to an imperfect standing before God. Additionally, they introduced sin to every successive generation, right into our own time.

The evidence of sin today

Sin, a condition within that is the catalyst to the acts we call “sins,” remains with us today. We see this not only in the most evil examples of the past and the present—men and women committed to the destruction of others for their own gain—but we

see it in our own lives as well, when we make small choices for our own sakes that deny God’s place as the designer and arbiter of what is truly good.

The place of faith

When God is given full reign in our lives, we call this faith. The disciples asked that Jesus increase their faith, because they knew that faith was the impetus for all right action before God. When we act without God in mind, we are always sinning, whether or not we say we believe in Him, for “everything that is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Our active conscience

When we consider acting in sin, our conscience sends us warnings that we either mind or set aside. Likewise, if we commit a sin, either with premeditation or in spontaneity, we will hear from our conscience in the form of guilt. Again, we may accept this chastening or dismiss it in favor of repeating the sin. Those who repeatedly ignore their conscience are at risk of “searing” their conscience so that it no longer effectively keeps them from sin.

When you review these matters regarding sin and guilt, what are your thoughts? Are you angry that sin is so prevalent? Do you feel helpless in standing up to it, or defeatist in the need to even try to do so? Do you want to seek God for a remedy to this sin?

God’s remedy for sin

Through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God has made a remedy for sin that both satisfies His imperative justice and dispenses His immense love.

While you may yet desire a deeper understanding of how Jesus Christ qualifies as the One who can save us from the eternal consequences of our sin, what do the simple facts about the reason for Christ’s death tell you about God?

WHAT’S NEXT?

This is the second in a series of studies on spiritual due diligence. The complete set of studies will allow for a thorough investigation of some of a number of spiritual matters, including:

- The need for due diligence
- The nature of Scripture
- Death and the afterlife
- What other religions teach in comparison to the Bible
- The invisible realm
- End times

The third study in the series, which you may explore next, is “The Nature of God and Christ.” Its goal is to consider the nature and character of God, with specific consideration as to how Jesus Christ relates to God. Its lessons include a look at God’s eternal existence; His Trinitarian existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and His incarnation (living in the flesh) as Jesus of Nazareth.

Our hope throughout these studies is that you will gain a greater and greater sense of who God is and how He promises to interact with you as taught in the Bible. If this occurs, you will have accomplished what many have not—you will have conducted your spiritual due diligence.

What you decide to do with the knowledge you gain is surely a matter between you and God. But we also believe that God has designed us to live in community with other people. Therefore, it is also important that you discuss what you are thinking with others who are also considering the claims of Scripture, be they “seasoned veterans” of Bible study or quite new at the task. If you are not in a study with others at this time and would like to be, call Links Players at 800-90-LINKS and we’ll offer some suggestions for groups who might encourage you in your thought and discussion.



Spiritual Due Diligence

Leading a group study

IT CAN BE DAUNTING TO BE CALLED ON to teach the Word of God. Indeed, many potential leaders have told us that while they are capable of and eager to bring a group together, or to act as host, teaching is an entirely different level, one for which they do not consider themselves prepared.

Others don't feel so much weight when it comes to teaching. They know their Bibles well, or they're naturals when speaking to a crowd.

It is, then, the precise goal of the structure of these Links Players Bible studies to provide a fully operational Bible study for those teachers who need much assistance and yet a format that leaves room for experienced leaders to bring their own learning to the table.

In each lesson, you will find these features:

- An **introduction** providing connections for the reader between what they see and know in their lives and the topic of study at hand. While we are primarily a sports-minded ministry aimed at golfers, our materials are used by many non-golfers. Therefore, these introductions use examples from more common experiences, as well as those tied to athletics.
- A **narrative** progressing through the main ideas of the lesson. Some leaders may choose to read this with the participants verbatim (or nearly so). Others may use it as a general guide for presenting the material.
- A **Bible study**, drawing from particular specific Scripture passages. These passages are included in the light green bar on the right side of each lesson. You may find that you wish to provide the broader context for these passages from your own Bible. You may also wish to look up these passages in other translations to see how the alternate wording can assist in understanding.
- A **reflection**, which challenges participants to make some mental connections and decisions about what they have studied.
- Some of the lessons also include **further thoughts**, which are presented in the dark green bars on the right of the lesson. Again, these are intended only to offer the basic information; your own study and knowledge can help expand these ideas.

In addition to these studies, as your group grows together, you will want to include opportunity for prayer among the participants. Even with a study like this one, which may include a number of participants who are just beginning their investigations of God, Christ, and the Bible, prayer is often an open door for those who are truly seeking God. Offering to pray for personal and family needs is often the best way to begin this practice.

We also strongly encourage leaders to stay in touch with participants throughout the week, simply making themselves available for further questions and discussion.

In the same way, we are available to talk to group leaders about their experiences and to answer questions regarding the studies. You may call us Monday-Friday at 800-90-LINKS.

What is a Links Player?



Spiritual
Due Diligence

THE LINKS PLAYERS BIBLE STUDIES, including "The Nature of Man," are produced by Links Players International, a Christian sports ministry aimed primarily at golfers. The good news is that sometimes in that aim, we miss! That is, there are plenty of non-golfers who have found benefit in the Daily Devotional, Bible studies, and magazines we have published through the years.

There is a reason for this, of course, and that is because truth transcends our human experiences. For instance, while we often hate to admit it, in many ways we cannot improve on how the previous generation lived. Technologically, we may have made some nifty advancements, but in terms of human interaction—and, we believe, humans interacting with God—we don't make any real progress through time.

Therefore, whether or not you are a golfer, we think that the chief principles we teach and learn can apply to you. A Links Player tries, by the power of God's Holy Spirit in them, to live according to the following principles:

LOVE GOD AND OTHERS. When asked the greatest commandment of Scripture, Jesus replied, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" He went on to say, "*This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (Matthew 22:37-39)

INTEGRATE CHRIST'S REIGN AND INTEGRITY INTO ALL OF LIFE. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowds, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (the necessities of life) will be provided for you.*" (Matthew 6:33)

NETWORK FRIENDS TOGETHER IN CHRIST. When the followers of Jesus met together after His ascension into heaven, it was said of them: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.* (Acts 2:42)

KINDLE COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY. Jesus told a parable of the eventual judgment of each man and woman by God. In it, He provided insight into the standards of this judgment: "*The King will answer them, 'I assure you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.'*" (Matthew 25:40)

SHARE CHRIST. One of the chief of Christ's apostles, Paul, wrote to the church at Corinth this reminder: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God."* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Today, you may find that you have reason to be reconciled to God and to become a Links Player yourself. If so, you need to tell God in prayer: *Heavenly Father, Through Your Son Jesus Christ, I am prepared to offer my life to You. Please take it and all of my sin, and begin to renew me as Your ambassador. Amen.* If you have prayed that prayer, you will also want to share your decision with a trusted friend who knows Christ. This way they can encourage and lead you in your new walk of faith. It will be a challenge worth every step!

