10 Bible Verses that Confuse Christians THE MOST

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If you're like many Christians, reading the Bible may create more questions than answers. Some parts of Scripture can cause emotional confusion rather than calming clarity. If the confusion goes unchecked, it can affect our faith in God and even our relationships with other people.

At Grace Life International, we've counseled thousands of Christians who wrestle with questions about specific parts of God's Word. Maybe you've struggled with biblical passages, such as:

- Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect…
- No one who is born of God practices sin…
- What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do…
- If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive you…
- The heart is deceitful above all things…

This resource will address these perplexing statements plus many more. Our goal is to shed light on the most confusing Bible verses that trip up Christians. After counseling people for over 20 years, we know that misunderstanding certain parts of Scripture can taint our view of God and steal the joy that He intended us to experience.

It is our desire to help you overcome any misunderstandings about God, experience complete peace, and see Him more clearly than ever before! If you have further questions, we invite you to contact us at:

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Confusing Verse #1 – Matthew 5:48

"But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

(New Living Translation)

This confusing statement was proclaimed by Jesus Christ during His well-known "Sermon on the Mount." As Jesus spoke to a large crowd, He told them to "be perfect." Have you ever wondered how Jesus could make such an outlandish statement? Do you wrestle with inward thoughts, such as "How can I ever be perfect like God?"

The type of perfection that God requires doesn't just apply to our behavior. Perfection also applies to our thoughts, attitudes, and motives. Worse, it's a pass / fail test. Make one mistake and perfection is lost. There is no grading on a curve. In order to "be perfect," we must always love the people who reject us, individuals who take advantage of us, and even people who persecute us. Talk about feeling guilty! We all fail miserably and have no hope of attaining perfection, even if we lived a thousand lifetimes.

Why would Jesus tell us to be as perfect as God? More importantly, how does His statement apply to our daily lives as a Christian? Jesus spoke His words to a Jewish audience. At that time, every Jew was obligated to keep the entire Old Testament law, which included the 10 Commandments as well as 613 additional religious laws. Almost every law was aimed at the outward behavior of the Jewish people.

Jesus knew that many people thought they were okay with God, because they tried their best to obey and even brought animal sacrifices when they failed. The purpose of His proclamation was to show that the Law demands not only outward perfection, but inward perfection. After Jesus' sermon, every Jew under the Law (and all of us today) was smacked in the face with our absolute and total failure before a perfect, holy God.

God's purpose of the Law is to make people aware of their sins. For instance, Romans 3:20 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." Jesus came along to raise the bar even higher regarding our sin by telling us to "be perfect." His command is like telling people to jump as high they can and expecting them to land on the moon.

But, the reason why Jesus said to "be perfect" wasn't to load us up with feelings of depression and misery. Instead, He was preparing the Jews (and all of us today) to realize our need for a Savior who could *make us perfect before God*.

Take comfort in Hebrew 10:14, which offers great encouragement for those who believe in Christ as their Messiah who makes us perfect before God today, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

Jesus commandment to be perfect is impossible for everyone. Instead, He makes us perfect through His death and resurrection. He has done for us what we can't do for ourselves. Jesus has made us perfect before God through His total forgiveness and by giving us a new identity. When you believe this truth, you walk in peace with God and rest in Him daily!

Confusing Verse #2 – Matthew 6:15

"If you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."

(New Living Translation)

At first glance, this verse seems pretty straightforward. If you want your sins to be forgiven by God, then Jesus says you must forgive others for their sins. Upon a little reflection, though, an astute Christian might wonder how this verse squares with other verses, such as Colossians 2:13, which declares, "God forgave (past tense) us all our sins." Talk about confusing, which perspective is correct?

If you want to live free from wondering if you've done enough to please God, then understanding God's forgiveness is imperative. But, how do we reconcile the contradictory tones of Matthew 6:15 and Colossians 2:13? Let's examine the fundamental difference.

Matthew 6:15 is a conditional position as illustrated by the word "If." Jesus seems to say that our forgiveness from God is based on the condition of forgiving others. In order to be forgiven, there is something we must do, namely forgive others.

In contrast, Colossians 2:13 is an unconditional position, because the writer, Paul, does not say we must "do" anything to gain God's forgiveness. If there is a "condition," it is the reality of being "in Christ," which is mentioned three times in the preceding verses (see Colossians 2:9-11). This truth is the foundation of the New Covenant from God, which exists today as foretold by the prophet, Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

> "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel…I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people… for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.'" (NASB)

One of the pillars of the New Covenant is total forgiveness for all who believe in Christ. But, if total forgiveness is true, then why did Jesus sound like He was contradicting the New Covenant? He didn't. *The New Covenant had not yet begun when Jesus spoke those words in Matthew 6*. At that point in time, Jesus was living in the Old Covenant era, when Israel still had a conditional relationship with God. People received blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Later on, Jesus instituted the New Covenant as superior to the Old Covenant at the Lord's Supper (see Luke 22:20).

Today, our relationship with God is based upon the New Covenant. We can enjoy peace with God knowing all of our sins are forgiven. Hebrews 10:10 says, "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

To be clear, God still takes our sin seriously. We cannot avoid the consequences of sin or the need to confess our offenses. But, the New Covenant means that a Christian can live free from feeling condemned by God (see Romans 8:1) and filled with joy as we live our lives confidently under His amazing grace (see Romans 6:14-15).

Confusing Verse #3 – Jeremiah 17:9

"The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

(New America Standard Bible Translation)

When the Bible says that our hearts are "desperately sick," the idea might create more self-loathing than confusion. How do you bounce back from this kind of statement and walk with any hope about the future?

This verse in Jeremiah 17:9 was written as a shocking statement to the Jewish people who belonged to the tribe of Judah. God was telling them about the punishment they would receive due to their sin of idolatry and worshiping other gods. He described their hearts as "deceitful" and "wicked."

However, here's the key to understanding the meaning of God's statement. The verse was written during the Old Covenant many years before Jesus appeared as the Messiah. Does the verse apply to us today? No, because we are New Covenant believers. The transformation that God has already given to modern Christians was foretold in Ezekiel 36:26, which says:

> "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (NASB)

God was telling the world that there would come a time when we would no longer have a deceitful, sick heart. Therefore, the passage in Jeremiah 17:9 doesn't apply to the New Covenant believer. We have a new heart that is righteous, holy, and motivated by the Spirit of God.

Take a moment to compare Jeremiah 17:9 with the finished work of Jesus dying on the cross and resurrecting to new life. Due to the blood He shed, we have been forgiven, once for all for our past, present, and future sins (see Ephesians 1:7). Yet, there is even more! Christ's body was given that He might give us life. Romans 6:4 says:

> "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (NASB)

Your heart is good, because God promised long ago He would give new hearts to all who believe in Jesus Christ. This amazing conversion was all accomplished by the finished work of the cross. If you're a Christian, take heart! Your heart is not deceitful or desperately sick.

Confusing Verse #4 – Romans 7:15

"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate."

(New International Version)

Every Christian wrestles with the desire to do what is right, but winds up doing the opposite. Even the apostle, Paul, who wrote this verse, wasn't immune to the struggle. We've all been there, and as you read this, you might feel this confusion today. If you commit certain sins on a frequent basis, Satan can trick you into believing your deepest desire is to sin. However, let's review Romans 7:15 at a deeper level and consider what really happens when you do sin.

Notice that Paul says first, "I want to do what is right," which indicates that we want to live righteously. We hate it when we sin – every time. Our internal desire to live righteously comes from our true identity, which is our identity in Christ. As a Christian, the real you truly loves God, wants to live in a pleasing manner, and hates sinning.

But, our inner conflict between right and wrong can make us feel there are two natures inside of us. One nature wants to do what is right. The other nature wants to do what we hate. Yet, that idea cannot be true. We only have one true identity. God removed our old nature when He crucified it on the cross with Jesus. Paul says in Romans 6:6:

> "We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin." (NLT)

We were born with our old self, which loved to sin. But, God says that old nature is gone forever! He buried it with Christ in His grave and left it there forever! Yet, this isn't where our story ends. When Jesus rose from the grave, God also transformed us into new creations who want to live righteously. Ephesians 2:4-5 says:

> "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." (NASB)

This good news sounds wonderful. But, if it's true, why do we still sin? If our true desire is to live righteously, why do we succumb to temptation? Consider these three reasons:

1. We don't know or believe the new nature God gave us through Jesus Christ.
2. We rely on our weak willpower to fight against temptation. Has that worked yet?
3. We live on a treadmill of rededication, incorrectly believing it will help overcome sin, such as saying, "God, I promise that I won't do that sin again."

These three problems can lead us astray from experiencing the way God designed us to live. He wants us to enjoy an intimate, dependent relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ, who lives in us. Relying on Christ, instead of ourselves, enables us to live in His power to overcome temptation and follow our true desire to do what is right. When we understand this truth, we overcome sin more and more in our lives!

Confusing Verse #5 – 1 John 3:6

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.

(New American Standard Bible)

Does this verse mean that people who sin do not know God? If we all sin, then are we all disconnected from God? When some Christians read this passage, their level of anxiety might go through the roof.

Would God really expect that people must never sin in order to know Him? If so, then our only hope lies solely upon ourselves. Life is reduced to an endless striving to be sinless. This would also suggest that Jesus's words on the cross, "It is finished," meant He was lying.

In reality, this confusing verse offers an encouraging promise to Christians, instead of judgment and condemnation. Earlier in the same chapter, the author says in 1 John 3:1:

> "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." (NASB)

We actually become God's children when we become believers. It is who we are in the depth of our being. It is the core of our identity in Christ. How would you respond if someone asked the question, "Who are you?" Does your mind immediately default to your profession, your successes, or your failures? Instead, God wants you to answer, "I am a child of my Heavenly Father!"

But, this confusing verse says, "No one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." How do we reconcile what John is writing? The Greek translation for the word "sin" means "a continuous course of sin" or to "perform repeatedly or habitually in order to accomplish a deed." When John wrote this verse, he was speaking of people outside of Christ who love sinning and do not have a genuine relationship with the Father and the Son. He was not speaking about God's children.

Christians and non-believers can both sin. However, there is a major difference. A Christian hates it when he or she sins. They don't want to do it again. In contrast, a non-believer isn't bothered by the sin he or she commits. There is no remorse or concern that what they did was wrong.

When you sin and feel regret, you don't have to worry whether or not you are a Christian. That is not what 1 John 3:6 means. Instead, the verse refers to people who claim to know Jesus but enjoy sinning with no desire to stop. Christians still sin sometimes, but we don't like it and we want to live above it. The remorse we feel after sinning is actually an indication of God's Spirit alive and working within us!

Confusing Verse #6 – Galatians 2:20

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."
(New International Version)

Almost every Christian who reads this confusing verse can struggle to understand the meaning. How can we be "crucified with Christ" when we're alive and well in the 21st century? If we're imperfect people, how can "Christ live in me?"

Let's look closely at this verse and focus on the four "I's" written by the Apostle Paul. As we understand who each "I" refers to, then it will open up the Scripture's meaning:

1. "I have been crucified with Christ..."
The first "I" is a reference in the past tense to who we were before becoming a Christian. Paul points to our original identity as sinners separated from God. Our initial position at birth gave us an identity of being sinner in desperate need of a Savior.

2. "I no longer live..."
When Jesus died on the cross, He didn't do it to gain favor for Himself. He experienced the excruciating pain in order to take the punishment we deserved for our sin. As sinners before a holy God, we all deserve to be crucified. Instead, God decided to put the punishment we deserved upon Jesus as a once and for all sacrifice. In addition, your identity as a sinner was crucified with Christ. It's not something that will happen. It has already happened. That is why Paul says, "I (the sinner) no longer live."

3. "I now live in the body..."
This brings us to the third "I," which represents our new identity after Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. As we live today in our present body, our identity is dramatically different than before. 2 Corinthians 5:17 explains, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." This truth is significant, because it tells us that a seismic change occurs when someone decides to follow Christ. In reality, our identity has already been transformed. For example, there are over 60 times in the New Testament where God describes a Christian as a "saint."

4. "I live by faith in the Son of God..."
The fourth "I" in Galatians 2:20 reveals how our new identity desires to lives by faith in God and His will for our lives. God made us new creations to live in dependence on Christ in us. However, we don't always do this, which causes us to sin. In addition, if we haven't learned about this truth, we'll depend upon ourselves instead of Christ in us.

God placed each of us on this earth with the intent to live every moment relying on Christ in us instead of ourselves. That is the way the "new you" wants to live when you go to work, relate to your spouse, raise your kids, serve at your church, exercise, or even play video games. Galatians 2:20 gives great encouragement to embrace our true identity in Christ and allow Him to live through us each day!

Confusing Verse #7 – Ephesians 4:22-23

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."
(New International Version)

What do you think it means to put off the "old self" and put on the "new self?" Is the Apostle Paul telling us that we have two selves within us? Is he urging us to get rid of the old self by changing our bad behavior to good behavior? What if Paul is trying to convey a totally different message?

When we were born into this world, we entered with an identity called the "old self," which some refer to as the "old nature." It was our true identity, and Paul describes it as corrupt and separated from God. Since we entered the world disconnected from God, we develop all kinds of strategies to cope with life's challenges and meet our needs for acceptance and love. As we grow up, our self-centered methods lead to despair, shame, pride, hypocrisy, and conceit. These problems occur because the old self is sinful and detached from the Creator who loves us.

The great news is that God provided a way out of our mess. He placed our old identity on the cross with Christ in order to crucify it and remove it forever (review Confusing Verse #4). In addition, He raised us up with a new identity as a new creation that is righteous, holy, and complete in Christ (review Confusing Verse #6)

As a Christian, our true identity is what Paul describes as the "new self." However, if we don't know our old self is dead, then we can fall back on our old way of life and live according to "deceitful desires." That's why Paul exhorts us to "put on" the new self, which represents who we really are. In dramatic language, he advocates holding a funeral for the old self, taking off our old grave clothes, and wearing our new grace clothes.

Putting on the new self is a reference to our attitudes, thoughts, and behavior. For example, we can avoid the temptation to tell someone a lie, because Christ in us is not a liar. We can tell the truth because we are a truth-teller in our new identity in Christ. Fear no longer has to dominate our thoughts, because we are not a fearful person in our identity in Christ. Instead, we can walk peacefully as someone who trusts God. It is our nature now to trust God, though everything around us may scream the opposite.

Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:22-23 describes the incredible blessing of being a Christian. Our "old self" is literally dead and gone. Our "new self" is alive and represents who we really are. Use this encouraging truth to leave the old behind and live a righteous lifestyle according to who God made you to be!

Confusing Verse #8 – Ephesians 4:30

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

(New International Version)

Have you ever worried that your sin could cause God to grieve resulting in Him turning away from you? Do you walk in fear that your fellowship with Him can be broken? Ephesian 4:30 can seem like an ominous warning to anyone who misunderstands this confusing bible verse.

As believers, living under the New Covenant, there is an essential truth we must remember in order to avoid misinterpreting Scripture or taking it out of context. What is the essential truth? When Jesus died upon the cross, He said in John 19:30, "It is finished!" By giving His body for us, Jesus made us completely righteous in our identity because a believer's identity is rooted in Christ.

If a Christian is made righteous through Christ, then how can we grieve the Holy Spirit? Consider the anxiety that occurs when someone misinterprets this verse. We are naturally led to think we need to create a religious checklist and make sure we're meeting God's approval. Is it possible for a Christian to grieve the Holy Spirit? There is only one way. The answer is found in John 6:28-29:

> "Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (NASB)

Put simply, unbelief is the only thing that grieves the Holy Spirit. Why? Unbelief leads us to walk according to the flesh and ignore God's righteous life within us. When we don't believe what God says is true, the apostle Paul describes all sorts of negative outcomes that can occur. In the same chapter as Ephesians 4:30, he lists common problems such as anger, falsehoods, stealing, unwholesome language, bitterness, wrath, slander, malice, etc.

God loves His children and does not want us to experience these problems, especially among one another. He grieves when we hurt because of our sin, just like we grieve when one of our own children experiences hurt because of their mistakes.

The good news is that Ephesians 4:30 should not make us worry that when we sin God will become angry with us and turn away from us. Earlier in Ephesians 1:13-14, we are given this powerful assurance from God:

> "After listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory."

Confusing Verse #9 – Matthew 5:27-29

"You shall not commit adultery; but I (Jesus) say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." (New American Standard Version)

After reading this Scripture, you might expect to see men all across America wearing an eye patch! According to Jesus' comments, every man is guilty of looking at a woman with sexual lust. Does His remark feel a little harsh and over the top? Worse, why would Jesus tell men that sexual lust is grounds for going to hell? Isn't He being too extreme to say a man should tear out his right eye to stop lusting in order to go to heaven?

Jesus wanted the Jewish people to understand that keeping the 10 Commandments isn't good enough to please God. The 6th Commandment is "You shall not commit adultery." God goes beyond the actual commandment to look at our hearts and minds. Within us, there is sexual lust making everyone guilty of sin, both men and women. The purpose of Jesus statement was to identify the true definition of sin. God cares just as much about what we think on the inside as to how we act on the outside.

The 10 Commandments were well known by the Jewish people who heard Jesus preaching. Many thought that they we in good standing with God because they had never physically committed adultery. Jesus was giving everyone a wake-up call to jar their erroneous beliefs. He told the men if they sexually lusted after a woman, then they were guilty of sinning against God. But, He didn't even stop there. Jesus also said that one single sin would send people straight into hell. And, if that statement didn't get their attention, He suggested the impossible, "If you eye makes you stumble, tear it out."

Jesus' words may sound crazy, but He had a loving purpose. He wanted people to see their guilt and the serious consequences of sin. The purpose of God's law isn't to make us righteous. The law is meant to reveal our need for God. Romans 3:19 says, "For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are."

When Jesus' audience realized that it's impossible to keep God's laws, they were prepared to place their faith in Christ as Messiah and Savior. The same idea is Jesus' point for us today. He wants all men and women to realize the eternal consequences of their sin so they will come to Him as their Savior.

In addition, Jesus wants Christians to know they won't go to hell if they commit adultery in their hearts, because they are forgiven. God provided a way to overcome our sin by living through us by faith to handle our temptations. Galatians 3:24 reminds us, "The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith." (NASB) In addition, Jesus wants Christians to know they won't go to hell if they commit adultery in their hearts, because they are forgiven. God provided a way to overcome our sin by living through us by faith to handle our temptations.

Confusing Verse #10 – Psalms 37:4

"Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart."

(New International Version)

Some people would consider this verse one of the most encouraging statements in the Bible. But, the words can also be misunderstood and cause a lot of confusion. It's easy to focus on the second part of the verse and start making a list of our heart's desires, such as a new car, a bigger house, a changed spouse, more money, a better job, safety for our children, etc. There is certainly nothing wrong with praying and asking God for those things. But, when the author, David, wrote this verse, what did he really mean? Is God like a genie who will make all of our wildest dreams come true?

To understand the answer, let's start with a question: What are our deepest desires? Sure, more money and better relationships may be nice. But, in the depths of our spirit, everyone really wants to feel loved, accepted, and secure. God knows these issues represent our deepest needs. Since He loves us so much, He wants to fulfill those desires within us, during every moment, circumstance, and relationship.

How does God satisfy our deepest needs? He provides the most thrilling fulfillment to our empty hearts that lasts forever. Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are able to experience eternal union with the Person who loves us the most. Because of Him, we lack nothing. 2 Peter 1:3-4 says:

> "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (NIV)

Even better, God goes beyond just uniting us to Himself. Since He lives inside of us, He initiates specific desires and passions to accomplish His purposes and make life meaningful. Consider the special gifts and abilities that make you unique, such as our talents, skills, personality, etc. We didn't become who we are by mistake or chance. God is constantly working within our own free will to pursue new aspects of life that we can enjoy. He delights in making our lives interesting and satisfying!

To be clear, pursuing the "desires of your heart" doesn't mean God is a vending machine who gives us anything we request. Psalms 37:4 is not a "name it and claim it" verse. However, God is big enough to hear our wishes and give us those things when He deems it best. More importantly, God cares primarily about our satisfaction, contentment, and maturity in life. And, we can only truly fulfill those deepest desires in one way, by delighting ourselves in Jesus Christ!

Do You Have Other Questions About God?

3 Ways We Can Help

At Grace Life International, our mission is leading Christians into the life-giving power of God's grace in the following three ways:

Counseling: Get Personal Attention and Get Healthy

We have over 30 staff members who provide Christian counseling for personal, relationship, and spiritual concerns. Counseling is available in-person at our offices in Charlotte, Asheville, or via online counseling to anyone around the world.

Events: Experience God's Grace in a Lively Environment

We offer conferences and discipleship programs that provide practical, Biblical explanations of how to live in the freedom of God's grace and our identity in Christ. Attendees learn how to daily walk in the truths of the New Covenant. Most events offer remote video access for those who cannot attend in-person.

Resources: Apply Biblical Truth to Specific Areas of Life

We offer a variety of resources designed to help you apply God's grace to different areas of life, including marriage, family, career, Bible study, etc. Visit our website to explore our videos, e-books, and free articles.

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