

CHAPTER 9 THE EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN

One day during my rebellious teenage years, I sat in class talking to a friend and said something profane. Even though he was not a Christian, he pointed out my hypocrisy. According to him, I lived one life in church, and another in school. The truth cut deep, but I could not deny what he said. God used this person to show me that I needed to repent so my life could evidence my relationship with the Lord. I was living irresponsibly and, as a result, was not being an effective Christian.¹¹⁷ Since effective Christianity covers a broad spectrum, this chapter will discuss only a few specific areas of this wide subject.

Lust and Sexual Purity

With sensual commercials, explicit movies, passionate television shows, racy satellite programs, porn magazines, strip clubs, prostitutes, unwholesome Internet sites, and scantily clad women in the work place and church, it does at times seem impossible to survive this sexual bombardment, especially as a man. Satan tells us that we will never rise above these things, that we will always be trapped by lust and masturbation. But we must not believe these lies. Satan wants us to believe that God isn't good, that He's keeping something from us.

Men, we really must get into the habit of bouncing our eyes away from sensual things and starving them of lustful images.¹¹⁸ Notice the example of Job as he promised to refrain from looking lustfully at what he should not (31:1).

Psalm 119: 9 says, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word." And verse 37 stated, "Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to Your Word."

Ephesians 5:3 declared, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." Did you get that? Not even a hint. Second Peter 1:3 stated of Christ, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness." Also see 1 Corinthians 6:13, 18-20; Ephesians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:6; Titus 2:11-14.

In this highly sexual culture, both Christian ladies and gentlemen should be modest especially in the things they wear and do, so as not to provoke each other to lust (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3-6). Many Christian youth group girls need to seriously

¹¹⁷ In chapters 8 and 9, I'm not trying to draw a fine distinction between the words "responsible" and "effective." I'm merely using them to loosely organize this material into two shorter chapters, rather than one long one.

¹¹⁸ For a great book that gets right to the point on this subject, see Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, *Every Man's Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time*, Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2000. This is also a wonderful resource for women if they really want to understand men and are mature enough to grapple with the sexual darkness and temptation that lurks in the hearts of most Christian men.

rethink what they're wearing (or not wearing!), because their Christian brothers might stumble at these temptations. But youth aren't the only ones dressing seductively. Many women need to carefully think through this, too, for their own purity and for the sake of others. Ultimately, immodest clothing indicates an immodest heart (attitude). A pure heart will demonstrate itself in appropriate dress and behavior, like the way you walk, bend over, and carry yourself. Of all people, Christians should take modesty seriously.

Dating and Sex

Sex is a good thing, but outside the sanctity of marriage it is wrong (1 Corinthians 6:15-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8). Although there's tremendous social pressure, and often hormonal pressure, you should save sex for marriage. Even if long ago you gave away your virginity, you can still live celibate until marriage. Despite what it seems, everybody is not "doing it." Even if they were, it would still be wrong. You will not regret waiting until marriage.

How far is going too far sexually? Christians often wonder how physically involved they can get without sinning and this is dangerous. You should never seek to find sin's "borderline." Stay as far away from sin as you can.

When certain actions seem questionable, abstain until you've had time to talk it over with a mature Christian. Anything that will subtract from the meaningfulness of your wedding night is too far. Apart from marriage, certain types of kissing and touching will only provoke sexual desires. Anything you wouldn't want someone to do with your sister or future spouse is also too far. Stay away from anything that might directly lead you to sin (Romans 13:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:22).

Carefully plan your dates. Try to limit your isolated time together since it will likely only elicit temptation. Unmarried couples who sleep together often try to justify their actions by saying that they're in love. If you think this way, turn to 1 Corinthians 13:1-8, and read how it defines love.

Others would never try to justify their sin, but neither do they guard themselves from the subtleties of sexual sin. I recall a dating Christian couple I knew in college. Although their intentions were good, they were alone in an apartment one day with too much free time. They started to kiss, then their passions ignited and soon they were sexually involved. Because he got her pregnant, they married and dropped out of school to work full time. What happened to them is typical. Though they were good people, they isolated themselves, inviting temptation. So live wisely. Stronger people than you have fallen into sexual sin.

Dating and Marriage

Amy worshipped with us regularly, typically attending Bible studies and other church activities. She remained fairly faithful to the church until she started dating Bill. She and Bill worshipped with us a few times but quickly stopped coming altogether. Though Bill claimed to be a follower of Christ, his life showed no signs of hunger for God. Certainly, this relationship failed to honor God because it led Amy and Bill away from God's people, the church.

If you want to avoid unbelievable pain, only date and marry a maturing Christian. Fools think they can convert non-Christians. If you are dating an unbeliever (or even a person who claims Christ but does not live the Christian life), you are forfeiting God's

best. First Corinthians 7:39 indicates that the Apostle Paul did not want a believer to marry an unbeliever--"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."

Also, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 may give the reader further insight into the foolishness of marrying an unbeliever:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'

Though 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 may not be specifically addressing the issue of dating or marrying unbelievers, the text offers a few principles that most likely apply to Christians in those situations. But the most fundamental principle would be, don't date or marry a nonbeliever. If you hold your relationship with God to be the most important thing in life, how can you expect to live in harmony with someone who doesn't share that same value? I could take you to countless women in local churches who thought they could eventually sway their men to believe in Christ, but after decades still see no results.

Friends and Acquaintances

Friends significantly influence you whether you know it or not. "The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray" (Proverb 12:26, NKJV). "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11). Surround yourself with people who love Jesus (2 Timothy 2:22). Furthermore, if you want to be wise, spend time with wise people (Proverbs 13:20; 15:22).

But what about your non-Christian friends? Do you abandon them? If your friends influence you in a negative way, they will only hinder your spiritual growth. As a Christian, you can make a difference in this world. Listen to what Matthew 5:13-16 says:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

You cannot be salt and light if you embrace the same values as the world (i.e., non-Christian community). Neither can you be effective if you withdraw altogether.

You might, however, need to disassociate from friends because of their negative influence.¹¹⁹ If so, be courteous. Don't condemn, but explain why you want to disassociate from them, even though they might not understand. Regardless of their responses, continue to demonstrate the compassion of Christ toward them.

Language and Conduct

Undiluted evil continues to ooze from the pores of today's culture. Vulgar or racist words flow prevalently in society. If you use profane words or tell suggestive jokes, you damage your effectiveness in communicating Christ's love. Even laughing at unwholesome jokes gives the impression that you approve of them.

In addition, participating in sarcasm or gossip damages you and others (Proverbs 18:21; 20:19). Sometimes professing Christians revel in gossip, spreading negativity with no shame. Christians should view gossip, especially their own, as an offense against God.¹²⁰

Throwing verbal sticks and stones breaks emotional, spiritual, and mental bones. As Ephesians 4:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Let Scripture set your guidelines for language and conduct.¹²¹

Unfortunately, many people who claim to follow Christ also frequently take the Lord's name in vain. People don't have to use God's name along with "damn" in order to use it in vain. Believers should avoid using words like, "God-almighty," "Jesus," "Oh my God," "Lord," or "God" as exclamations. In Exodus 20:7, God commanded the Israelites not to use His name in vain. Any usage of God's name without reverence for who He is constitutes taking His name in vain. Of all people, Christians should not profane the name of their Savior.

Some Christians manage to keep their language pure, but smolder with a bad attitude, and non-Christians notice this. They will not be attracted to Christ if you consistently demonstrate a poor attitude. Everything about you conveys some type of message. Therefore, be considerate of the people around you lest you trip them up.

School and Work

Ever since the beginning of creation, even before Adam sinned, God gave humans responsibility (Genesis 1:28-30; 2:15, 19-20). If you are healthy and old enough to work, you should work diligently at your job (1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:8). Followers of God should not be lazy (Proverbs 6:6; 13:23).

Several passages provide principles that can apply to the class room or the work place: "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh" (1 Peter 2:18; also see

¹¹⁹ Proverb 22:24; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

¹²⁰ See Romans 1:24-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

¹²¹ Proverbs 4:24; 12:18; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17.

Ephesians 6:6-9; Colossians 3:22-24). These verses discuss the relationship between first-century slaves and owners, which we are not. But these verses still apply to us.¹²²

Even though you are not a slave, these principles still apply to you as a student or an employee. Both relationships consist of a functional element (e.g., authority and subordination). Nevertheless, since you do not live as a slave, the demands of these verses should make your responsibility a little easier to fulfill.

Be on time for work or school, and work as industriously as possible. If you cannot fulfill your obligations, ask for help, but don't do a poor job. Do your assignments as if Jesus were your employer or teacher. Remember, you represent Christ. Romans 12:11 encourages believers to, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Cheating on tests, being dishonest on your time cards, or taking materials from the office are wrong and paint a poor picture of Christ.

Forgiving Others

You will not travel through life without being spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically wounded. Refraining from bitterness is difficult, but you must forgive those who mistreat you regardless of how harsh they have been. If you harbor bitterness toward someone, it comes from an unforgiving disposition that will certainly hurt you.

"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:14-15).

To deal with these harsh attitudes, you may want to write your bitter feelings down or even mention them when you privately pray to God. You can honestly vent your frustrations to God. Be reassured that He will avenge all injustice (see Psalms 12, 35, 37). However, don't carry hatred around; determine to forgive those who hurt you. Ask God to do good things to your enemies, even if you have asked Him to avenge you. Go out of your way to do something nice for your enemies (Romans 12:20).

How many times should you forgive them? Grant them forgiveness as many times as they offend you (Matthew 18:21-35). Even if they refuse to repent, don't hold a grudge.

What was Jesus' attitude toward His enemies in Luke 23:34? He forgave them. You should forgive others because Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32). You might even have to take the first step in attempting reconciliation (Matthew 5:23-25).

Take for example a Christian couple, Brian and Karen, who loved each other deeply and talked about marriage. Out of nowhere, Brian broke up with Karen. She died inside because she loved Brian more than she could put into words. Admittedly, she struggled with bitterness toward him, she even shared some of her anger with him. He listened, but never apologized for his own sins. Eventually, more tension built between them. Finally, Karen felt she needed to offer forgiveness, although she considered it more Brian's place, since he had initiated the breakup. She spoke with him and asked for forgiveness over any bitterness she'd sown. Although Brian received her apology, he never apologized to her. Even if he wasn't sorry about breaking up, he could have helped Karen by asking for her forgiveness for the damage he'd caused. But that never

¹²² See s.v. "Slavery (Greco-Roman)," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

happened. He only said he wasn't mad at her. Karen had a choice, to forgive Brian or become bitter again. She forgave him, and that's what you must do for your offenders.

The great pastor and scholar from New England, Jonathan Edwards, 1703-58, spoke directly about the need to forgive and endure offenses from others:

*A humble spirit disinclines us to indulge resentment of injuries; for he that is little and unworthy in his own eyes, will not think so much of an injury offered to him as he that has high thoughts of himself. . . . It is pride or self-conceit that is very much the foundation of a high and bitter resentment, and of an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. . . . Let us endeavour, under all injuries, to preserve the calmness and quiet of our spirits, and be ready rather to suffer considerably in our just rights, than do anything that may occasion our stirring up, and living in, strife and contention.*¹²³

When you wrongfully offend others, be humble enough to apologize to them and ask them to forgive you.¹²⁴ If they do not grant you forgiveness, continue to treat them respectfully. You cannot make them forgive you. If you have sincerely sought to reconcile the relationship, then you have done your part. Furthermore, do not continually carry guilt for your mistakes. God has forgiven you as 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin." Accept God's forgiveness.

Are there people whom you have not forgiven, or people you should ask forgiveness from? If so, write their names down and make things right before another day passes. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." As Schreiner and Caneday boldly say, ". . . people who ignore these verses and do not forgive others will find themselves in hell."¹²⁵

A Non-Argumentative Attitude

Avoid arguments when you can. They typically only waste time and stir up anger.¹²⁶ As much as possible, live in peace with all people (Romans 12:18).

¹²³ *Charity and its Fruits*, ed. Tryon Edwards (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998 reprint [1852]), 79, 82-83.

¹²⁴ Confess your sin to people according to the extent of your sin's effect. In other words, if you have offended someone, go to *that person* and seek reconciliation. It would not necessarily be wise to confess this to other people if they have not been affected by the conflict in some other way.

¹²⁵ *The Race Set Before Us*, 77.

¹²⁶ Proverbs 17:14, 19; 2 Timothy 2:23-26; Titus 3:9.

Unfortunately, I haven't always done my part to live peacefully with all people. Shortly after the Lord started changing my life in the late 80s, I spent a great deal of time reading the Bible. As a result of learning biblical concepts, I had an increasing desire to share these truths. Regrettably, I went about things the wrong way. I thought that being an effective Christian translated to rebuking every unbeliever and arguing with every Christian who didn't agree with me on trivial issues. I argued with people until my pastor encouraged me to be less contentious, and his words encouraged me to seek peace rather than arguments.

Sometimes you need to discuss important issues, but don't confuse foolish arguing with necessary discussion.¹²⁷ Don't argue for the sake of arguing or to prove yourself right; you might win the argument but unnecessarily offend the other person. When possible, avoid being harsh or rude. Don't speak in a way that exalts yourself and degrades others. Kindness goes a long way in being persuasive. Seek to attack issues (important ones), not people.

Living Wisely

One day you must give an account for how you lived on earth, so be wise with what God has given you (Ecclesiastes 12:14). If you give children money and time, they will probably spend both on candy and toys. Children, as well as many adults, have a poor understanding of how to properly manage time, spend money, and live wisely. Be a good manager of your time and money (Luke 16:1-13; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Recreation has its place, but don't give it too much attention. Beware of television, the Internet, and computer games; they'll eat your time and sap your soul.

Luke 16:10-11 teaches believers the importance of properly using what they have: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"

Neither waste your money on luxury (i.e., things not needed for survival), nor wear yourself out to get rich (Proverb 23:4; 1 Timothy 6:7, 10). This principle goes against the average American mindset, but Scripture teaches it. Instead, lay up your treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). After all, Psalm 90:12 says, "[God] Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

The Sabbath

The word "Sabbath" means rest. God modeled the importance of a Sabbath rest in Genesis 2:1-3 before sin ever entered into the world. Later on, God commanded the Israelites to take a Sabbath day once a week (Exodus 20:6-11). Although scholars debate the issue, I believe Christians do well to honor the Sabbath.

Consider a few points about the Sabbath:

- 1). The Sabbath reflects our peace with God (Hebrews 4:1-11).
- 2). The Sabbath reminds us of a greater reality (Colossians 2:16-17).
- 3). The Sabbath combats our idolatry by calling us back to God.

¹²⁷ Colossians 4:6; 1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3.

- 4). The Sabbath helps us relinquish control (a faith offering).
- 5). The Sabbath restores our energy.¹²⁸

God has given the Sabbath as a gift more than as a rule. God knows we need rest and time to reflect upon the more important things of life. Six days of work done in God's strength will be more productive than seven days done in your own energy.

Although God commanded the Jews to rest on what would now be our Saturday, I think the most important thing is *keeping the Sabbath weekly*, rather than insisting it be on Saturday or Sunday. It seems that it would be better if Christians in the same local church could all take their Sabbaths on the same day, then they could fellowship with each other more. Since work and family schedules will not always allow this, we need to extend grace to each other here.

But we should not overlook the importance of the rhythm (regularity or cycle) of the Sabbath. Regularity ensures that we remember to keep it. Whatever day we set as our Sabbath, it ought to stay our Sabbath, with only an occasional emergency interrupting it.

Lest we become too dogmatic, however, we need to keep in mind what Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NKJV). While we need to keep the Sabbath consistently, we need to mingle our commitment with grace.

Concerning the issue of what a person can and can't do on the Sabbath I will leave to your own study. As to how long a Sabbath needs to be (sun up to sun down or 24 hours), I'll also leave for each believer to determine.

The Danger of Legalism

Since I've talked so much in these past two chapters about dos and don'ts, I want to discuss legalism. Legalism is the idea that we can do something, or not do something, to gain spiritual credit in God's eyes.

Professing Christians become legalists when they go beyond what Scripture teaches and set rules for what other believers must do. Jesus often battled with the Pharisees over their legalistic tendencies.¹²⁹

Again, the Christian life consists of more than what we wear, eat, drink, or do. We should be careful making rules for other believers ("don't play cards...you must go to church three times a week...you must like this kind of music..."). God cares about how we live outwardly, but He wants our actions to radiate from a pure heart for Him (Hosea 6:6; Colossians 2:16-23). As the Apostle Paul did, we must lean on the side of grace and

¹²⁸ For further study on the Sabbath, see Exodus 31:13-17; Leviticus 25:2-22; Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Isaiah 1:13-17; 56:2, 6; 58:13-14; Jeremiah 17:19-27; Ezekiel 20:12-13; Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 13:10-17; John 9:1-16.

¹²⁹ Matthew 9:13; 15:1-14; 23:1-15, John 12:43; concerning the yoke of legalism, see Matthew 11:28-30; Luke 11:46; Acts 15:10; Galatians 5:1.

resist forcing others into our mold, while at the same time guarding against unnecessarily offending others (1 Corinthians 8-9).

Summary

Being an effective Christian affects all areas of a believer's life. Believers should pursue God's best and honor Christ in all aspects of their lives. Specifically, believers can honor Christ through dating and marrying only maturing believers. Believers should choose spiritually mature Christian friends. Other such things as language and conduct affect believers' abilities to fellowship with God and to influence others for Christ. Believers should also do their best at school and work. Furthermore, not forgiving others and arguing over trivial issues can damage believers and their witness--their influence for Christ. God wants Christians to be wise managers of what He has entrusted to them, which likely includes taking a Sabbath each week. But, believers need to be careful of legalism, not falling into the trap of thinking that something they do, or don't do, will make them right with God.

Assignments

1. Memorize Matthew 5:16, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."
2. Think of some ways in which you might be able to enhance your effectiveness for Christ. Write them down and post them where you will see them daily.
3. If you need to reconcile with someone, do that as soon as possible.
4. Are there any sexual temptations, like skin magazines or web links, that you need to get rid of or block? What about immodest clothing that shows off your body? If so, take action to rid your life of them now.

Discussion Questions

1. How should believers respond to friends who frequently use inappropriate language?
2. What should be your response toward someone who is angry with you?
3. How might an argumentative attitude affect your effectiveness for Christ?
4. What are some controversial behaviors that may still be OK for a Christian to do?
5. According to the author of *Growing Up in Christ*, why should Christians still keep the Sabbath weekly?

Answers to Chapter 9 Discussion Questions

1. How should believers respond to friends who frequently use inappropriate language? *If the person using inappropriate language is a Christian, you can tell him that you're offended by it and lovingly point them to Ephesians 4:29-32. If that person isn't a believer, you can either ignore his language, or let him know such language offends you. (Be careful not to give the impression that if he changes his language, he'll then be a Christian.)*
2. What should be your response toward someone who is angry with you? *If possible, go to him and ask him what's wrong. Apologize and ask for his forgiveness if you're truly at fault. If you think that approaching him right now will only make matters worse, pray for him. But don't use this as an excuse to avoid him just because you fear confrontation. Continue to look for opportunities to right the situation.*
3. How might an argumentative attitude affect your effectiveness for Christ? *People will begin to perceive you as a troublemaker, a fighter, rather than someone who's life has been touched by Christ.*
4. What are some controversial behaviors that may still be OK for a Christian to do? *Just a couple of examples to get you going...playing cards, dancing, etc.*
5. According to the author of *Growing Up in Christ*, why should Christians still keep the Sabbath weekly? *Believers do well to keep the Sabbath because God modeled it in Genesis 2:1-3 before sin entered the world or before the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is a gift from God and a chance to trust that God can do more with our six days than we can with our seven.*