Is carnal OK? Some of you may have wondered about our teaching subject today. Is it about sex – is it going to be “X” rated? After all, most of the synonyms for carnal in the Thesaurus are sexual, sensual, erotic, lustful, lascivious, lecherous, licentious – but there are also two others - fleshly & worldly.

While I don’t hear the term much in church anymore except from old-timers, I remember hearing pastors and church people regularly talk about “carnal Christians” – and while it could include lustful, lascivious, lecherous and licentious actions, the primary definition the church people were using was much more expansive. It came to refer to someone who had made a profession of faith some time in the past but was now living and acting like an unbeliever – and not a moral one at that. Jesus was not an important part of their life. Their actions had little to do with godly morals or Biblical principles. This phrase “carnal” attached to “Christian” came from the KJVs use of the word “fleshly” to translated the Greek word “fleshly”. Other translations use the word “fleshly” or “worldly”.

I don’t bring this up to try to explain to you the different nuances each translation is trying to bring but to point out a clear distinction that the New Testament regularly makes but is often missed in some modern American Bible-believing churches or Bible-believing Christians. Jesus and the New Testament regularly talk about two ways – walking in the darkness or walking in the light, being godly or ungodly, the broad way to destruction or the narrow way to salvation, spiritual or worldly. But when people use this phrase “carnal Christian” they make a whole new category – a third category that definitely has a strong foot in the world and yet claims to be in the Kingdom of God. God makes contrasts – go this way, not that way – to make something clear. But when we add a third huge option where we say what they are doing is not good, but at least they will be in heaven so its OK, we miss God’s message. It doesn’t matter whether you lean to an Arminian or a Calvinist position, both have historically stated clearly that no true Christian will remain carnal for a lifetime. Some have abused the idea of a “carnal Christian” by saying that it is possible for people to come to faith in Christ and then proceed to live the rest of their lives in a completely carnal manner, with no evidence of being born again or a new creation. Such a concept is completely unbiblical. We’ll say more on this in two weeks when we tackle the real question behind this.

So as we look again at v 8-9, we want to be careful not to make a third category and thus miss what God is saying here – there are 2 ways – one we should take and one we shouldn’t. READ v 8-9. God doesn’t give us these categories so we can go out and judge other people – but so we ourselves are rightly challenged in our own lives. Having both a positive and a negative reason for our actions helps us persevere and keep going when we are tempted to let go of one of those reasons. Here, God is giving us both a positive and a negative reason so it is crystal clear why the actions God calls us to in v 5-7 are more important than lunch, whatever activities you have planned or a football game today. Put effort into these 8 qualities, and if they are increasing in...
your life there are positive long term results. But if you start seeing yourself as having arrived, or coast along or neglect them the consequences are dire, not just less than the best. The contrast here is to awaken & encourage us to action and to demolish any excuse, rationalization or laziness we may have.

PROPOSITION: We are spiritually blind, ineffective, unproductive and willfully self-focused when we chose not to put current effort into godly qualities.

I. Encouragement - effort leads to effective & fruitful spiritual life 2 Peter 1:8

Today we focus on v 9, but because these thoughts are specifically given to us as a contrast, it is most helpful if we first remember the incredible encouragement God is giving us in v 8. READ v 8. The Lord reminds us here that if we possess these qualities in increasing measure – remember possess and increase are 2 separate and equal words — those increasing qualities will keep us from being ineffective or unproductive in our spiritual life. So what characteristics are being focused on? READ v 5-7. Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love - the initiation of which God actually does for us starting with our conversion and continuing with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. There is not some pre-determined level we need to get up to before they are effective - each of us starts at different places – but effectiveness comes just from them increasing in our own life. That’s because it is God who is actually taking our human efforts and multiplying them so that our personal relationship with Jesus and spiritual usefulness to God will not be ineffective or unproductive. We can be confident our Christian life will have value. That is not hard for many brought up in the US to believe because we are constantly told that with effort anyone can achieve and do anything. But that is not true for many people in history, throughout the world today or even in certain situations in our own lives.

A. Valuable even if less freedom

Imagine for a moment that you were a slave in the southern United States in the early 1800s. What could you accomplish for the Lord Jesus Christ? How valuable could you imagine your life to be for the advancement of God’s kingdom? You have no freedom to do what you want, in fact, you could be taken from your family at any time or even just killed. But God says the lives of those Christian slaves will be valuable – effective and productive – even if we don’t have the freedom they would like. That means, your life is not ineffective or unproductive because you are married to an unbeliever and not free to do all you wish you could for the Lord Jesus. Or if you’re a grandparent who’s grown children have told you that you cannot talk about God, the Bible or Jesus around the grandkids – your life is not ineffective or unproductive for the Lord. Recognize the power in this encouragement that we are valuable even if we don’t have the freedom to freely study, teach, talk about, or witness about our Lord Jesus Christ.

B. Valuable even if less education

Or picture yourself as a peasant in Europe in 950 A.D. You can’t read. You can’t write. You don’t own a Bible, in fact you know very little about the Bible and
everything they say in church is in a language you don’t even know. How can your Christian life ever be effective and productive? How can you ever be a help to what God is doing in the world? God declares, here in verse 8, that if you have and then put effort into these qualities so that they are increasing, then your spiritual life will be valuable even if you have less education than the people around you. That means your life is not ineffective or unproductive because you don’t know all the answers to the questions the skeptics throw out. That means, your life is valuable for the Lord even though you don’t know a lot about the Bible as long as that knowledge is a bit more next year! Recognize the power in this encouragement that we are valuable even if we don’t have the education or knowledge that others around us have!

C. Valuable even if less status or power  
Or picture yourself as a Dalit in India – what use to be called “an untouchable”. It is the lowest caste with no status or power. Everyone else looks down on you; they don’t listen to anything you say; and they ignore you. How can your Christian life ever be effective or productive? How can you ever help out in what God’s doing in the world? God declares, here in verse 8, that if you have and then are now putting effort into these areas so they are increasing, then your spiritual life will be valuable even if you have less power or status than others around you. That means your life is not ineffective or unproductive because people look down on you or ignore you. That means your life is not ineffective or unproductive because you are NOT popular, famous, beautiful, strong or an extrovert. Recognize the power in this encouragement that we are valuable even if we don’t have the status or power of those around us.

D. Valuable even if less opportunity  
Or picture yourself as a Muslim background believer – when you came to believe in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, your family disowned you. You were isolated from your town and excluded from public gatherings. You cannot share Jesus openly – you can’t even meet openly or with many other believers. You just don’t have many opportunities spiritually, relationally or culturally to represent Jesus. How can your Christian life ever be effective or productive? How can you ever help out in what God’s doing in the world? God declares, here in verse 8, that if you have and then are now putting effort into these qualities so they are increasing, then your spiritual life will be valuable even if you have fewer opportunities than other Christians in the world. That means your life is not ineffective or unproductive because you live in a rural area, or you can’t write a Christian book, or you aren’t outgoing or you don’t have many opportunities to share Jesus with others. Recognize the power in this encouragement that we are valuable even if we don’t have the opportunities others have.

E. Valuable if you feel like “a nobody”  
READ v 8. This is an incredible encouragement to us. Even when we feel like a nobody or feel like we aren’t any good to God or feel that we don’t have any resources or opportunities, if we will genuinely turn over our life to Jesus as Lord and
Savior & then put some human effort into these 8 virtues in verses 5 to 7, then our lives – our spiritual lives – will not be unproductive or ineffective. That is incredible – what an encouragement! The reason this is so incredible is that it is not our effort that accomplishes these things, but God takes our efforts and multiplies them to do far more than we could ever think or imagine. We’re like the little boy who brought the 5 loaves & 2 fish to Jesus to feed 5000 men. Did the little boy feed 5000? NO, but God used his sacrifice & his effort in a most profound and powerful way. Even our strongest efforts to change our character are like 5 loaves & 2 fish to feed 5000 – it is pathetically insignificant but it’s all we have and we do it sacrificially. The Lord then multiplies our efforts to increase those qualities in our character, draw us closer to Jesus, accomplish more for Jesus’ work and be a valuable part of the kingdom of God.

II. Warning - Neglect leads to a wasted spiritual life

The contrast to that is very different – it is a warning God wants to wake us up with. READ v 9. If we aren’t willing to put effort into these qualities, our lives will be wasted. We won’t produce any on-going fruit. Our faith must be a growing faith if we are going to be useful to God on earth. To think it’s just fine that we can accept that there is a God or that we have made some profession in the past or we are too busy with other things & will get to Jesus later – that inactivity is foolish, unwise, and blind. God gives us v 9 as a warning so we don’t waste our life, effort or faith. It starts by saying “But whoever does not have them – that is whoever doesn’t possess the qualities in v 5-7 that are to be increasing – “is nearsighted and blind.” As you might guess, this is not talking about physical nearsightedness or physical blindness, but spiritual and moral blindness.

A. self-focused/myopic

“Nearsighted” comes from a Greek word from which we get our English word “myopic” – which just means “nearsighted or lacking imagination, foresight, or intellectual insight.” Physically, this happens because a defect of the eye causes light to focus in front of the retina instead of directly on it, resulting in an inability to see distant objects clearly. We can also be spiritually myopic where our focus is so much on ourself, the physical and the immediate that we can not see the bigger picture of life or eternity clearly thus we use our time and effort in poor ways.

Some of you may have heard of the marshmallow test done at Stanford University in the late 1960s. Kids were brought into a room without distractions and a treat was put in front of them – a marshmallow, pretzel or cookie. They were then told by someone they trusted that they could eat one now – but if you waited 10 minutes, by themselves, then they could have 2. (So Neal, here is your favorite Almond Joy candy bar – you can have one now – but if you wait until after the service you can have 2 – now I brought 4 with me today so I could do both services. And since I have been fasting this morning, that looks better than you think). The researchers were testing the process of delayed-gratification in kids. Decades later they followed up those kids and found that those who could delay gratification for a greater reward, did much better in life in so many different areas. In simple terms, if we just focus on we want
for the moment, it blinds us to a better future. Interestingly only a very small portion of kids ate the marshmallow or cookie immediately – the vast majority at least knew it was wiser to go for 2 in 10 minutes. They tried distracting themselves, looking other directions, singing, but even though the vast majority tried, only 30% were able to last the 10 minutes and get the second treat.

**READ v 9.** We Americans live in a nearsighted society – we want everything instantly. Don’t have money, pull out the credit card. Need someone right now, pull out the cell phone and they will interrupt whatever they are doing to answer us – and if they don’t we get anxious or upset. Most don’t build in 5 or 10 minutes extra when they are traveling to something for possible delays and then get upset that everything is not perfect so we can get there on time. We aren’t willing to sacrifice to spend time with others, then complain no one spends time with us. Americans focus on their wants for the moment and figure everything will work out fine for the future. Like the marshmallow test, it is not that we don’t try, it is just that the now looks so inviting. Yet God wants us to have a clear and compelling view of the future so we don’t waste our lives, but gain so much more. Jesus even told us that He will give us 30, 60, even 100 times more in the future, what we sacrifice now for the advancement of God’s work in the world.

B. Spiritually blind

**READ v 9.** The other word used here is **blind.** Unlike **nearsighted**, a blind person can’t see anything – they walk in darkness. Spiritual & moral blindness is where a person is unable or refuses to see or live the truth. Jesus is our guiding light – ignore His ways and we are in the dark and will waste our lives. Jesus called the legalistic religious leaders of His day – blind; John says those who don’t love fellow Christians walk in the darkness; Here in the next chapter, Peter pictures false Christian teachers as blind; elsewhere the New Testament portrays all the unsaved as spiritually blind. They choose not to accept the teachings of Christ and His authority in their lives, egged on by satan & the demonic who seek to keep unbelievers spiritually blind.

In John 8:12 “Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”

C. Willful (how can the blind be nearsighted?)

The tragedy here is that these people claim to be Christians but they have forgotten the cross – they have forgotten that Jesus died cruelly there to pay the penalty of their sins. Their **blindness is willful.** They have heard the truth, but turned from it. We see that in the word “**forgetting**” but we also see that in the actual order of these two words – in Greek it is **blind and nearsighted**, not nearsighted and blind as the NIV puts it. But **blind and nearsighted** is a strange order since ‘**blind**’ is a stronger word than ‘**near-sighted**’. How can the blind (who can not see at all) be nearsighted (see close up but not far off clearly)? A person cannot be physically blind and physically near-sighted at the same time. Peter’s order is meant to get our attention
and hopefully all those using different versions saw that immediately. How can those exposed to the gospel at one time now be spiritually blind and be no different than an unbeliever? Because they are nearsighted – they have chosen to just focus on the things of this world instead of the things of God. They are consumed with getting something now and unwilling to wait for something much better in the future – they are failing the marshmallow test badly. This is not satan’s blinding but their own willful choice to which satan eagerly helps out.

III. The power of grace and thankfulness

READ v 9. They are not living as forgiven sinners. They are behaving like unconverted people. If members of the church are living immoral lives, they bear witness that forgiveness of sins means little to them. Those who treasure being forgiven live in a way that pleases God. While stated in the negative, this final phrase reminds us of the power of grace and thankfulness to combat spiritual blindness and nearsightedness.

A. Undeserved grace ("cleansed from their past sins")

That we have been “cleansed from their past sins” through repentance and faith is an incredible gift from God. We don’t deserve it and we can’t earn it. We call that grace – God’s unmerited favor. God encourages us in v 8 to put our own effort into 8 aspects in v 5-7 even though it means we have to sacrifice things now because in doing so we won’t waste our life. And then God warns us in v 9 if we are unwilling to sacrifice things in the immediate for His higher purpose, we definitely will waste our lives – and we can’t blame anyone else because it was our willful choice. Unlike the marshmallow test, God shows us one more aspect here at the end of v 9 – God empowers us – gives us the power if we will take it – to be able to see clearer the greater future joy and thus not give in to the immediate that ends up harmful. See the problem with the vast majority of kids in the marshmallow test was not that they didn’t want to wait to get something better – remember only a small fraction immediately took the marshmallow or cookie. The vast majority tried to distract themselves or focus on other things or tell themselves they could do it but they failed. They needed more power! The same is true in our Christian lives – God wants us to put our effort into the right and turn from the wrong – but we will not have enough strength to do that all the time even though we are trying. Our empowerment comes from realizing just how great God’s gifts – His grace – really are. We have been totally cleansed from our past sins and that is not because we paid the penalty – Jesus did. For us to understand God’s grace, we must be honest about our sin – they aren’t little things that aren’t that bad – every sinful thought and action we take pollutes the universe, hurts other people, and would ruin heaven – there is nothing good about them. But equally, we need to totally accept Jesus’ cleansing of our sins – it is total. God is giving us a new start. We can’t wallow in self-pity which is actually sinful pride trying to be humble. Our empowerment is not just rightly see our future rewards, but fully receiving the undeserved gifts God is continuously giving us.

B. Remembered thankfulness ("forgetting that they have been")
And recognizing those gifts is what developing a life of thankfulness really helps. **READ v 9.** Forgetting here can only mean they the person has deliberately forgotten, or put out of their mind, the fact that they have been cleansed from their past sins. The opposite of forget, is to remember. And **taking time daily just to remember those special things God has, is and will do** for us without any requests, complaints or multi-tasking, allows the wonder of God’s grace to empower us. See the researchers specifically didn’t give the kids any empowerment to be successful – they could have given them an activity to do or a toy to play with that would have taken their focus off that treat sitting before them and many more would have made it the 10 minutes. God has provided us with the empowerment, but we need to focus on that rather than the temptation or our will-power succeeding on its own.

**C. Active response**

If we forget what God has done for us, we will not be excited to share Christ with others, be patient with others, be generous with others or sacrifice for others. May we all apply these words to our heart and life! Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus.