

Chapter 11

THE GAME PLAN



Brio, a 10th grader, wants to play college basketball more than anything in the world. How is she going to spend her time in order to fulfill this dream? Is she going to come home after school each day, plop herself down on the couch, watch TV, and munch on twinkies all evening? I don't think so. She is going to spend her time playing club ball to gain experience, working out, and taking the time to practice, practice, and more practice. Most mature individuals understand anything in life really worthwhile having requires a strong commitment to do whatever it takes to achieve their desired goals, including making the necessary personal sacrifices.

The athlete who wants to be the very best they can be, like Brio, will work their butt off and give up countless hours of free time in order to train. Those that want a successful career will go to college and sacrifice time and financial resources to get the best education they can get in order to have more financial control in the future. Parents that really care about their children will sacrifice a great deal of time and energy so their children can be better equipped to handle life in the future. Building strong relationships with others requires a commitment and may mean giving up some of the things you like to do in order to have a more meaningful relationship.

Developing a spiritual relationship that can make a positive difference in your life and the life of others also requires sacrifices and commitment. There is a difference though, because building a stronger spiritual relationship is not based on what you do as much as it is based on a change of heart. It is important we understand this difference because if we don't our attempts at spiritual growth will seem too much like work, like something we know we should do but really do not want to do. Changing our hearts, our attitude, will lead to a spiritual journey that will be fun, exciting, beneficial, and fulfilling.

Once you decide that you want a stronger spiritual relationship you will find there is action you should take that may require sacrifices of time and some habits but the rewards will be great

- contentment, peace, and satisfaction. And remember -“the yoke will be easy and the burden light”.

The process of spiritual growth should start with prayer. Start with prayer if you are not sure about what you believe and you really want to know “the truth” about God. Pray that God helps you and shows you how to have the relationship He desires. Start with prayer if you do not have the contentment you know you should have. If you want assurance of going to heaven and you want Jesus to be in control of your life admit to God you do “sin”, ask for his forgiveness, and ask Jesus to come into your life. If you are going to focus on “doing” anything then focus on constant prayer because that is what will give you the power to change your heart, therefor your life.

I believe getting away from it all, going to the mountains, a lake or river, somewhere where it is quite and where you can really focus on your thoughts and prayers can be extremely helpful when you decide to begin a quest for spiritual growth. Life is full of so many distractions and we too often blow our problems way out of proportion to what they are in reality. Getting away from it all helps us focus and helps put our problems and our desires in proper perspective. We enjoy just being alive when we are at a place where we can appreciate God’s created beauty, making it easier to think about the Creator.

When you begin to pray one of the first things you should pray for is for the help of the “Holy Spirit”. The power and role of the Holy Spirit is written about many times in the Bible and this power is not used enough by many of us. The Holy Spirit is also referred by several different names including the Spirit of God, Holy Ghost, and the Spirit of Truth. Jesus in Luke 11:9-13 explains if we are seeking God and his truths all we have to do is ask God for his gift of the Holy Spirit, and this gift will be given to us. If we have an earnest desire to know God and his truths we will have a supernatural “Counselor” that will be a part of us.

John 14:15-17 "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Jesus tells us in John 14:26 that the Counselor (Spirit) will teach us and remind us of what Jesus has said. The Holy Spirit helps us form our spiritual consciousness. A consciousness based on truth, not our underlying desires which is what forms the spiritual consciousness of those who claim to be spiritual but have no real desire to know God. We should call on the Spirit to help us when praying, reading the Bible, books, and other publications about God. The Spirit helps us in all aspects of our lives.

How the Spirit works is a mystery that I am not equipped to explain. Will the Spirit help you know all God’s truths beyond any shadow of a doubt? If so why do so many who have a sincere love for God and his truths disagree about so many theological points? Will the Spirit reveal what you want to know instantly, or in several weeks, or maybe even in many years? How much research should we do on our own, using the resources God has given us such as the Bible, commentaries, books, and other resources to understand God’s truths, or do we just sit in our easy chair waiting for God’s revelations to come to us?

I can’t give you answers to these questions, I can just tell you to trust God when he promises to give you the help of his Spirit and be assured you will know what you need to know. That’s what I had to do when writing this book, yet I still had to do a great deal of research using a wide variety of resources, and of course the primary resource was the bible. I can tell you God doesn’t

give us the Spirit so we can be spiritually lazy. He gives us the help of the Spirit when we make a sincere effort to seek and know him, and our bibles are the best source for knowing God. Also trust the Spirit is far more than just some supernatural teaching assistant. The Spirit becomes part of us and gives us an inner strength needed to live the life God wants us to live. The Spirit forms our character.

Gal. 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

It is the efforts we make toward our spiritual growth that makes the difference in our ability to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as our hearts have to be right to take advantage of the Spirit, the same holds true to get the most out of our prayers. Whenever you do anything you should want to get the most out of your efforts. An athlete knows in order to get the most out of their drills, proper technique needs to be followed and to make a play work good execution is essential. Praying is no different except instead of technique and execution we need the right attitude and frame of mind.

There are scriptures that provide many important insights on how to make praying more effective. One of the most important factors that determine the effectiveness of our prayers is our motive for praying. Are we praying for what God wants or what we want, and sometimes the two are very opposed to each other? James 4:3 specifically tells us if we pray for something to just satisfy our own pleasures, we will not get what we ask for. Our motives should be in line with the will of God, in other words what God wants for our lives.

1 John 5:14,15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.

Many of our prayers are based on selfish motives instead of a concern for God's will. For example, an athlete who prays that they do well in a game may not get the result they want if what they are seeking is personal glory. The very same prayer may be effective if the motive is simply to bless the efforts of their hard work and training or to show others how God can work in their lives (sometimes God uses failure to show how he can work in our lives). You can have total confidence your motives are in line with the will of God when you're praying for spiritual growth, when you are praying to know God, and when you are praying for God to be in control of your life.

Having confidence is another very important factor for effective prayers. Confidence is another word for faith and our faith should be based on trusting in God. You have read in Chapter 10 (Expect to Win) the more you know God the easier it is to trust Him. In this same chapter I also stated the more you experience God working in your life the more you will turn to Him for help. This is a snowballing process but at some point you have to get the ball rolling. At first your faith may be weak, which is why you are committing to spiritual growth in the first place, but the more you go to God in prayer the stronger your faith will become if your heart is right, and this will increase the effectiveness of your prayers.

To illustrate this point I will use an athlete again as an example. An athlete may come to the realization he or she needs quicker feet in order to have a more fruitful athletic career. The coach tells the athlete "shuttle drills" really help. He or she commits to doing these drills but has a real hard time getting motivated to do them. After a few months of these drills the athlete begins to notice an increase in quickness that is really helping their game. The attitude of the athlete

toward doing these drills begins to change from drudgery to increased enthusiasm. The athlete now has “faith” in the drills and intensifies their efforts and commits to better form and technique, which results in even more quickness. I can tell you from watching my son do shuttle drills praying is a heck of a lot easier. I can also tell you increased prayer will make a tremendous difference in your life but what I believe is not as important as what you believe.

Once you really start to believe in God’s love, in his power, and in his promises you will then start to see a real power in your prayers. Hebrews 11:6 makes it clear we have to have faith to please God, and if we really believe he exists we will be rewarded if we earnestly (key word) seek him. One of those rewards of our faith is answered prayer.

James 1:5,6 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

What would be your reaction if someone demanded or expected help from you that you were under no obligation to give? How would you feel if you did help and the person you helped takes you for granted at best or doesn’t appreciate your help because for some unjustified reason they think you owe them? Would your reaction be different if that person let you know how much they appreciated your help and it was obvious they were genuinely thankful. Would your motivation to help be effected if you loved the person wanting your help and that person freely let you know they loved you? You bet it would!

God loves us and he will intervene in our lives even when we don’t deserve it, and keep in mind because of our sinful nature we don’t deserve it. But a thankful and trusting heart will make our prayers even more effective. The following verses remind us about the attitude we should have.

Philippians 4:6,7 - Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 makes the same point, telling us to be joyful always and to give thanks in all circumstances. Verse 17 also tells us to pray continually. Jesus gives us a parable in Luke 18:1-8 in order to illustrate the value of persistent prayer. He tells of a judge who neither cared about God or men. A widow kept coming to this judge begging for justice against her adversary. For the longest time she would keep coming to this judge, and the judge would keep denying her request. Finally this judge gave in, because she wore him out with her persistence, he gave in just to be rid of her. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand they should never give up praying for what they want, persistence matters.

Your level of persistence often indicates how important something is to you and how badly you want what you are praying for. If it’s not real important it won’t take much before you give up praying for whatever it is you are praying for. If it’s not important to you why should it be important to God? Conversely, if it is important to you then it is important to God. The more you keep praying for something the more you are showing God how much what you are praying for means to you. I believe persistent prayer can also strengthen your faith and your reliance on God as well as showing Him how passionate you are about what you are praying for.

You have read how praying can be ineffective because of wrong motives, an ungrateful heart, and a lack of faith. Jesus gives additional instructions about praying in Matthew 6:5-15. He tells us not to make a show of our praying because we want to impress people with our

“spirituality”. Instead there are times we need to find a private place, away from distractions to go to God in prayer. Our prayers also have to come from our heart instead of just repeating a bunch of words, or as Jesus put it in verse 7, we should not babble like a bunch of unbelievers who think chanting a bunch of words will accomplish something. God knows what we need. He simply wants us to sincerely want him to be involved in our lives.

Jesus goes on to tell us how to pray in verses 9-15 (often referred to as the Lord’s Prayer). In this prayer we ask in God’s holy name (we recognize who God really is) for him to do his will in our lives, we ask him for even our basic daily needs. We ask him to keep us from temptation and to protect us from Satan. Jesus also tells us to ask God to forgive us of our sins as we forgive others, in fact he makes an extra effort to make this point because he goes on to state if we don’t forgive others God will not forgive us.

Holding grudges against someone will reduce the effectiveness of our prayers. God wants our hearts to be right when we come to Him in prayer. Love of our fellow man is very important to God (a topic that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 13 “Love – The End Result”). A major way we can demonstrate our love is to forgive others when they have wronged us just as God has forgiven us for our many sins against Him. This “spiritual cleansing” is an important concept to understand. We need to get rid of bitterness, our self-centered attitude, and anger toward others because this hinders our spiritual relationship, therefore our communication with God.

Confessing our sins is another important aspect of our “spiritual cleansing”. I will give a quick review as to why this is important. God is holy which means God is perfect. Because of our rebellious nature, we sin and our sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2). Because of His love for us God has made a provision to reconcile us to Him through the death of Jesus. But in order to be reconciled to God we have to admit, or confess, our sins to Him. When we confess our faults we are telling God “I admit I have weaknesses and I need your help God to overcome these weaknesses”.

Our prayers become more effective because we are acknowledging how much we really need God in our lives and admitting weaknesses and faults is always the most important first step in overcoming our weaknesses and faults. This is why Proverbs 28:13 tells us he who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. For example, admitting we are not where we should be spiritually is the most important first step in our efforts to grow spiritually. We are not only to confess to God, we confess to each other, as the following scripture clearly states.

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

This is very difficult for many to do and one of the reasons why Christian fellowship is very important. We often need encouragement and confessing our sins to others breaks down prideful barriers that prevent us from receiving the encouragement of those that care about us. It is our pride that prevents us from sharing our problems and robs us of the love, support, prayers, and strength we can gain from others who do care. Confessing our sins to each other also gives us someone else to be accountable to and allows us to reap the benefits of their prayers for us.

Your prayers are also affected by the life you live and being obedient to God increases the power of your prayers. James 5:16 proclaims the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. God being more attentive to our prayers because we are obedient does really make a lot of sense if you think about it. We live a life of rebellion and disobedience and when trouble comes along or we start reaping the consequences of our sin then we then decide to get God involved. A

point I tried to make in Chapter 10 (Expect to Win) was that the stronger our relationship with God the more involved he will be in our lives. Keep in mind it is our faith in Jesus that makes us as righteous as God just as Abraham's faith was credited as righteousness, but it should be a faith that leads to obedience.

We need to remember when we ask God for forgiveness, and we are truly sorry for what wrongs we have done, God forgives us and we are made as righteous as God. We are viewed as if we have never sinned! This is the real beauty of what our faith in Jesus does for us. And it is not just saying the words, confessing with your mouth, that does anything for us, it is really a deep down inside understanding that we have sinned and it is this true repentance, this desire to turn from sin, that will cause us to turn to God.

When we truly look to God for our strength our hearts are changed and we have a desire to know God and this is important in order to have a strong spiritual relationship with Him. When our relationship is strong we will be more effective in living up to God's standards because of our love for him. We will want to obey instead of feeling we have to, and that is a huge difference. I have stated several times in this book that love is a great motivator. Our love for others as well as our love for God can give us an incentive to be more obedient because if we really care about those we are praying for we would should want our prayers to be as effective as possible.

1 John 3:21,22 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

James 5:16 tell us we should pray for each other and the scripture below states we should pray with each other. These verses also point out why Church and other means of Christian fellowship are important. We gather together with a common goal – to grow in Christ, and the power of our prayers is increased when we pray with others with this same goal. We are also tapping into the loving power of others who care about each other when we pray with and for other believers along with tapping into God's power.

Matthew 18:19,20 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Prayer is what ignites our spiritual growth and reading our Bible on a regular basis provides the fuel we need to sustain that growth. For any relationship to be beneficial there needs to be two-way communication. Prayer is how we talk to God and the Bible is how He communicates with us. The bible serves three very important purposes. The first purpose is its message of salvation – how we can be reconciled to God. The second purpose is so we can know God. This is extremely important because the more we know God the more we will love Him. You will understand His love for you and your love of God will motivate you to live out His will for your life which leads to the third purpose – the bible gives us instructions about how to have the life God wants us to have. Because of Gods love for us He has given us instructions how to get the most out our lives. Our play-book for a winning life of joy, contentment, love, peace, and a life of value to others.

Ephesians 5:17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

In order for the bible to have maximum impact we have to be in the right frame of mind when we read the bible. How true is this for much of what we do? To do to your best when taking

tests in school you need to be able to concentrate and be free from distractions. An athlete needs to be focused to achieve peak performance. You have just read about how to prepare your heart in order to get the most out of praying. If you read your bible just for the sake of reading it your efforts will be no more fruitful than the student reading course material just because they have to or an athlete just going through the motions to perform. Being motivated to read the bible is the key to getting the most out of it just as motivation is the key to doing our best at whatever we do. Obviously I hope this book is helping you to become more motivated to grow spiritually but I believe prayer is what will really make the difference, especially if you ask for the help of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever we commit to learning something new, we will have a very limited understanding at first about whatever we are trying to accomplish. As we go through training and the learning process our understanding increases. If we tried to learn too much too soon we would become extremely frustrated and this can be very counterproductive.

For example, if a football or basketball coach puts in a new offense and explains this offense at a team meeting and expects the team to instantly understand this offense the coach will be in for some disappointments. The same would be true if a professor or teacher explains a complicated concept in one lecture and then expects their students to have a complete understanding of the material. Usually any new concept is taught in bits and pieces until the individuals can grasp the overall concept.

Reading the bible for a new Christian works much the same way. The Bible provides spiritual nourishment for a new Christian and is essential for spiritual growth. But if a new Christian tries to understand too much too soon he or she will be like a newborn given food when they should be starting on milk. They will not be able to “digest” what they read and maybe even “choke” on it by rejecting God due to not understanding what was just read. 1 Peter 2:2 uses this example as this scripture tells new Christians to crave pure spiritual milk just like newborn babies so we can grow up in our salvation. You need to focus on trying to understand the basic truths of the bible at first and as you do you will begin to gradually understand deeper biblical truths. An amazing truth about the bible is you can read it all your life and you will still learn something new.

As you grow spiritually your desire to understand more of God’s truths should increase. If you do not have this desire you are not growing and you will become a malnourished Christian! You more than likely are only reading your bible for the sake of reading it instead of wanting to comprehend it. If we become spiritually lazy we will experience less and less the benefits of a strong (because we allow ourselves to get weak) relationship with God. We will be of little value to others, when we should be, and our spiritual understanding of God’s truths will suffer. The following scripture is trying to drive home this very point to the intended readers, a warning we should not take lightly.

Hebrews 5:12-14 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Spiritual maturity is a never-ending process and like a child that develops into an adult who in turn teaches a child, we need to keep developing our spiritual knowledge. As our understanding increases it will be easier to share our spiritual insights with others, and this should make their lives better as well as our own. I believe it is extremely important that you continually pray that

God gives you wisdom and helps you maintain your desire to know Him and ask for the help of the Holy Spirit while you are committing to read your bible. Otherwise you will just be going through the motions and the bible will never really come alive to you.

If your heart is right when you read your bible you will be amazed at how God will show you His truths and how your love for Him will grow. You will gain spiritual insights you have not had before. You will become better and better at applying God's truths to your life and this will lead to a more satisfying, peaceful, and productive life. Your confidence in what you believe will grow and this confidence will give you boldness along with the knowledge needed to share your faith with others. You will be equipped to make a real difference in the lives of others, giving your life tremendous value.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Your bible can be relied on! For your bible to have meaning to you it is critical you trust the authority of scriptures. The first thing anyone opposed to God and his standards will do is attack the reliability of the bible. Chapter 3 (Can We Trust Our Play-book), and chapter 12 (Be Prepared For War) discuss this issue in more detail. For this evidence to mean anything you really need to examine your heart. This is a point I have made several times in this book because it is such an important point. We have to have a sincere desire to want to know the truth instead of just wanting to justify our actions.

Contentment, peace, and joy don't just happen! In fact in Philippians 4:12 Paul said he "learned" the secret to being content in all things. You learn from really understanding God's love for us, understanding and knowing His promises, and from knowing and trusting in God's power. Reading your bible is how you learn to understand His love, promises, and power.

Reading our bible helps us understand God's will and his instructions about how to get the most out of life. As I have stated before, these instructions are for our own benefit. Even though we may not always understand the reasons behind God's instructions we should know because of his love for us and because he is all-knowing, we will benefit and prosper from trying to live up to God's standards. Who doesn't want to prosper? Before the time of Jesus, God's people relied on the laws of the Old Testament and these laws were for their benefit, and the same principle applies to us today.

Joshua 1:8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Psalms 1:2,3 tells us much the same. These scripture point out that those who delight in meditating (heart is right) day and night on God's word are like trees planted by streams of water, they will yield their fruit in season. Whatever they do they will prosper. This is an interesting analogy because these verses indicate it may take time before meditating on God's word achieves maximum benefit to you. If you recall, Chapter 2 (Peak Performance) your spiritual growth will help you develop attributes that will make you better at whatever you do, but it takes time to develop these attributes.

An athlete does not play to their maximum potential overnight. It takes a lot of consistent training and discipline before they are ready for their "season". A student is being prepared to

handle the challenges of their profession by learning the basic principles of their profession as a student as well as developing needed discipline and perseverance. A new employee needs to go through a period of training before they are productive. Reading our bible on a regular basis and with the right frame of mind will steadily make our lives better and prosperous.

Our efforts toward spiritual growth will cause us to prosper but this prosperity may not always be as the world defines prosperity. Jesus tells us in John 8:31,32 if we follow his teaching, which we know by reading the New Testament, we will know his truths and these truths will set us free. It is living out and knowing these truths that will give us contentment and joy that will not depend on a materialistic prosperity. We will feel prosperous because we will know our life has a value, a purpose, that no possessions can ever give us. It is reading our bible that will convict and equip us to have this life of value.

You should also take advantage of the many books, commentaries, and other resource materials written by others that want to share their spiritual insights. These resources give us additional views and information that can accelerate our spiritual growth. You can compare reading books that help your spiritual growth to an athlete that uses a personal trainer. The coach gives a lot of beneficial instructions but a trainer can really help someone get the maximum benefit from those instructions. When I really started to get into writing this book I wanted know as much as I could about the topics I wanted to write about. I began to read the books I have referenced and these additional resources helped my understanding of these topics immensely.

I admit before undertaking this project I had not spent much time reading. An additional benefit of my research was getting back into the habit of using free time to read. I really started to feel more of a sense of fulfillment because I was now spending more time doing something constructive instead of wasting time, which can be easy to do when you have a TV around. I discovered how enjoyable reading is and now I try much harder to find time to read.

I believe reading constructive books is exercise for the mind like working out is exercise for the body – and both are needed to get the most out of life. I understand most who read this are students and students get plenty of mind exercise. I just want to urge you to be careful you do not neglect reading when you finish school. A major difference is you will be able to read what you want to read and if you attend or have attended college you will appreciate the fact the cost of non-text books are actually affordable.

Who you hang around with can be a major factor in effecting your spiritual growth.. Peer influence has a tremendous impact on shaping our character and personality, especially during our youth. I have been married over 20 years and I still remember the tremendous pressure to conform to the norms of the day when I was single. This is why I have a huge concern for college students away from home for the first time. I know there are pressures to conform to destructive lifestyles in order to feel accepted. A very large percentage of freshmen at many large colleges flunk out of school, not because they are not capable, they become academically ineligible because they allow peer pressure to effect them. These students often spend too much partying and not enough time studying.

The temptation to give in to unhealthy peer pressure is another reason why taking steps toward spiritual growth is so very important – it will give you the wisdom, strength, and motivation to choose friends wisely. This does not mean you should only hang around others who share the same beliefs. In fact making friends with others who do not know God gives you an opportunity to effect their lives in a very positive way.

You need to be careful not to allow others to hinder you from having the relationship God desires. If you hang around others who have a different set of standards than what God wants us

to live by, you will more than likely adopt some of those standards. Psalms 1:1 tells us we will be “blessed”, we will have a better life, if we don’t listen to those who are wicked, or hang with those who make fun of others or those who lead a life opposed to the life God wants for us. The following verses makes it very clear why we should not hang around with these type of individuals.

1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."

The meaning of these scriptures go deeper than who we choose to have as friends. What type of TV shows and movies we watch, books we read, and music we listen to (Christian based music is a booming industry so there is a wide variety of great music available) will all have an effect on shaping the type of person we will become. You may not think what you read, watch, and listen to influences you but it influences you far more than what you may think it does. It can slowly cause you to compromise God’s standards because it is another form of peer pressure – pressure to conform to popular cultural values of the day and often these values are the opposite of what God would want us to adopt.

An obvious example is sexual values. Be honest with yourself and ask yourself if the entertainment media emphasizes self-control or self-indulgence (which of the two “sells” the most). So we really need to evaluate if what we watch, read, and listen to causes us to focus on what the following verse tells us to think about.

Philippians 4: 8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.

Hanging around with others who do not share your same beliefs may not be harmful but marriage is a different story. If you are single, choosing your future spouse will be one of the most important and life impacting decisions you will make. I can tell you from my own marriage that there will be much you will not have in common and you will go through hard times, but having the same core beliefs (the beliefs you live by) is what will bind you together and make your relationship more meaningful and fulfilling.

Marrying or seriously dating someone you can grow with spiritually and who shares your core values will impact the quality of your relationship far more than someone who likes the same movies, music, or whatever other interests you may have in common. You can change what you like (I often did because of my marriage) without changing the person you are, but compromising your view of what is right and wrong will change your inner self, and that can be disastrous. This principle holds true for any close relationship because your faith defines the person you are.

2 Corinthians 6:14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

You may be asking yourself – how do I meet and make friends with those that will be good influences? You can offset the many negative influences in this world by making certain you have fellowship with other believers. Christian fellowship is important for spiritual growth and a great source for strength and encouragement that can help you get through tough times. This is a very important reason why you should attend church. Church not only is a place to worship God and a great place to hear how the teachings of the Bible (sermons) are applied to our lives, but is also a very important source of knowing other believers. If you attend a large Church make certain you

get involved in their Bible studies or small group ministries. This is critical in order to get to know other members and so they can get to know you.

Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

There are many great Christian organizations that compliment church such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, school Bible studies, various college and high school based campus ministries for students, independent bible studies for adults like Bible Study Fellowship (BSF), and many other Christian based organizations. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to have strong Christian fellowship with people you know will care about you. Hebrews 3:13 tells us to encourage one another daily so that none of us may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. This means we should use each other to strengthen our resolve to live the life God wants for us and to overcome the temptations we all face.

Fellowship with people who care gives you an opportunity to share your burdens and this can be extremely beneficial. There is tremendous therapeutic value in being able to talk to others about what may be troubling you (but be careful not to whine) even if they cannot do anything about the situation. It has helped me and that is why I enjoy it when someone shares with me the frustrations of school, practice, jobs, relationships, or anything else because I know it is helping them cope with the struggles.

Galatians 6:2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Carrying each other's burdens is more than just listening to problems, it may require trying to do something to help, and if you have the love of Christ in you then you should have a desire to help, that is fulfilling the law of Christ. Sometimes all you can do is offer prayer and encouragement, and never underestimate the power of both. A great source of strength and encouragement can be someone who really understands your situation or has been through some tough times in their own lives.

For young or new Christians I would strongly recommend seeking a mentor who is a mature believer. In fact seeking a spiritual mentor can really benefit everyone. An athlete knows you get better when you play with and even against better athletes. This same principle applies to spiritual growth – you will grow more when you can spend time with someone who has a strong spiritual relationship. A mature Christian has more than likely been through a lot and that is why they are a mature Christians. They will not be judgmental because they more than likely have made mistakes and have learned from those mistakes and because of their experiences they will be more understanding.

This may be a controversial statement but I would avoid seeking the help of young materialistically successful Christians who have not gone through any real trials in their life, no matter how knowledgeable about the bible they may be. I believe it will be too easy for them to be more judgmental instead of loving and understanding. I have experienced attempted help from this type of person and it was no help at all to me. Being able to share with others who you feel understand what you are going through will have tremendous value to you as it has been to me. In fact one of the benefits of experiencing trials and failures is that we can use these experiences to help others.

2 Corinthians 1:3,4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Our mind is constantly being filled with messages of what to do and how to live. These messages come from work, school, friends, TV, movies, music, books, the internet and who knows where else. If God is not in control of our life ungodly influences will be and there sure are a lot of ungodly influences in the world. These ungodly influences are out to destroy us! We are constantly making choices about what we allow to influence us. Committing to spiritual growth will make the difference in overcoming destructive influences.

If you think you are happy now just see what happens during your growth! If you are not happy, and I am talking about a deep down inside satisfaction, or as content as you would like to be see what happens during your spiritual journey. You will be able to accomplish things you didn't think you could do, other people will love to be around you, and you truly will have a winning life.

Philippians 3:7-16 does a great job of summing up what spiritual growth should be all about. Paul states in verse 7 what he once considered profit, he now considers a loss for the sake of Christ. His priorities have changed, what he once thought was important is not important anymore. Verse 8 reinforces the previous verse and goes on to say there is nothing that can compare to knowing Christ, he considers everything he gave up for his spiritual relationship with Jesus as rubbish compared to what he now has. Paul now knows, according to verse 9, he can never become "righteous" by what he does but he can be considered to be right with God because of his faith in Christ.

Paul makes it clear he now desires to really know Jesus and experience his love, his power - the power to change lives, as well as experience the sufferings of Jesus. In other words he wants to experience the heart of Jesus, which includes the pain felt seeing others suffer, the pain from knowing what sin does to us, as well as the pain from persecution because of following Christ (verse 10). In verse 11 Paul make it known he does not fear death, as he knows he will be resurrected from his death to be in heaven.

In verses 12 and 13 Paul confesses he has not yet obtained his spiritual goals, he is far from perfect, but his life is dedicated to "press on", to grow in Christ. His pursuit is to make progress toward living out, taking hold of, the truths taught by Jesus, the truths understood from his efforts to know Christ. He wants to forget what is behind and work toward what is ahead. He doesn't want guilt to hinder his spiritual progress. Paul goes on to say in verse 14 he wants to press on to win the prize, the reward that God wants him to have. Paul wants to be a "winner" according to God's definition of a winner.

He explains in verse 15 if we are mature we should take this same view of life, and if there are points you don't understand, God will eventually make these points clear to you if your heart is right. The last verse of this section, verse 16, tells us we should live up to what we already know. And many know better and refuse to act on God's truths.

What will get you to have the same view as Paul. It will be following the game plan discussed in this chapter – lots of prayer, reading your bible and other Christian based books and resources, going to church, Christian fellowship, getting involved in Christian based organizations, and staying away from influences that get in the way of your spiritual growth. These activities will improve your spiritual relationship, therefore your life as well as all those around you. Your growth will make a difference