Key Verse. "But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one." (1 Corinthians 2:15)

Introduction

We use the word "spiritual" all the time. A coworker says she is spiritual but not religious. A friend says a sunset was a spiritual experience. A Christian says a certain believer is very spiritual because he prays a long time or speaks with deep feeling. A preacher says a believer can live as a carnal Christian or move up to the spiritual life.

These all use the same word. Most of them do not mean what the Bible means.

The popular idea is that spirituality is something ethereal, mystical, or emotional. It is a mood, a sense, a glow, a feeling of connection. Scripture describes something very different. Spirituality in the Bible is objective. It pertains to the spirit, and it is measured by what the Holy Spirit revealed.

We will answer four questions. What is spirituality? How does that contrast with other definitions? How have the mistaken definitions affected believers? And how can a believer be sure he is spiritual?

What Is Spirituality?

The Word

The English word "spiritual" translates πνευματικός (pneumatikos). It comes from πνεῦμα (pneuma), spirit, breath, or wind. The ending means "belonging to" or "characterized by." So πνευματικός is that which belongs to the spirit, that which is characterized by spirit.

The word appears 26 times in the New Testament. Paul uses it 24 times. Peter uses it twice. It does not appear in the Gospels. Paul uses it in three ways. He uses it of things, of an order of existence, and of a person.

Spiritual Things

First, things that come from the Spirit are called spiritual. The clearest example is God's Word. Paul says of the Law, "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" (Romans 7:14). The Law is spiritual because it came from God.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul describes how the Apostles delivered revelation: "which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words" (2:13). Spiritual things came in words. They could be written down, read, and understood.

The gifts are also called spiritual: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware" (12:1). The Greek says only, "concerning the spiritual things." They are spiritual because the Spirit gave them.

Peter uses the word twice, in one verse: “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). The house and the sacrifices belong to God’s order, and they are acceptable “through Jesus Christ.”

Another Order of Existence

Second, “spiritual” can describe another order of existence, a realm beyond ordinary flesh and blood. It does not mean unreal. Israel in the wilderness “all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (10:3-4). The manna was real food. The water was real water. They were spiritual because God supplied them.

The resurrection body is the same: “it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (15:44). The resurrection body is a real body. It is spiritual because it belongs to God’s order, not to the order of Adam.

That order is not automatically holy. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Demons are spiritual in this sense. That alone should caution us against treating every “spiritual” experience as from God.

The Spiritual Man

Third, Paul uses the word of a person. The key passage is 1 Corinthians 2:14-15: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.”

“Natural” is ψυχικός (psuchikos), soulish, the man who has only natural life. He does not have the Spirit. Jude describes such men as “worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19).

“Appraises” is ἀνακρίνω (anakrinō), to examine, to investigate, to evaluate. The spiritual man appraises all things. That is an activity of the mind. He weighs everything by a standard. “Spiritually appraised” is πνευματικῶς (pneumatikōs), spiritually. It means examined by what the Holy Spirit taught.

The difference between the two men is not that one has an inward faculty the other lacks. It is the standard each one examines by. The natural man examines by man’s wisdom. The spiritual man examines by what the Spirit revealed.

So here is the definition. **Being spiritual is examining and evaluating all things by what the Holy Spirit revealed. At any given moment a believer is either doing that or he is not.**

Paul uses the word of a person three more times. “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (1 Corinthians 14:37). “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a

one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

Two Kinds of Men, Not Three

"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?" (3:1-3)

Paul calls them "brethren." They are "in Christ." Their standing is not in question. Their thinking is fleshly. "Fleshly" is σαρκικός (sarkikos), governed by the flesh, by the measure of man. They ranked teachers the way the world ranks speakers. They were "walking like mere men."

That is not a third kind of man. Scripture gives two kinds of men: those without the Holy Spirit and those with Him. The fleshly believer is not a different kind of believer. He is a believer using the wrong standard. "Spiritual" does not name a higher class. It describes a believer thinking by what the Spirit revealed.

How Does This Contrast with Other Definitions?

Pew Research reported in 2023 that "there is no single, widely accepted definition of spirituality." That is true in our culture and in Christian circles. We can group the common definitions into six errors. Each one gets something wrong about the source or the standard.

Error One: Spirituality Is the Inner Self or a Feeling

Pew asked Americans what is essential to being spiritual. The top answers were "being connected with something bigger than myself," "being connected with God," and "being connected with my true self." The Oxford dictionary defines spiritual as "of, relating to, or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things."

The biblical word points to the Spirit as the source, not to the human interior. A natural man can be deeply "spiritual" in the popular sense and still not accept "the things of the Spirit of God" (2:14). The difference is the standard, not a feeling.

Error Two: Spirituality Is Experience Apart from Belief

Eckhart Tolle wrote that "how 'spiritual' you are has nothing to do with what you believe but everything to do with your state of consciousness." In an interview he said, "beliefs are thoughts," and therefore, not spiritual.

That is close to the exact opposite of Paul. Spiritual things were delivered "in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words" (2:13). The spiritual man is tested by what he believes about the apostolic writing (14:37). Spiritual truth has content.

Error Three: Spirituality Is a Higher Class of Christian

Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote that Paul "has divided the whole human family into three groups": the natural man, the carnal man, and the spiritual man. The Campus Crusade booklet on the Spirit-filled life draws three circles and says, "Though all Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, not all Christians are filled (directed and empowered) by the Holy Spirit."

Chafer rightly said the spiritual man is "normal," and he rightly separated salvation from maturity. But Paul names two kinds of men in 2:14-15, not three. In 3:1-4 he corrects the Corinthians' thinking. He does not create a lower class of believer.

Error Four: Spirituality Is Gifts, Signs, or Power

The Assemblies of God statement says the baptism in the Holy Spirit "is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues." In practice a believer without that experience is often treated as less spiritual.

Corinth had every gift. Paul says, "you are not lacking in any gift" (1:7). Yet he could not speak to them as spiritual men (3:1). The gifts were spiritual things. They do not make the person who had them spiritual. The test is 14:37.

Error Five: Spirituality Is Disciplines or Moral Effort

Richard Foster wrote, "God has given us the disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace." Many believers think of a spiritual person as one who keeps devotional habits, fasts, or keeps rules.

Scripture never calls a practice spiritual in itself. Spiritual things come from the Spirit. Restoring a brother gently (Galatians 6:1) is what a spiritual man does. It is not what makes him spiritual.

Error Six: Spirituality Is the Immaterial or the "Spirit Part" of Man

Merriam-Webster gives "incorporeal," not bodily. Others divide man into body, soul, and spirit, and call the spiritual man the one whose spirit part rules.

The manna was real food, and it was "spiritual" (10:3-4). The resurrection body is a real body, and it is "spiritual" (15:44). The word marks origin and order, not a lack of substance. And Ephesians 6:12 shows it is not automatically holy.

How Have the Mistaken Definitions Affected Believers?

These are not harmless differences in vocabulary. A wrong definition sends believers looking in the wrong place.

Chasing feelings and experiences. If spirituality is a feeling, the believer chases the feeling. When it fades, he thinks God has left. Even the Campus Crusade booklet says, "Do not depend on feelings." Paul tied the spiritual man to appraisal, not emotion. Feelings follow thinking. They do not measure it.

Doubt and discouragement. If spirituality is a status gained by meeting conditions, the believer keeps asking, "Am I spiritual right now? Did I confess everything? Have I surrendered enough?" He can never be sure.

Pride or despair. If there are two tiers of Christians, some believers think they have arrived, and others think they never will. Both are wrong. Galatians 6 cautions the very men who restore others: "each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (6:1). Two verses later: "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (6:3).

Performance and checklists. If spirituality is disciplines, the believer measures himself by his schedule. Paul named the decrees, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21), and then said this: "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). They look spiritual. They do not change the standard a man thinks by.

Mysticism replacing doctrine. If spirituality is inner experience, a man's impressions become his authority. Paul cautioned the Colossians against the man "taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (Colossians 2:18). Without doctrine believers become "children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14).

Neglect of the Word. If the Spirit speaks to me directly, I don't need to study. But Paul told the Ephesians, "when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4). The Bereans "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). That is what a spiritual man does.

Measuring by gifts. If spirituality is power, the most impressive believer looks the most spiritual. Corinth proves otherwise. They lacked no gift and were still fleshly.

How Can One Ensure He Is Spiritual?

We need to keep two things apart: what God has settled, and what the believer does with it.

Positionally: In Christ, Indwelt by the Spirit

Every believer has the Holy Spirit. Each received Him the moment he believed the Gospel. Paul says to the Ephesians, "having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). To the Corinthians, who were acting fleshly, he says, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). And, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (12:13).

That is not earned. It cannot be lost. It does not depend on feelings. "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the

Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9). There is no believer without the Spirit, and no unbeliever with Him. A Christian can and should be spiritual from the moment he is saved.

Experientially: Thinking by What the Spirit Revealed

Being spiritual is examining and evaluating all things by what the Holy Spirit revealed. Where do we find what He revealed? In the Scriptures. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

That gives us three plain facts.

First, it rises and falls. At any given moment a believer is either evaluating by the Word or by the measure of man. The same believer can do both in one afternoon.

Second, it is not a different class. The believer who thinks by man's standard is not a lower kind of Christian. He is using the wrong standard, and the remedy is proper thinking and growth.

Third, right thinking equips the believer to choose rightly. It does not choose for him. Paul says, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). The renewed mind proves what God's will is. The believer still has to choose it. So we cannot look at a man's conduct and declare him spiritual. Wrong conduct can expose wrong thinking. Right conduct does not prove right thinking.

Spiritual maturity is a related subject but a separate one. Maturity is what makes this thinking settled and consistent instead of occasional.

Filled in Spirit

Paul writes, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:18-21).

The Greek says "be filled in spirit," ἐν πνεύματι (en pneumati). There is no "Holy" and no article. When Ephesians means the Holy Spirit, it says so (1:13, 4:30). Romans 8:9 also says "in the Spirit," but there, the next clause names Him: "the Spirit of God." Ephesians 5:18 has no such descriptor. And when Scripture names what fills a person, it does not use "in." So the filling here is located in the believer's own spirit, the inner man, as opposed to the flesh that wine fills.

"Be filled" is πληρόω (plēroō), to fill, fill up, complete. It never means "to control." Paul is not setting two controllers side by side. He sets two fillings side by side. The drunk man fills himself with wine. The believer is filled in his spirit with truth. The verb is a command, and it is passive. The believer is commanded to be filled, and the activities that follow describe how that happens.

Colossians 3:16 settles what fills the believer. The same activities appear there: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Being filled in spirit is the word of Christ dwelling richly in the believer. It is not a mystical surge. It is a mind full of the truth God gave.

Walk in Spirit

Paul writes, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). And, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (5:25).

Again, πνεῦμα stands with no “Holy,” no “of God,” no article, and no preposition. The contrast in the chapter is spirit and flesh, the two sides of the believer. The spirit here is the believer’s renewed spirit. To walk in spirit is to walk in reference to it, to order a pattern of life that fits the new man God made, not the flesh.

“Walk” is περιπατέω (peripateō), to walk around, the ordinary word for how a man conducts his life. The second “walk” in verse 25 is στοιχέω (stoicheō), to stand in line, to keep in step, as soldiers in rank. At any given moment we are lined up with our spirit or with our flesh.

How does a believer walk in spirit? He grows in the knowledge of the Word. He prays, conforming his thoughts to God’s thoughts. He loves others as Christ loved him. And he makes good choices based on the Word of God. None of that is mystical. It is not waiting for a feeling before a decision. It is the Word, believed and applied.

The Test

Paul gave the Corinthians one test: “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (1 Corinthians 14:37).

The test is not how a man feels, how gifted he is, how long he prays, or how many rules he keeps. The test is what he does with the apostolic writing. Does he recognize it as the Lord’s commandment, and does he evaluate everything by it? That is objective. It can be checked against the page.

Application

Stop chasing a feeling. Feelings are real, but they are not the measure. Ask what you are thinking, and by what standard.

Rest in what God has settled. If you have believed the Gospel, the Holy Spirit indwells you. You are not waiting for a second experience to make you complete.

Fill your spirit with truth. Read, hear, and think through the Scriptures. The drunk man fills himself with wine. Fill yourself with the word of Christ.

Test every claim. Test the preacher, the book, the impression, and the experience by what is written. A spiritual experience that contradicts the written Word is not from the Holy Spirit.

Restore, don't rank. When a brother is caught in error, help him back to right thinking with gentleness. You are not a higher class. Look to yourself.

A Word on the Gospel

Everything we have said assumes a man has the Spirit. The natural man does not. He may be very "spiritual" in the world's sense and still be "devoid of the Spirit" (Jude 19).

The Spirit is not received by feeling, by discipline, or by gifts. He is received by believing the Gospel.

Synthesis

Spirituality is not ethereal, mystical, or emotional. It is objective, and it pertains to the spirit.

"Spiritual" describes what comes from and belongs to the Spirit: His Word, His gifts, and His order of existence. Of a person, it describes a believer examining and evaluating all things by what the Holy Spirit revealed.

Every believer has the Spirit. Not every believer is thinking by what He revealed.

The believer is filled in spirit when the word of Christ dwells richly in him. He walks in spirit when he lines up his life with the new man, not the flesh.

"But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one" (1 Corinthians 2:15).