

Study: Many Believers Struggle to Obey God's Word

Canadian churchgoers say reading the Bible has changed their life and they readily confess their sins, according to a survey by LifeWay Research.

The survey included 1,086 Canadian lay people who attend church at least once a month.

More than half say they try to avoid temptations but few say that becoming a better Christian involves self-denial.

About a third (33 percent) of Canadian churchgoers agree with the statement, "A Christian must learn to deny himself/herself in order to serve Christ." Close to half (45 percent) disagreed.

"Obeying God and Denying Self" is one of eight attributes of discipleship found in the Transformational Discipleship study conducted by Nashville, LifeWay Research.

Each of the eight attributes consistently shows up in the lives of spiritually growing believers, said Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research.

McConnell said researchers didn't list specific sins that churchgoers should avoid. Instead, they were more interested in people's attitudes. They wanted to see how important obeying God is to churchgoers.

He said spiritual maturity goes beyond avoiding sin and asking for forgiveness. It also involves conscious choices to obey God's will rather than our own.

"Obeying God is only easy when a person's own desires match God's," McConnell said. "Until believers have the same mind as Christ, denying their own natural desires will be hard."

The survey asked churchgoers how often they confess sins or ask for forgiveness. It's a way to measure a spiritual attribute called "Obeying God and Denying Self."

Sixteen percent of those surveyed say they confess sin and seek forgiveness daily. One in five say they confess to God a few times a week. Almost a quarter (23 percent) rarely or never confess sins and wrongdoings to God and ask forgiveness.

The survey also asked churchgoers how proactive they are in avoiding sin.

Just over half (52 percent) agree with the statement: "I try to avoid situations in which I might be tempted to think or do immoral things." Twenty-five percent disagree, and 23 percent are indifferent.

More than half of Canadian churchgoers (58 percent) change their attitudes when they feel those attitudes displease God.

The idea of obeying God, however, got mixed results, especially the statement: "When I realize that I have a choice between 'my way' and 'God's way,' I usually choose my own way."

Forty-percent disagree, while nearly the same number (38 percent) neither agree nor disagree. Only two percent strongly agree, while 22 percent agree overall.

The survey also reveals actions that lead to higher scores on the "Obeying God and Denying Self" attribute, according to researchers.

Those actions include:

- Attending a worship service;
- Making a decision to obey or follow God with an awareness that choosing His way may in some way be costly;
- Being discipled or mentored one-on-one by a more

- spiritually mature Christian;
- Reading the Bible or a book about what is in the Bible;
- Praying for unbelieving acquaintances;
- Setting aside time for prayer of any kind.

McConnell noted that “Obeying God and Denying Self” is the only one of the eight attributes of discipleship that was predicted by more frequent worship attendance.

It’s a sign that spiritual maturity often happens in community, said McConnell.

“Many people think of obeying God as something they must do on their own,” he said. “However, it’s clear through the research findings that the teaching, encouragement and accountability of corporate worship have a direct impact on obedience.”

These findings on obeying God and denying self are part of the largest discipleship study of its kind. Results from each of the eight attributes of spiritual maturity will continue to be released over the coming months.

LifeWay Research used the study’s data to develop a questionnaire for believers, called the Transformational Discipleship Assessment (TDA). This online evaluation delivers both individual and group reports on spiritual maturity based on eight factors of biblical discipleship. The TDA also provides practical suggestions for continued spiritual development.