

THE GOSPEL IN SLOW MOTION:

**A 9 STEP
SANCTIFICATION MODEL
FOR SIN-BASED STRUGGLES**



Brad Hambrick

THE GOSPEL IN SLOW MOTION: A 9 STEP SANCTIFICATION MODEL FOR SIN-BASED STRUGGLES

A core value of G4 is the belief that the gospel speaks to both sin and suffering, but ministers to these experiences differently. For this reason, G4 series curriculum are built around two nine-step models: one for sin-based struggles and one for suffering-based struggles.

Here, we will overview the nine-step model for sin-based struggles; that is, life struggles emerging from our beliefs, values, and choices. We sometimes refer to these steps as the “responsibility model” to contrast it with the suffering model, which addresses struggles that do not emerge from our beliefs, values, or choices (a comparable study overviewing that content can be found at bradhambrick.com/G4suffering).

As you go through this material, the image we want you to have in mind is a ball bearing. In a ball bearing each of the small inner balls spin to create a smooth rotation for the outer ring. By way of metaphor, each inner ball represents a night at G4, and the outer ring represents the change in an individual’s life.



It is common to feel like a given conversation creates more change than has in fact occurred; more is understood than assimilated. In a conversation, you may feel like your friend has covered the first four steps (i.e., admit, acknowledge, understand, and repent), but when you talk with them next, they have returned to minimizing their sin or blame-shifting.

Progressive sanctification means that there will be rises and falls in our progress. As a rule of thumb, do not gauge progress by where your friend is at the end of a G4 meeting; that is a measure of *understanding* or *desire to change* more than progress. Instead, measure progress based upon where your friend is at the beginning of the next G4 meeting. This represents the difference in movement of the inner balls (i.e., conversation) and the outer ring (i.e., actual change).

With the image of a ball bearing in mind, let’s go over the nine G4 steps for change with responsibility-based struggles.

Step 1: Admit I Have a Struggle I Cannot Overcome Without God

Admitting we have a life-dominating struggle is something that usually comes and goes (at least at first). This is why someone can reach out for help in a moment of crisis and then get defensive a few days later (maybe even minutes later) when discussing the same life struggle.

The primary goal of step 1 is to garner a consistent commitment to change. If we try to provide practical guidance before someone is committed to change, our best advice – even biblical advice – will be undermined by their inconsistent motivation to change.

Step 1 is also when we realize that we sin because we’re sinners, rather than we’re sinners because we sin. We are born with an inherent bent toward sin. No one has to teach us to disobey or be selfish. Realizing our sin condition is essential for recognizing the reality that we need more than the removal of a few bad habits. We need a new heart that only Christ can give (Ezek. 36:26).

Step 2: Acknowledge the Breadth and Impact of My Sin

You can admit you have an overwhelming struggle and still not acknowledge the breadth and impact of that struggle. Just like you can know that your house needs major repairs and not know the extent or cost of those repairs.

Principle: *Our commitment and effort toward change will be proportional to our belief about the breadth and impact of our struggle.* Imagine a 1 to 10 scale. If you believe you have a size 4 problem, you will give level 4 effort. But if your struggle is size 8, level 4 effort will be inadequate, and you won’t make significant progress. Ultimately, not acknowledging the size of the problem will create a defeatist attitude: “I tried. I even tried God’s way using the Bible. And it didn’t work. What else can be expected of me?”

In step 2 we acknowledge the severity of our sin (its frequency, duration, and magnitude) and our sin’s impact on other people (intended or unintended) without wallowing in guilt or shame. *During step 2 we acknowledge the futility of making empty promises that change will come quickly.*

Step 3: Understand the Origin, Motive, and History of My Sin

Too often *acknowledging* (step 2) is confused with *understanding* (step 3). It is as if moments after acknowledging our struggle, we become experts on how to change. We are prone to say with annoyance “I know...” to each insight and practical suggestion we receive. During step 3 we allow God to dissolve this attitude.

A key part of change is humility, and two primary expressions of humility are (a) the willingness to learn and (b) the patience necessary to walk through the learning process. We can say that someone understands their sin when they can discuss the following three things with clarity and without defensiveness:

- *Origin*—How does my struggle reveal the depraved condition of the human race?
- *History*—How has this struggle developed in my life (i.e., family history, personal habits, etc.), and what can I learn from its history?
- *Motive*—What makes this sin appealing to me, and how can I refute the lies implicit in these motives?

Key biblical passages that provide help in step 3 are James 1:14–15 and 4:1–2. In these passages, as Ed Welch explains, we see a transition in the focal point of change from the Old to New Testament.

“The Old Testament theme of idolatry passed the baton to the New Testament themes of lust, cravings, and sinful desire. This is in keeping with the New Testament’s emphasis on the hidden commitments of the heart over the external object of our affection. As Scripture unfolds, it gradually looks more at our wants and desires and less at the actual idols themselves.”¹

In other words, *God is concerned about our behavior because it reveals our heart.* We want help participants see how their behaviors reveal their heart so that they can apply their Bible as God intends.

Step 4: Repent to God for How My Sin Replaced and Misrepresented Him

Hopefully you are gaining an appreciation for the order of these steps. Repentance is at the heart (i.e., middle) of the change process. However, when our sin hurts others, we are prone to put confession (step 5) at the center of the process. We want making things right with others to be the fuel for change. But expecting forgiveness from people to do what only being right with God can do is ineffective and sets us up to blame others for our continued struggle.

Beyond understanding the order of these steps, *a primary task in step 4 is to view repentance as a gift rather than a punishment.* Read Romans 2:1–11. While the *fear of the Lord* is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10), it is the *kindness of God* that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). In step 4 we gain a more accurate understanding of God’s demeanor toward us on this journey. Too often we make God in our own image, imagining that he is as frustrated and angry with us as we are with ourselves.

In step 4 we also learn that repentance is about more than feeling sorry in God’s presence. *Repentance is a wholesale shift in our primary allegiance—from self to God—and forsaking of the values that made sin seem worth it.* Understanding of idolatrous motives in step 3 sets us up to do this *repenting of unbiblical values* work in step 4.

Step 5: Confess to Those Affected for Harm Done and Seek to Make Amends

This is a plumb line statement of G4: *You will only be as free as you are honest. Privacy kills change and fuels sin. Transparency kills sin and fuels change.* Chances are this step may scare you as much as any step you’ve taken since the first one. But remember, it is not nearly as scary to move forward as it is dangerous to drift backward.

Confession serves two functions: (a) acknowledging how we’ve harmed relationships, seeking forgiveness, and making amends and (b) inviting people to become a more informed part of our support network. *Confession is the door to community, the door through which we must pass if we do not want to be alone with our sin.* Confession is what invites others into our lives and points out to them

¹ Ed Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 203.

where they can help. Confession is how we acknowledge our weakness and admit that we need their help. Confession is what assures others that we have the humility and realistic expectations necessary to be safe to receive help.

Step 6: Restructure My Life to Rely on God’s Grace and Word to Transform My Life

Step 6 is what most people are looking for when they reach out for help. They want practical steps to address their problem. But everything before *life restructuring* creates the context for practical, biblical advice to succeed. These prior steps are summarized in the following list:

- *Admitting* the problem garners motivation and commitment.
- *Acknowledging* the size of the problem removes minimization.
- *Understanding* the motive and history allows practical steps to be more targeted.
- *Repenting* restores relationship with God and removes shame.
- *Confessing* restores key relationships and establishes a support network for change.

Ephesians 4:20–33 provides the basic strategy of step 6: replacement. Notice how Paul also calls for replacement as an essential part of change. In verses 20–24, he exhorts his readers not just to “put off” the old but also to “put on” the new, a transformation that is rooted in a profound change in thinking. To illustrate this point, Paul gives examples of change, offering sample replacements for lying (v. 25), anger (vv. 26–27), stealing (v. 28), destructive speech (vv. 29–30), and bitterness (vv. 31–32). In each G4 curriculum, this strategy is individualized for the subject that is being addressed, drawing from the best of Christian and secular literature on that subject.

Step 7: Implement the New Structure with Humility and Flexibility

In step 7, we assess the effectiveness of our restructuring plan and make the necessary changes. Temptation does not remain static (Luke 4:13). *When we begin to make progress, temptation will change because we have a real enemy bent on our destruction* (1 Peter 5:6–11). Therefore, the plan we created in step 6 will need to be updated regularly.

Step 8: Persevere in the New Life and Identity to Which God Has Called Me

Perseverance is when “better” becomes “normal.” When an area of sin becomes life-dominating, the presence of that sin becomes part of the day-to-day normal of our lives. That means holiness feels strange. *We must reacclimate to a God-honoring life.*

Do a thought experiment. Imagine a mountain in your mind’s eye. What do you see? Chances are the image you conjured up was snow-capped peaks. Those snow-capped peaks don’t float; something lies beneath them and holds them up.

The same is true for our sin. When we imagine our sin, we see our worst moments. But those worst moments don’t float. They sit on top of many lesser compromises that we deemed not that bad. In the perseverance step (step 8), we begin to root out the “smaller” sins and compromises that upheld the peak sins.

Step 9: Steward All of My Life for God’s Glory

To “steward” something means to use it for God’s intended purpose. As the law of God is summarized in a positive command in Matthew 22:36–40—something to *do* instead of “thou shall not”—we must always end our battle with sin by talking about how to run to God rather than merely how to run from sin. *Life is not about what we avoid, but what we pursue.*

To help you assess how to steward your life for God’s glory, we offer the following nine questions so that graduation from G4 launches you to live on mission:

1. Am I willing to commit my life to whatever God asks of me?
2. What roles have I neglected that God has placed me in?
3. What are my spiritual gifts?
4. For what group of people am I burdened (age, struggle, career, nation, language, etc.)?
5. What am I passionate about?

6. With what talents or abilities has God blessed me?
7. What are my unique life experiences?
8. Where do my talents and passions match up with the needs in my church and community?
9. How would God have me bring these things together to glorify him?

Conclusion

What did you get from this study?

- If you're a new participant in G4, you received the big picture of the G4 journey that is in front of you. This study helped you understand how the nine steps of G4 work together so you don't get lost in the details of working one of the steps.
- If you're studying this in a small group, you received an overview of how you can more intentionally apply the gospel to any sin-based struggle you or a friend are facing.

Either way, we hope you've been encouraged as you realized that regardless of where you are in journey against sin, God will meet you there. Your choices are “stay stuck” or “just do better.” The gospel, as we've laid it out in slow motion, provides a map to help you determine what active reliance on God looks like in the next step of your journey.

Questions for Small Group Study: 9 Steps for Sin-Based Struggles

When studying this lesson as a small group it is recommended that: (a) each participant read the lesson during the week, (b) watch the 15-minute video as a group, and then (c) discuss the following questions:

1. Big tasks are easier (not easy) when they are broken down into small steps. What is an example from your life where you have seen this to be true?
2. *Step One*: When have you tried something that you lacked the motivation to do? How did it go? How well did you apply any of the good advice you received?
3. *Step Two*: When has underestimating a task undermined your sincere desire to complete that task?
4. *Step Three*: How does understanding the desires that motivates a behavior and the history that reinforced those desires help change be more than “try harder” behavior modification?
5. *Step Four*: Can you think of an example when you confused feeling really bad about something you did with having an actual conversation of repentance with God?
6. *Step Five*: Can you think of an example of when you sinned and put being right with the person you offended ahead of being right with God? How did that impact your relationship with that person?
7. *Step Six*: How does taking steps one through five seriously prevent the practical suggestions we often give in step six from becoming mere clichés or platitudes?
8. *Steps Seven and Eight*: Often this is the phase in our journey where we experience change-fatigue, and we begin to take short cuts. How does a structured process like this, help curb that tendency?
9. *Step Nine*: As you look at the questions for how to steward your life for the glory of God, what do you feel compelled to invest in more? How does having a passion to run towards help in our battle against sin?

Appendix: What Is G4?

G4 is a group-based counseling ministry that provides a context for participants to invest a season of their lives in overcoming a life-dominating struggle of sin or suffering. G4 groups utilize a subject specific curriculum (addiction, depression, eating disorders, grief, trauma, etc.) built around one of two nine-step models of sanctification.

The goal of G4 is to see participants graduate back into the general discipleship ministries of the church, freer from their struggle and with a clearer picture of what it means for believers to support one another as the gospel transforms the most difficult parts of our lives.

Why the name “G4”?

“G” is for gospel. Too often in counseling groups, our struggle becomes our identity. The longer someone is in a group, the more their identity becomes “addict,” “depressed,” or “divorced.” G4 provides the benefit of a place to be known without the detriment of cultivating a struggle-based identity.

We place the “G” at the front of G4 to serve as a reminder that our identity is found not in our struggle but in our Savior—Jesus Christ. Yes, we struggle. Yes, it is freeing to have a place to be honest about that. But, no, our struggle does not define us. Through the gospel God tells us who we are and makes us more and more into the person he created us to be.

“4” is for the four types of groups that can be housed within a G4 ministry. Here is a basic definition for each of the four types of groups that can exist within G4:

1. *Recovery Groups* are for destructive, habituated life patterns, such as substance abuse, chemical addiction, or behavioral addictions (e.g., pornography or gambling).
2. *Process Groups* are for decreasing the disruption caused by difficult experiences or “sticky” emotions. They might address trauma or the aftermath of destructive relationships.
3. *Support Groups* are for mutual encouragement as participants persevere through difficult experiences that endure for an indefinite period of time, such as divorce, depression, or grief.
4. *Therapeutic Educational Groups* provide a better understanding of challenges that are often misunderstood and might provide a holistic Christian perspective on mental health or identify common challenges for blended families. <end numbered list>

G4 Series Curriculum

Sin / Responsibility Based Curriculum

1. False Love (sexual addiction and adultery) – bradhambrick.com/falselove
2. Gaining a Healthy Relationship with Food – bradhambrick.com/healthy
3. Overcoming Anger – bradhambrick.com/anger
4. Substance Abuse – bradhambrick.com/addiction
5. Anxiety/Depression² – bradhambrick.com/anxiety

Suffering Based Curriculum

1. Anxiety/Depression – bradhambrick.com/depression
2. Navigating Destructive Relationships – bradhambrick.com/destructive
3. Taking the Journey of Grief with Hope – bradhambrick.com/grief
4. Trauma – bradhambrick.com/trauma
5. True Betrayal (processing a spouse’s sexual addiction or adultery) – bradhambrick.com/truebetrayal

² Note: Depression-Anxiety are dealt with together so that each can be addressed from both a responsibility and suffering paradigm.