

# GOING DEEPER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

August 3, 2014

**BE GOOD.**



# Discussion Guide

## After You Believe

Ephesians 4.20-24

### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- At what point did you begin to express or realize that you had faith in Christ? If you have not come to a point where you have chosen to trust yourself to Christ, how might you describe where you are on your own faith journey?

### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes and comments to explain the context of Ephesians as well as the nature of virtue.

- Read Ephesians 4.20-24 out loud, slowly. Pause to allow the words to sink in and then read these verses once more.
- According to Paul, after a person becomes a Christ-follower, what practices is he to take up?
- What are the purpose and result of these practices which Paul proposes? (You might consider looking at Ephesians 4.14-19 for context.)
- In your experience, what is a person to do after he comes to enter a faith-relationship with Jesus? In what ways, if any, are these similar or dissimilar to the practices Paul outlines?
- In your experience, what were the purpose and result of what you learned a Christ-follower was to do? What has been your experience with these?
- Ancient Christian thinkers referred to Paul's instructions as an exhortation to pursue Christian virtue. Present-day followers of Christ within the Protestant tradition often struggle to accept this interpretation because they feel it smacks of "working for one's salvation." However, in the context, Paul is not referring to the working for one's salvation but rather to the working out of one's salvation. In your mind, what might be the difference between these two?
- What might a working out of one's salvation—pursuing virtue—look like in real terms for an individual? For a community?
- What, if anything, might keep an individual or community from acting upon their faith in these ways?
- Conclude your time with prayer and discussion of what a pursuit of virtue might look like for your own community.

## Context and Background

### *Virtue*

Virtues, strictly defined, are morally excellent or commendable practices and attitudes. Throughout history, people have pursued virtue through various means, understanding that such a pursuit is connected to the experience of goodness and rightness in both one's own life and society. The ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle and Plato, wrote extensively about virtue and its pursuit. Their writings focused primarily on such virtues as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as well as the means by which one might obtain these virtues.

The ancient Greeks were not the only people to consider the issue of virtue. Biblical writers and later Christians have taken up the topic of virtue and discussed it at great length. While the biblical and subsequent Christian discussions of virtue do center upon virtue as moral excellence, they differ in their understanding of the origin of virtue and the qualities defined as virtues, as well as the purpose for seeking virtue. Within Christian thought, virtue originates within the person of God; that is, all good and commendable practices and attitudes originate in God's own character and person. People are meant to take up these virtues because they are made in the image of God and, thus, are created to take up God's way of being as a means of glorifying him (Genesis 1.27). Understandably, the lists of Christian virtues, coming from the person of God, differed somewhat from those defined by the Greeks, including such virtues as charity, patience, kindness, and self-control (Galatians 5.22-23; Philippians 4.8; Colossians 3.12-16; 2 Peter 1.3, 5). However, biblical authors and later Christian thinkers understood that these were secondary virtues, each stemming from the higher order virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13).

The primary thought in Scripture, and for almost 1,600 years, was that the pursuit of Christian virtue was part of the process of sanctification and involved a partnership between the follower of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Philippians 2.12-13; Ephesians 4.20-24; 2 Peter 1.3). With the Reformation, some Christian writers began to reject the pursuit of virtue, as it sounded too much

like "working for one's salvation" and therefore denied a grace-based salvation experience. However, these later Christian thinkers had to go to great lengths to reinterpret Scripture passages which plainly encouraged the pursuit of virtue and linked such a pursuit to one's salvation experience (Ephesians 4.20-24). What should be noted is that the pursuit of virtue is not the foundation of salvation but the outworking of salvation. It is because of God's gracious work in one's life that a follower of Christ pursues virtue. He does this recognizing that the character he is taking up is God's own and that he does so empowered only by the gracious presence and power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4.22-24; Galatians 5.22-23). While the virtuous life which flows from one's openness to the work of the Holy Spirit is good and results in the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10.10), the primary outcome of the virtuous life is the sharing of God's own life which brings God glory and honor.

## The Text

### **Ephesians 4.20-24:**

#### *I am saved by grace. . .now what?*

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is, perhaps, one of Paul's most thorough and systematic approaches to the redemptive work of God and its practical outworking in the lives of Christ-followers. This may be due, in part, to the nature of the letter. In some early manuscripts, the name "Ephesus" is left blank, giving the impression that this letter was intended for a larger network of churches in Asia Minor, churches which may have been influenced but not visited by Paul. Therefore, these churches were in need of the core of Paul's gospel teaching in Asia Minor.

Paul's great contribution in this letter is his emphasis on God's gracious movement of redemption. God moved, in the person of Jesus, to redeem people in an act completely motivated by love. When people were least deserving, God moved through Jesus in a way that they could not earn, a movement Paul referred to as grace (Ephesians 2.1-10). This gracious movement of God made it abundantly clear that people were forever secure in their standing as loved by God (Ephesians 3.14-21).

Paul's second great contribution in this letter is his emphasis on the practical outworking which God's redemptive movement of grace initiates in the lives of believers. The gracious redemption of God begins a journey toward an entirely new way of being for those who follow Christ. This new way of being is not separate from the experience of salvation but is itself part of the salvation experience (Ephesians 2.10). The implication of this thought is that God's redemptive movement of grace is not complete in a moment but is something of an ongoing process. Paul refers to this ongoing process of salvation as sanctification (Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 6.11). The purpose of sanctification is to become like Christ, taking up his own way of being and in so doing take up the life of God (Ephesians 4.13). However, many believers find they get stuck in their journey toward Christ-likeness (Ephesians 4.14-19). Rather than looking more and more like Christ, many believers find their lives continue to resemble the lives of those around them; that is, they simply do not change.

With this in mind, Paul outlines how the followers of Christ are to partner with God in moving from the life they were living to the life of Christ-likeness. This process begins as believers recognize that their lives are not like that of Christ, something they were taught was necessary by those who proclaimed the gospel to them as well as by Christ himself as they began to relate to him as a person. Paul reminds them that they were taught how to pursue the life of Christ. His seems to indicate former teaching which we now only have in a condensed form. The believers were to take off their old ways of being and then allow God's Spirit to do an inner-work of renewal. As God's Spirit did his work of renewal, believers were to partner with him by taking up new ways of being rooted in God's own character. Early believers and later Christian thinkers referred to these ways of being as virtues. (See Virtue.) While one might interpret Paul's train of thought to involve an immediate and complete change within the life of a believer, Paul does not describe the pursuit of God's character in these terms. Rather, Paul addresses the pursuit of God's character (virtue)

by addressing individual virtues and discussing how each one is to be taken up separately as necessary (Ephesians 4.25-6.19).

## Application:

Jesus promised that if we follow him we would experience an abundant life (John 10.10). The problem is that after choosing to follow Jesus, many people are wondering when this abundant life will arrive. Simply put, after following Christ, most of us change very little. We place our faith in Jesus and then we wait, but our lives, in many ways, continue to mirror the lives we led before we came to follow Christ. Ancient Christian thinkers would tell us that the experience of the abundant life was found in something we have rejected, the pursuit of virtue. They would claim that following Christ is not just about putting our faith in Jesus. They would note that there is something that happens after we believe. They would point to passages like Ephesians 4 which indicate that after we express faith in Jesus we are called to pursue the life of Christ. It is in this pursuit that we partner with the Holy Spirit to put on the character of God (virtue), and it is in this taking up of the life of God that we begin to experience the life God intended for us in Christ.

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