

EPHESIANS

GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 2

CONVERSATION STARTER

What is the most random or eclectic community or group you've ever belonged to?

PAUL AND THE POWERS

What do you think about when you hear the words “spiritual beings?” All of us have vastly different backgrounds when it comes to the question of angels and demons. Some of us grew up in churches that saw demons lurking around every corner, while others treated the devil as more of an abstract idea or metaphor rather than a personal being at work in the world. For Paul, the truth is somewhere in between.

Throughout Ephesians, Paul talks about the “powers,” forces that are both physical and spiritual, visible and invisible, that exert authority and influence and seek to reshape how we think about the world and our place in it. For Paul, these can be both human rulers, like kings and priests, or nonhuman spiritual beings.

In Ephesians 2, Paul describes one of these spiritual beings by name, “The Prince of the Power of the Air,” who he claims is actively working against God’s plan and leading humans toward darkness. This being’s influence, he claims, is in the very air we breathe; his presence is an inescapable reality that can be felt and experienced, even if it can’t be physically seen. Jesus describes this same figure in John 10, calling him the thief who comes “only to steal and kill and destroy.”

And though Paul wants us to be aware of these spiritual forces in the world, he also reminds us that there is no power greater than the power who raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus’ name is above every name, his rule over all other rulers. And when we are “in him” we can rest assured that no power of darkness can overcome the light of Christ.

Spend a few minutes discussing this idea with your group. Do you find it difficult to believe there are invisible, spiritual forces at work in the world? Why or why not? How do Paul's views on "the powers" challenge your perception of evil, and what forces might seek to influence our perception of the world?

WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE

Have you ever found yourself trying to earn God's love? Or hoping that if you just say or do the right things, God will somehow look more fondly on you? Paul tells us nothing could be further from the truth.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

At its most basic, grace refers to a "gift given out of delight." It's often used to describe great acts of generosity or favor given to those who don't deserve it or couldn't possibly earn it. For example, long before God's people ever agreed to follow the Law, God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. God heard the cries of His people, and even though they had nothing to offer Him, God was moved by compassion, mercy, and kindness toward them.

The same is true for us today. Even though there was nothing we could do to earn it, God rescued us from sin and death out of loving kindness and compassion toward us. Jesus died, so we could escape death. Likewise, Jesus rose from the dead, so we, too, could experience new life, becoming new creations through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this way, grace is unconditioned (not given on the basis of worth). But grace is not unconditional (no expectation of return). While we are not saved by good works, we are saved *for* good works. We can't earn God's love, but we are called to respond to God's love by how we love God and love others in return. We are blessed to be a blessing. God calls us to take the love, kindness, mercy, and compassion God has graciously given to us and in turn, offer that same love, kindness, mercy, and compassion to others.

God's grace is a gift freely given, a gift we could never earn or deserve. But it is also an invitation to join God's campaign to bring light to those living in darkness. Jesus calls us to join a new community of people with one common goal: *thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. Read Ephesians 2:1-7 out loud together. Looking back on your faith journey, are there any “but God” moments that stand out to you? How have these moments shaped your relationship with God?
3. Read Ephesians 2:8-9 as a group. Take turns sharing what grace means to you. How have you experienced God’s grace in your life?
4. **We are not saved by good works, but we are saved *for* good works.** What does this mean to you? How would our lives be different if we really believed this statement to be true?
5. We all desire to belong. Where do you see this idea playing out in our culture today as people search for a place to belong?
6. In Ephesians 2, Paul describes how God welcomes outsiders into His family. How might God be calling us, as individuals and as the church, to welcome those who identify as outsiders into our circles?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Last Sunday, Rev. Matt Tuggle challenged the Cornerstone community to think about who has the privilege of influencing us. Whether it’s consciously or subconsciously, all of us make decisions every day about who and what we allow to shape our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Over the next few weeks, Matt invited us to pray the following prayer based on Ephesians 1:18-19. As you pray, be thinking about who or what would make it on your “Mount Rushmore” of influence; in other words, who are the four people or things that shape your view of the world and yourself? Consider whether or not you’re making space for the power and wisdom of God’s influence in the midst of your day-to-day.

I ask that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened

In order that we may know:

The hope to which You have called us,

the riches of your glorious inheritance in Your holy people,

and Your incomparably great power for us who believe.

Amen.