Leader's Guide

Questions Encore: Isn't Being Good, Good Enough?

The Goal: From Self-Confidence to Confidence in Christ

Primary Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–10
Supporting Scripture: James 2:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:23–26; Philippians 3:4–9

What We Want the Group to Understand

The central issue is not whether someone has done admirable things. The issue is whether those things can make a sinner right with a holy God. Scripture's answer is that acceptance with God cannot be earned by moral achievement. It is given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Keep returning to this simple statement: We do not obey to make God accept us; in Christ, we are accepted by grace and begin learning to obey out of gratitude.

This distinction matters for everyone at the table. A nonbeliever may assume Christianity is a system for becoming respectable. A seeker may wonder whether forgiveness is possible. A young Christian may think God's acceptance rises and falls with daily performance. A mature Christian may understand grace intellectually while still relying on a spiritual résumé.

Your task is not to embarrass anyone into admitting failure. It is to help the group see both the seriousness of sin and the sufficiency of Christ.

Preparing to Gather

Read the devotional and the primary passage slowly. Then read James 2:10–11 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 in context. Ask yourself: "Where am I tempted to defend my standing before God by pointing to something I have done?"

Prepare to explain three things without assuming previous biblical knowledge. Grace is God's undeserved favor toward sinners. Faith is receiving and resting in Christ rather than relying on ourselves. Righteousness is being right before God according to his holy standard.

Opening the Conversation: What the Scorecard Can and Cannot Teach

Start with the Golf Question

Ask: "What is the most painful finish you have ever had after playing an otherwise excellent round?"

Let a few golfers tell their stories. Then ask: “Did explaining your earlier birdies change the number you had to sign for?”

The devotional’s player is ten under par through seventeen holes. A 15 on the par-four eighteenth is eleven over par on that hole, producing a one-over-par 73 on a par-72 course. The earlier birdies remain impressive, but they do not erase the strokes taken on eighteen.

You might say: “We all understand that the scorecard does not change because we have a compelling explanation. The devotional uses that experience to challenge a common assumption: that enough good deeds can cancel our guilt before God.”

Name the Illustration’s Limits

This is important: salvation is not actually determined by adding up moral birdies and bogeys. In golf, good holes can offset bad holes in the total score. Before God, good deeds do not purchase forgiveness for disobedience.

Nor is the Christian message that we need to avoid one catastrophic mistake. The problem is deeper. Every one of us has sinned, and sin reaches into our thoughts, desires, and motives.

Ask: “Where does this golf illustration help us, and where would pressing it too far mislead us?”

Listen for this distinction: The illustration helps expose our instinct to appeal to past accomplishments. It does not provide a complete explanation of God’s judgment or his grace.

Move from Golf to the Heart

Ask: “What do people usually mean when they say, ‘I’m a good person’?”

Likely answers include being honest, caring for family, working hard, helping others, and avoiding serious wrongdoing. Acknowledge that these things matter.

Then ask: “Are we describing something genuinely good, or are we explaining why we think God owes us acceptance?”

That question moves the discussion from outward behavior to personal confidence.

Transition

“Christianity does not deny that people do worthwhile things. It challenges the belief that those things can remove guilt and establish a perfect standing before God. To understand why grace is necessary, we must first understand whose standard applies.”

First: God’s Standard

Read James 2:10–11

Ask someone to read the passage aloud. James connects the law's commands to the God who gives them. Breaking one command makes someone a transgressor of God's law, even if that person has obeyed other commands.

Ask: "Why is 'I'm better than that person' an inadequate answer to God?"

The problem with comparison is that we choose the measuring stick. We usually select someone whose failures make us feel respectable. But God does not measure us against the worst person we can imagine. He judges according to his own holy character.

You might say: "Comparing handicaps can tell us who is the stronger golfer. Comparing sins cannot tell us who has earned acceptance with God."

Explain What James Does Not Mean

James is not saying that every sin has identical consequences or that committing one sin means committing every other sin. Murder and an impatient word are not interchangeable acts.

His point is that selective obedience does not establish innocence. A person cannot answer a charge of theft by pointing out that they have never committed adultery. Obedience in one area does not erase guilt in another.

Ask: "How do we use obedience in one part of life to excuse disobedience somewhere else?"

Give people room to answer without requiring public disclosure of private sins.

Go Beneath Outward Behavior

Jesus teaches that God's concern includes anger, lust, and the desires of the heart, not merely visible actions. See Matthew 5:21–30.

Ask: "How does considering our motives change the way we evaluate our goodness?"

An act of generosity may genuinely help someone while also feeding our pride. Service may be mixed with a desire to be noticed. God sees both the act and the heart.

Do not imply that every admirable deed is worthless to the person receiving it. The point is that even our good deeds cannot bear the weight of making us right with God.

Keep the Tone Gracious

Some people will respond defensively; others may become discouraged. Avoid speaking as though Christians stand above the problem. Say "we," not merely "you."

A useful summary is: “The law exposes a need that comparisons and stronger resolve cannot solve. We need more than an improved record. We need forgiveness and a righteousness we cannot supply.”

Second: Grace Provides What We Cannot Earn

Read Ephesians 2:8–10

Read all three verses, even though the devotional’s opening quotation stops at verse 9. Verse 10 protects the discussion from the mistaken conclusion that good works do not matter.

Ask: “According to these verses, what is the source of salvation, how is it received, and what follows from it?”

The source is God’s grace. Salvation is received through faith, not earned through works. Good works follow as part of the new life God creates in Christ.

You might summarize the order this way: Grace leads to salvation through faith, and salvation leads to a life of good works. Reversing that order changes the message.

Explain Faith Carefully

Faith is not a meritorious achievement that replaces other achievements. It is not the one impressive thing we contribute so God will reward us. Faith receives Christ and what he has accomplished.

Nor is faith merely agreeing that God exists. Saving faith involves trusting Jesus Christ as the one who can reconcile us to God.

Ask: “What is the difference between believing that a bridge can hold someone and actually driving across it?”

The illustration is limited, but it can help distinguish knowing facts from personal reliance. The saving power is not in the strength of our confidence; it is in the Savior we trust.

For the Person Who Feels Unworthy

Someone may say: “You do not know what I have done.”

Respond gently: “You are right that I may not know your story. But grace is not a reward for people whose failures are manageable. It is God’s mercy toward sinners who cannot rescue themselves.”

Do not minimize real harm or suggest that forgiveness removes every earthly consequence. Grace makes confession and repentance possible; it does not make wrongdoing harmless.

For the Person Who Feels Worthy

Someone else may say: “I have tried to live responsibly.”

Respond: “That matters and the people you have helped may have benefited greatly. The question is whether responsible living can remove your guilt and make God your debtor.”

Ephesians leaves no room for boasting. No believer can say, “God accepted me because I supplied the better record.”

Transition

“Grace is not God pretending our sins do not matter. It is God acting through Jesus to deal with them fully and to provide the righteousness we lack.”

Third: The Great Exchange

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21

Ask: “What does this verse say about Jesus, and what does it say about those who are in him?”

Jesus “knew no sin.” He was not merely better than other people. He was without sin. Yet he took the place of sinners so that, in him, they might become the righteousness of God.

Explain the *Great Exchange* in ordinary language: Our guilt is counted against Christ, who bears its judgment, and his righteousness is credited to believers.

“Credited” means counted to someone’s account. The theological word is imputation, but the group does not need to master the term to understand the truth.

Jesus’ Life and Death Belong Together

Jesus lived the obedient life we have failed to live. He loved the Father perfectly and fulfilled the law without exception. At the cross, he bore the judgment our sins deserved.

His resurrection confirms his victory over sin and death. Our confidence rests in a living Savior, not merely in an inspiring example from the past.

Ask: “Why do we need more than an example of how to live?”

An example can show us the right path, but it cannot erase the guilt we already carry. We need someone who saves, not merely someone who instructs.

Guard Against Two Misunderstandings

First, Jesus did not become morally corrupt. He remained the sinless Son of God while bearing our guilt as our substitute.

Second, God does not declare that we have personally lived a flawless life. He counts believers righteous because they are united to Christ. Their acceptance rests on Christ's obedience, not on a fictional account of their own behavior.

This is justification: God's declaration that a sinner is righteous in his sight because of Christ, received through faith alone.

Distinguish Acceptance from Growth

Justification concerns our standing before God. Sanctification concerns God's continuing work of making us more like Jesus.

Ask: "What happens when we confuse those two?"

We may treat every failure as proof that God has withdrawn his acceptance, or every success as proof that we have earned more of it. The gospel gives a steadier foundation: accepted in Christ, we confess sin and pursue growth.

A helpful closing sentence is: "Jesus does not merely improve our chances of acceptance. He is the reason believers are accepted."

Questions and Objections You May Hear

"If Good Works Cannot Save Us, Why Be Good?"

Return to Ephesians 2:10. God saves people into a new life, not into indifference. Good works express gratitude, love our neighbors, and bear witness to God's transforming grace.

You might say: "A healthy tree bears fruit because it is alive. The fruit does not give the tree life. In the same way, obedience is the fruit of salvation, not the purchase price."

Persistent, unrepentant indifference to sin should not be brushed aside. Grace trains us to turn from ungodliness, not to make peace with it. See Titus 2:11–14.

"Isn't It Unfair for a Decent Person and a Terrible Sinner to Need the Same Savior?"

Acknowledge that people's actions differ greatly in severity and consequences. Christianity does not erase those differences.

But needing grace is not the same as saying everyone has caused equal harm. All have sinned, and none can establish a righteous standing before God through personal achievement.

Ask: “If acceptance could be earned, where would we draw the line—and who would have the authority to draw it?”

God’s mercy is not unfairness toward the deserving. It is generosity toward the undeserving, provided through Christ’s costly sacrifice.

“Does That Mean Someone Can Do Terrible Things and Then Just Say They Believe?”

Saying religious words is not the same as trusting Christ. Genuine faith includes turning toward him rather than defending our sin. Repentance and faith belong together, though neither earns forgiveness.

God’s forgiveness does not automatically remove legal consequences, restore broken trust, or eliminate the need to make restitution where possible.

A person cannot use grace as permission to continue harming others.

“What About Someone Who Has Never Done Anything Really Bad?”

Respond gently: “What standard are we using for ‘really bad’?”

Bring the conversation back to God’s commands and the heart. We do not need to manufacture a dramatic testimony to need Christ. Quiet self-righteousness and respectable unbelief still leave us dependent on ourselves.

Conclusion: A Different Foundation for Life

Return to the Three Study Questions

Use the golf question to revisit the limits of the illustration. Ask: “Are we still imagining that salvation is a better total score, or are we beginning to see our need for a Savior?”

Use the second question to uncover comparison. Ask: “Who comes to mind when you want to reassure yourself that you are a good person?” Then ask: “What changes when God’s holiness, rather than that person’s failures, becomes the standard?”

Use the third question to connect the Great Exchange with daily life. Ask: “If your acceptance rests on Christ, how might that change the way you respond to failure, success, and the failures of others?”

Apply the Gospel in Three Directions

For the person exploring Christianity, the invitation is not “Make yourself acceptable and then approach Jesus.” It is “Come to Jesus as a sinner who needs what only he can provide.” Encourage honest questions without pressuring someone to perform a response for the group.

For the believer weighed down by failure, encourage confession without self-rescue. We should grieve sin, repair harm where possible, and seek help. But we do not rebuild our standing with God by accumulating enough good days.

For the believer tempted toward pride, remember that grace eliminates boasting. Moral discipline, biblical knowledge, church service, and generosity are gifts to steward, not credentials with which to look down on others.

Optional Preparation

Romans 3:19–28 explains universal guilt and justification by grace. Philippians 3:4–9 contrasts a religious résumé with righteousness through faith in Christ. Luke 18:9–14 contrasts self-righteousness with a sinner's plea for mercy. Titus 2:11–14 shows that saving grace also teaches godly living.