

gospel culture

LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRIST

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how to use this study

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to experience the transformative power of the gospel. Through six sessions of study, we'll be challenged to take our gospel doctrine and form gospel culture in our lives and in our churches. We hope and pray that through this study, God will make the truths of the gospel fresh to you.

GROUP STUDY

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session of content begins with a group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with God's Word.

START

The group session will begin with a few questions designed to help you introduce the session's topic of study and encourage everyone to engage with the study.

WATCH

This space provides Scripture references and key thoughts from Ray and Sam's conversation, as well as blank space to take notes as you watch the video teaching. Codes to access the teaching videos are included with your purchase of this book and can be found on the insert located at the back of the book.

DISCUSS

This section is the main component of the group session. The questions provided are designed to facilitate the group discussion on the session's topic. The goal for this discussion is for you to challenge one another to pursue gospel culture together.

PERSONAL STUDY

Three days of personal study are provided after each group session to help you contemplate the session's topic on a deeper level.

PERSONAL STUDIES 1 AND 2

The group and personal studies are complementary. These studies are meant to grow your understanding of gospel culture and give you more concentrated time to reflect upon and apply what you learned in the group session.

CREATING GOSPEL CULTURE

This personal study section gives you the opportunity to take what you're learning from God and others, process it, and reflect on how you can be a part of building a gospel culture in your church.

SESSION ONE

believe the gospel

group study

START

Welcome to Gospel Culture session 1, "Believe the Gospel."

What comes to mind when you hear the word *gospel*?

Now, think about yourself and the people you know who believe the gospel. Should those beliefs impact your relationships with them? Why? Share one way the gospel has impacted your relationships with other Christians.

We know what it's like to hold the knowledge of Jesus intellectually and, at the same time, think, speak, and act in ways that betray that knowledge. That's because knowing the gospel in your head isn't the same as knowing the gospel in your heart. So the word *believe* can certainly be tricky.

If any of us are going to walk faithfully and authentically alongside other believers, relating in ways that demonstrate the biblical knowledge we receive, we have to believe in a way that goes beyond knowledge alone. Belief is more than intellectual assent. Gospel doctrine is transformative. Gospel doctrine creates gospel culture. This study was designed to show you what it looks like to apply gospel doctrine in gospel culture—in real life, with real people, amid real problems we often let stand in our way.

Name one gospel-centered change you want to see in the culture of your local church and/or small group Bible study.

Pause to pray as you begin this study, asking God to open your heart toward the changes He wants to make in you and your relationships going forward, through the grace of the gospel.

Gospel doctrine necessitates gospel culture.

WATCH

Use these statements to follow along with the video teaching for session 1, and use the blank space to take additional notes.

The gospel is good news for bad people through the finished work of Christ on the cross, received with the empty hands of faith.

ROMANS 6:23

Believing the gospel changes not only how we settle into life each day but also the rules we share in friendship. It's a new, counterintuitive way of being friends.

Self-justification necessarily breeds contempt.

LUKE 18:9-14

Remembering the true extent of our own sin breeds friendship and makes us safe to be around.

1 TIMOTHY 1:15; ROMANS 2:11; ACTS 10:34-35

To access the video teaching sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.



DISCUSS

Use these questions and prompts to discuss the video teaching.

In the video teaching, Ray asked Sam, “If you could go to God with one request for what you most long for . . . what would you ask for?” How would you answer that same question?

How do present life circumstances help form our answers to that question?

What you experience impacts what you hope for and expect going forward. For example, Ray talked about the Jesus Movement he was a part of in the last century. He saw and experienced a real movement of the Holy Spirit and longs to see it happen again in this day and age. However, experience isn’t the only factor that forms our hopes and expectations of God; the truth we read in His Word is the primary way we know how to pray and ask God for awakening today and every day.

How was the gospel summarized in the video teaching? (For help, see p. 11.)

How does that statement strike you personally?

Read Romans 6:23. Why is it such a struggle for us to really believe this good news of the gospel—that we are all bad people, that Jesus finished the work of our salvation at the cross, that we receive His gift with empty hands?

Grace is counterintuitive to us in relationship with both God and other people. Our human default tendency is to believe we earn what we get. Receiving God’s grace as a free gift is an entirely different way of interacting with the world.

Read Luke 18:9-14 in consideration of Romans 6:23. What was Jesus's point in telling this parable?

If we don't look closely at this parable within the context of the whole gospel story, we might judge the Pharisee as a well-intentioned do-gooder who is simply struggling a bit with pride and maybe also some self-righteousness. If we're honest, many of us relate to him more than the tax collector. We are, after all, sitting in group Bible study! And we are happy for the sins we don't need to check off as our own. But that wasn't Jesus's point. The Pharisee didn't need a small shift in perspective; he needed a total renovation—which only Jesus can give. As Ray explained, when we're not trusting in Christ for our okayness before God, we tend to try to feel better about ourselves by ranking ourselves above others. And that destroys relationships.

Wrapping up the video teaching, Ray explained, "We all come to God through Christ the same way, holding out the empty hands of faith. And that not only brings us to God, it also brings us together." Let's talk about that specifically. How should the gospel of grace impact your relationships in the body of Christ?

As we've discussed what it means to truly believe the gospel, what impact are you now hoping to see and experience in *Gospel Culture*?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Prayer Requests

PERSONAL STUDY 1

grace unbound

How would you describe the culture of the faith community you're a part of?

When you think about the culture of your church, it's likely that you can identify both positive and negative aspects. It has been said by many that there is no perfect church. If you think you've found one, don't go! As soon as any of us do, it will no longer be perfect.

The message of Scripture isn't that we *shouldn't* engage with other believers in the community of faith. Neither is that the message of this study! The reason to involve yourself in the body of Christ isn't about having it all together or attaining some form of human perfection. The reason to involve yourself in the body of Christ is that you are, in fact, "involved" in the body of Christ! Ephesians 2:19-22 explains this about all believers: "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household . . . being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit."

Christians are joined together for holy purpose. We are "one body in Christ and individually members of one another" (Romans 12:5). The question, then, is how are imperfect people of all walks of life joined together in Christ? And what should that look like practically?

In your own words, what is the gospel message?

In what way does the community of faith you experience demonstrate a culture that aligns with the gospel it confesses?

In what way does that same group of Christians sometimes lean into a culture that is contrary to the gospel?

*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

The word *gospel* means “good news.” The gospel is a message of God’s grace towards undeserving sinners. The good news is that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from all our works. God, through the perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus, rescues all His people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of the full restoration of His created order forever—all to the praise of the glory of His grace.

That grace is a gift. We do not earn salvation by having it all together, and we are certainly not meant to relate to one another under the guise of that terribly wrong assumption. The good news of grace is not bound within the context of our doctrinal beliefs; it extends to every area of our lives and into eternity.

Why do we who believe the gospel with all our hearts often resist and even reject living out that grace in our relationships with God and each other?

Why is the doctrine of grace fundamental to any conversation about what we are meant to experience relationally with other believers?

Gospel doctrine creates gospel culture.

Consider Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. They had heard and believed the gospel of grace. They had been unified together in Christ. Yet they were at odds with one another and operating in disunity. They, like all believers then and now, needed a reminder that grace changes everything—including our relationships within the church.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain . . .

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-2,9-11

Circle the places where the word *vain* is used in this passage. What does it mean for a person to believe “in vain” or receive Christ’s grace “in vain”?

Why is it important for you to remember the good news of the gospel and continue to remind yourself of its power daily?

What does Paul's exhortation to "hold to" the gospel teach you about what it means to truly "believe" (v. 2)?

Paul's words to the Corinthians weren't meant as literary hyperbole. He personally understood the very real danger that exists for even the most doctrinally sound Christians. "It is entirely possible for someone who has never strayed theologically to deny the faith practically. It's also possible for a whole church to affirm or deny the faith either by embodying it or failing to do so."¹

Jesus came to earth with a grace so radical, it's foreign to everything we've ever known. His mercy for the undeserving makes Christianity hard to believe and hard to hold on to. In a world where we've experienced love that is very conditional, it's hard to wrap our minds around a different kind of love. But as unsteady and unsure as we may be, God's steadfast love for us continues to endure forever (Psalm 136).

In our instability, we deeply believe Jesus is disgusted by the reality of who we are. Well aware of our personal failures, our thoughts insist that He despises us. This is why we must hold on to the gospel that says He loves us. We must choose to deeply believe He forgives us, justifies us, adopts us, and even rejoices over us—and always will. Why? Because it is only in holding on to the gospel of grace that the presence of the risen Jesus and the sure hope of eternal life with Him will be a felt reality in this generation.

Is the presence of the risen Jesus a reality you feel in your community of faith? Why or why not?

We can never hear about the richness
of God's grace enough.

The gospel we believe and the culture it creates among us has eternal impact. Jesus is coming again (John 14:3). History is not drifting along out of His control. He will return to conclude history with dramatic judgment, and He will establish His own kingdom for eternity. And Jesus said, "I will take you to myself" (John 14:3). He was talking about heaven.

Read Revelation 21:1-4. Describe the culture all believers will experience together in the kingdom of heaven.

Heaven will be more than new individuals. Heaven will be a new community. Heaven will be a gospel culture where we'll experience forever nothing but the love of God. And that great hope has direct relevance to us as a church today.

Every gospel-centered church is a model home of the new neighborhood Jesus is building. Church is a place where people can come and see what human flourishing is starting to look like so that they can buy in now, they can come into safety now, before the final judgment. So much is at stake in the quality of our life together as a gospel culture. By God's grace, we can feel a little bit like heaven on earth.

*Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

MATTHEW 6:10

Look back at your answer to the first question in today's study: How would you describe the culture of the faith community you're a part of? What hopes do you have for growth in that culture?

How, specifically, do you need to pray for God's kingdom to come in your community of faith as it is in heaven?

God is calling us to bring something of heaven on earth so that people can see that Jesus really changes lives. That's our calling. How do we live up to that high calling? We believe the gospel. We believe the promises of God so that His promises overrule our selfish impulses, moment by moment. We treat His promises as real so that we relax and rejoice and love and serve.

**Pause for a moment to reflect on the faithfulness of God in the gospel.
Write a few statements that reflect your gratitude towards God.**

“It's not gospel doctrine alone, but gospel doctrine creating gospel culture. The truth of Christ must shape our creeds so that the beauty of Christ also adorns our life together as churches.”²

PERSONAL STUDY 2

gospel justification

In this week's first personal study, we learned the importance of believing the gospel. God's grace is fully sufficient! And that belief does not show itself in gospel doctrine alone—it shows itself in gospel *culture*. In other words, “If justification through grace alone by faith alone is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls, what does it look like to stand rather than fall? Is it possible to fall while we think we are standing?”³

What are some ways you have struggled relationally to live out the gospel you know you believe?

It is possible to stand for the gospel at the level of doctrine and at the same time betray the gospel at the level of culture.

It happens to us all, and that will continue for as many days as we live in the flesh. So, like Paul, we must identify the struggle that manifests itself in our daily lives (Romans 7:14-20). You may have fear about telling a coworker about Jesus or anxiety about fitting into the small group you just started attending. You might stay silent in a conversation with your most trusted friend in Christ instead of naming the sin that has you in its grip. Whatever the case, you will regularly be tempted to get out of step with the doctrine you believe.

Read Galatians 2:11-21. Notice how many times Paul used the word “justified” in verses 15-16. What did Cephas (Peter), Barnabas, and others know and believe?

The biblical doctrine of justification addresses a profound human question: “How can I be right with God?” The Bible is not asking us to care about something we don’t care about. The Bible is answering a huge personal question we all care about deeply. We don’t always answer our question with theological language, but this universal human longing is the focal point of the whole Christian gospel. It’s a cluster of questions, really.

Consider these as examples, and then add a question of your own:

Do I belong? If other people find out who I really am, will they despise me?

What does God think of me?

Is there any way God might tolerate me enough to get involved and help me?

What is it going to take to get God on my side?

Where do I stand with God, both now and forever?

After I die and stand before the judgment seat of God, what will become of me?

Other:

Considering Galatians 2, underline any of the above questions you think Peter, Barnabas, and other Christians might have been struggling with.

Place a check beside any you have recognized within your own heart and mind.

What thoughts or behaviors might give evidence that a person is struggling with these kinds of questions today?

What evidence indicates Peter and others were wrestling with questions like the ones listed on page 21? More specifically, how were they deviating from the gospel they believed?

Without this cluster of mega-questions being answered in a way that satisfies, we live in anxiety and posturing. We keep trying to justify our existence in various ways—success in business, setting records in sports, getting into the right school, getting someone to love us, and proving we’re not what our parents said we were. Our natural inclination is to embrace self-justification over grace-justification. But as long as we do that, we can’t love and serve God or each other.

In our effort to justify ourselves, we fail to experience the beauty of God’s grace in our individual lives and in our lives in community with one another—we miss out on the reality of gospel doctrine creating gospel culture. In exchange, we use each other to manufacture some feeling of completeness. And because that never works, we find ourselves in an ongoing cycle of frustration.

Driven by fear, Peter abandoned gospel culture.

How do you know it wasn’t a matter of doctrine that was driving Peter to withdraw from the Gentile believers? (See Acts 10:15.)

Gospel doctrine that doesn't show up in gospel culture essentially ignores the triumph of Jesus. Peter's behavior gave the message that Gentile believers had to align themselves with the distinctions of Jewish culture to be acceptable to Christ—and to Peter!

What an insult to Christ's work on the cross and an egregious violation of justification by faith alone. The culture among believers was disconnected from the doctrine those same believers knew and understood. And it was spreading.

Is it surprising to you that self-justification had spread from Peter to other church leaders like Barnabas? Why or why not?

Peter knew better. God had taught him through a supernatural vision that he did not have the right to call impure what God has made clean. To drive the point home, God reiterated that message three times (Acts 10:9-16). Barnabas knew better, too, but he also panicked and allowed self-preservation to take the lead.

In what ways have you seen church culture become misaligned with the gospel of grace?

What role do you play in cultivating gospel culture while also pursuing gospel doctrine?

The Lord calls us to be faithful to the gospel at two levels simultaneously—both at the level of doctrine and at the level of culture.

The chart below expresses some specific fears that might cause leaders in the church today to act in ways that are unfaithful to the gospel at the level of culture. For each one, identify one self-justifying behavior or expectation that giving into those fears might spread among members.

FEAR	BEHAVIOR
changes in cultural norms	watering down the gospel
preaching politics	
irrelevance in community	
decline in numerical growth	
offending guests	
church politics	

Read Galatians 2:13. What word did Paul repeat to describe these kinds of behaviors? How does that word strike you in this context: unnecessary overreaction or right on target?

I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel

GALATIANS 2:14A

Paul had the courage to speak out against such behaviors. He saw that there was something sacred to be guarded, enjoyed, and spread further. This conflict in Galatians 2 wasn't about ego. It was about the gospel—not at the level of doctrine but at the level of culture. Both Paul and Peter believed the right doctrine (v. 16). But Peter undermined that very doctrine by the way he behaved (v. 11).

What would have happened had Paul not stood up for the necessity of gospel culture?

What do we risk today when we act in ways that uplift a culture of self-justification rather than grace-justification?

We all come to God the same way. We are justified by grace. Faith in Jesus is all we need to belong. He makes us kosher in God's eyes. He assures that every kind of person can find a home in the Christian church. Any kind of cultural elitism denies the gospel. We do not accept multi-layered levels of okayness before God. For believers in Christ to do so is hypocrisy.

**THAT'S THE DOCTRINE:
Jesus is enough for us all.
AND THAT'S THE CULTURE:
Everyone in Jesus belongs!**

creating gospel culture

BY BELIEVING

This week, we've examined the imperative of grace in both doctrine and culture. True belief reveals itself in all things, from adherence to the teaching of credal principles in God's Word to the adherence of attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate those creeds—even when others give in to fear and compromise.

As a way of creating gospel culture, have a conversation with another believer who is typically with you in a larger group setting (e.g., your *Gospel Culture Bible Study* group, your church, your workplace, your general community). Use these questions as prompts for that conversation.

- 1. The biblical message of divine grace creates a social environment of human grace, and no one has the right to disrupt what our Savior died to create. In what areas do you need to call out this truth in your own life? In what way(s) or relationship(s) are you not practicing the grace of Christ you have so gratefully received?**
- 2. Respond to this truth from this week's study: "Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture, and the culture is as sacred as the doctrine." Would other people say the way you relate to them is as sacred to you as what you believe about Jesus? What would be different in your life if gospel culture was truly as sacred to you as gospel doctrine?**
- 3. Who do you need to encourage and/or challenge to stop deviating from the truth of the gospel, as Paul did in Galatians 2:14? How can you do that with both grace and truth?**

Use the next page to journal takeaways from your conversation or a prayer inviting God to deepen gospel culture through your friendships and relationships in your church community.

A series of 32 horizontal blue lines, evenly spaced, filling most of the page. These lines are intended for handwritten notes or answers.

